

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: GET TO KNOW COOP MAINSTAY KAREN MANCUSO

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By Susannah Jacob

Karen Mancuso has been a steady presence at the Park Slope Food Coop for over two decades. She's often one of the first people who members see when they walk through the door, and though her official title is Membership Coordinator, she has a finger in seemingly every pot of Coop life—from DJing during shopping hours and stepping in as traffic cop when the lines get unruly, to working as the *Gazette* Staff Liaison. And yet, she keeps a strikingly low profile. We convinced Mancuso, 51, who is nearing her 23-year Coop anniversary, to sit down with us and spill some (herbal) tea.

When did you join the Coop?

I joined the Coop in 2001, right after 9/11. I had come to an orientation at the Coop as soon as I moved to Park Slope in 1997, but never got around to joining. I was working in publishing: I was a fact-checker at *Entertainment Weekly*, a freelance writer at *Time Out*, and a copy editor at Barnesandnoble.com. I was laid off when the big tech bubble burst [in 2000]. I was going to move to Seattle because my best friends had moved out there. I had a ticket and everything, I was leaving on September 12, 2001. And then 9/11 happened, and I reassessed. I thought: I want to stay in New York. And then one of the first things I did when I really decided I was going to stay was join the Coop. My first shifts were stocking shelves. And then I was hired as a Membership Coordinator six months later.

What do you recall about your first days as a Coop employee?

At the time I was hired, the office had a certain reputation. It was an intimidating place, where no one wanted to go. Other than the time I came to the orientation, I had never even been upstairs. As an outsider, I wanted to avoid it at all costs.

What was intimidating about it?

The reputation of the people who worked there, who would, of course, later become my colleagues and my friends, was similar to the Coop's reputation for rules and order. But I applied, and I got the job. And so there I was, now one of these "scary" people in the office. I think when I was hired, along with a few other new people, it was the beginning of a shift where the reputation that the office had for being strict started to sort of soften. A group of us helped shift the culture unknowingly. Ann Herpel, who is a General Coordinator now, and Alex Marquez, now in the IT Department. The three of us weren't interested in making people feel bad because they were suspended. We wanted to help them.

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Tell me more about your different roles over the years.

Membership Coordinators work in administration. We help create and keep systems running. We help coordinate the labor of almost 17,000 members. One of the first things that I started helping with when I was hired was the *Gazette* because there was one general coordinator, Linda Wheeler, who has since retired—she was in charge of the *Gazette* and she wanted some help. I started out doing basic editorial assistant stuff for her. And eventually she retired, and I took over the *Gazette*. Some of my other responsibilities over the years were supervising the Orientation Committee and coordinating the Board of Directors elections. I also have done a lot of in-house writing—manuals, flyers, letters to members. And I've been the de facto Coop proofreader. I also help manage the Membership Office and I'm on the shopping floor several hours a week.

And how has the culture of the *Gazette* changed over the years?

Well, we still have reporters and editors, and we still have photographers and illustrators. But the members work from home now that we moved from print to online. A lot of the art department used to come in on the weekends and work together at the Coop.

How have you seen the internal culture of the Coop change?

Fundamentally, the Coop is the same place it was when it started in 1973 and when I joined the staff in 2002—it's a group of people working together to save money on groceries. But I think the culture has changed a lot. There are a lot of members who disengage by using their phones—they're stocking shelves and they're listening to a podcast or to music. Some checkout workers are staring at their phones. In the membership office, we were certainly busier before we digitized everything, because people were calling on the phone all day, they were coming in with questions. Now you can manage your membership from home online. The office was a lot busier back in the day. And I'd say we probably all talked to each other a lot more. Now, in the downtime, people are staring at their phones. Listen, I have a wife and a kid and they text me a lot so I get it, but I do wish we could all put down our phones more. I still think the Coop is a special place where there is a lot of communication. You can be standing in an aisle shopping, and there could be someone standing right next to you, and you might start talking to them. You may not know them, but you might start talking to them because we're in the Coop together. You're not going to do that in Key Food.

How do you personally use the Coop as a grocery store?

Right now I work four days a week instead of five, because I have a toddler and I share childcare responsibilities, but I shop every day that I'm here. We have a lot of dietary preferences in my house. Whereas I eat everything, my wife doesn't eat meat or dairy, and then I have a soon to be four-year-old who only eats pasta and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Some of the things that I've been buying forever are probably some of the most popular things we sell, like Lacinato kale and dried mangoes. I do love our cosmetics department. Right now, I'm really into the Ursa Major

products.

Do you consider yourself a Coop lifer?

I'm 51, and I started working here when I was in my late twenties. I think there's probably a good chance that I'm going to retire here. If you're a lifer, you feel really protective of the Coop. I really want it to succeed. I want it to continue. I want my son to grow up shopping here. I wish that maybe we could work on a second location. Unfortunately, that got squashed at a General Meeting, but I hope that in the next couple of years, that conversation could be picked up again, because there's no reason why our model can't be in other places.

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Where did you grow up and how did your upbringing inform your commitment to the Coop?

I grew up in suburban New Jersey. My parents were very conventional, and I think I rebelled against that. I always wanted to move to New York. My father grew up in Queens and my great grandfather owned a bookstore for decades in Murray Hill. New York City is in my blood. Growing up, my family shopped at ShopRite, but I had a good friend whose parents shopped at the local health food store, and I would go in there sometimes with them. I remember seeing a bar of Tiger's Milk, one of those old protein bars, and Tom's of Maine toothpaste, and being like, what is this cool stuff? And just wanting it, even at nine-years-old.

What creative work do you do outside the Coop?

The one thing that few people probably know about me is that I was doing stand-up comedy for a while. I did it for a few years, sort of as a challenge from a good friend of mine. I had been writing satire for the *Gazette's* April Fool's issues and then I just started writing stand up from there. I took a class at Carolines, which is a way a lot of people got started. And then I was able to do a few nights there, and then some bars and restaurants, and a queer comedy festival. When Covid hit, that shut everything down, and then I ended up having a kid right after. Now that I'm a mom I have not really had the time or energy to return to it. But I've always been a writer.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

Susannah Jacob is a native Texan and PhD student of US history. She takes pride in her proficient operation of the slotted, plastic bag-taper machine in the Coop's bulk department.