

THE COOP'S LOST AND FOUND: REUNITING MEMBERS WITH THEIR PRIZED POSSESSIONS

March 3, 2026



ILLUSTRATION BY DEBORAH TINT

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By Kim Velsey

Found: a claim ticket for Dixon's Bicycle Shop, passport photos of a child, medical records, a steel tongue drum, a fishing license, one silver circular dangling earring with mother of pearl. Lost: a USPS receipt, a cherry wood cane, a retainer in a purple case, a brown bag with a lease in it, a Room & Board bag with an electric mousetrap in it, countless library books. "I doubt many grocery stores are keeping this [kind of] list," said Park Slope Food Coop Membership Coordinator Elly Dittmar, when she showed

this reporter the Coop's spreadsheet of lost and found items recently. "I do think we take more care than most places."



Membership Coordinator Elly Dittmar holding found items

People lose things—or at least, think they *may* have lost things—anywhere they spend a lot of time. And members spend a lot of time at the Coop—especially when they come in to work a shift, often involving physical labor, and over the course of a

few hours shed sweatshirts, earbuds, hats and water bottles. Sometimes, they even leave their pants behind: There are currently several pairs of jeans in the gray lost-and-found bins by the front door (also, a lot of books and orphaned gloves). The bins are intended for non-valuable items.

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MEMBER ERICA HERMAN

Everything else that’s lost or found at the Coop gets logged into the spreadsheet that Dittmar started two years ago, after she took over running the Coop’s lost and found system. Before she digitized the list, it was kept in a notebook, where items reunited with their owners were crossed out. This made searching a bit of a slog, especially as the membership increased and with it, the number of unclaimed personal belongings floating around the store. Last year, about 300 items made it onto the list. And that’s not counting the many gloves, hats, umbrellas, water bottles and tote bags in the gray bins, which after two weeks are put out on the street for free. Glasses and keys are some of the most frequently lost items. Wallets and hearing aids disappear a lot, too. The Coop gets a lot of calls about lost wallets, said Dittmar, but wallets are the easiest items to reunite with their owners. If you lose your wallet at the Coop, the Coop will almost certainly call you.



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Lost and Found bins, located in front of the lockers, containing non-valuable items

Among the items logged into the spreadsheet last year were Erica Herman's wedding and engagement rings. Herman put them on a necklace for safekeeping when she went to lift weights at the gym—stopping at the Coop on the way home—only to notice hours later that the necklace was gone. She and her husband, who'd died unexpectedly a few years earlier, had always said to each other that you wear your life on your ring, meaning that you shouldn't be too precious about it. But she hadn't wanted to destroy her rings carelessly by lifting heavy metal bars etched with patterns for grip. Herman realized that despite her best efforts to keep the rings safe, she must not have closed the necklace clasp completely. And while she'd had the necklace at the gym and maybe at the Coop, she also knew it could have easily fallen off somewhere on the walk there or home. After she retraced all her steps with her daughter, turning up nothing, she left her name and number at the Coop. It felt like a long shot, but a short time later she got a call that the necklace, engagement and wedding bands had been found. "We joked that if you're going to lose something of significance, the best place to lose it is the Coop," said Herman. "First of all, people will find it, and second, they'll know what to do. They won't take it or put a found ring poster up on a pole in the neighborhood."



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Found earbuds and headphones

The Coop really does go to a lot of trouble to try to return lost items, Dittmar said. She told me that they once reunited a large amount of cash with its owner (over \$200, stuffed in an envelope) after they were able to watch a checkout area video and see it drop from her pocket. The first AirPods they found inspired her to engage in detective work: using bluetooth, she was able to figure out that the owner had worked at the Coop that day and return it to him. Now, however, there are too many AirPods floating around to track all the owners down (the current count is 14 and you'll have to sort through them yourself if you think yours may be among them). Unclaimed cash is eventually donated to CHiPs. Anything sellable, like jewelry, goes to Housing Works, as long as it's not a singleton earring or something else they won't take.



Found eyeglasses

The Coop also errs on the side of holding onto found objects, which sometimes means keeping things that are most likely abandoned rather than lost. Dittmar recalled an electric scooter they stashed away for months until one day they tried it out, only to discover it was broken. A large framed Maya Angelou quote has been sitting unclaimed in the Membership Office for quite some time. (Dittmar suspects it may have been a street find whose new owner had second thoughts about lugging it home after a big shop, a practice Coop staff heartily discourage.) Another item the staff thought may have been brass knuckles turned out to be a gua sha skincare tool. One of the oldest items kicking around is an undeveloped roll of film.

Lost & Found Only. No Donations.
Items held for 14 days. Do not take anything that does
not belong to you. Thank you.



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Found jeans and a drum

While the initial wave of relief at finding a lost object can be overwhelming if brief, members who've been reunited with their belongings say there's something else, too, something that lingers: a sense of gratitude that someone took the time to turn it in and someone else took the time to check a spreadsheet and make a call. A few weeks ago Beth London dropped her wallet at the checkout counter and couldn't find it anywhere, despite looking for it immediately with the help of four other members who stopped what they were doing to join in the search. She figured it had fallen in a basket or a box or some other weird place where it was obscured and went home dejected. There was about \$45 in cash in the wallet, which she didn't think she would get back. But she did hope someone would return the wallet itself and her cards. After nothing turned up the first few times she called to check, London thought that perhaps it had been accidentally thrown away. "I had given up. And then I got a call. Every penny was in there," she said. "I was like 'oh my gosh, this Coop is amazing.' I want to thank the unknown person who found it. It made me want to go out and do good things."



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