

MEET THERESA GRAY, THE FORCE BEHIND THE COOP'S CBD CABINET

April 14, 2026



PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLANE

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By Susannah Jacob

In 2018, a colleague at the Coop noticed that Receiving Coordinator Theresa Gray was favoring one shoulder. “You know how you can be in pain and not know it,” Gray remembers about the time. Gray loves her job because it keeps her moving all over the Coop. And yet, receiving coordinators do a lot of lifting, unloading and manual labor in a small workspace to ensure the Coop floor is stocked for members. “It was wintertime, I had a frozen shoulder, and I was actually quite miserable,” Gray remembers.

Around the same time, a sales rep for Gnome Wellness, a CBD company based in Johnsonville, New York, reached out to Gray, who has been a member of the Coop since 1994, and a receiving coordinator since 2001. By 2018, she had taken on additional duties as a buyer for the health and beauty products the Coop stocks, to help a general coordinator with “a lot on her plate.” Through that work, she came to know of the RAD Soap Company, which makes a hemp soap bar that is popular at the Coop. Greg Kerber, formerly of RAD Soap, had started a new company manufacturing CBD products, the rep said. Was Gray interested in trying any?

Gray has an affinity for small businesses. In the ‘90s, her mother, a seamstress, lost her job when her employer moved its operations overseas. With Gray’s help, she started her own small business called Miss Anna’s, named after Gray’s grandmother. It sold pies and cakes, and later hand-sewn clothes. Before she joined the Coop, Gray, who was raised in the Bronx, moved to London and owned a clothing shop on Kings Road.

She eventually returned and joined the Coop because she cares about the origin and manufacturing of her food. “Coop members are readers; we check ingredients,” Gray says. She knew she belonged here. And maybe so did Kerber’s new product.

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“He asked ‘Hey, Theresa, have you tried CBD?’ And I said, ‘What’s that?’” Gray recalls. He sent her a sample, and the rest is history. “Within a couple of days, my shoulder relaxed, and I felt much better. My posture was better. I felt I was getting sleep.” She called Kerber: “What is this stuff?”

Gray said she wanted to carry his Gnome products at the Coop. Some staffers were apprehensive. Gray ordered a couple of cases, which she was willing to buy herself if there were no other takers. “I started with a small supply in the basement, and then when word got out that we actually had it, I was allotted a small case on the floor.” At first, the case contained two lines of non-dispensary-grade CBD products, not the “stuff that gets you high,” Gray says. She stocked the case with products from Gnome Wellness and Charlotte’s Web Hemp.

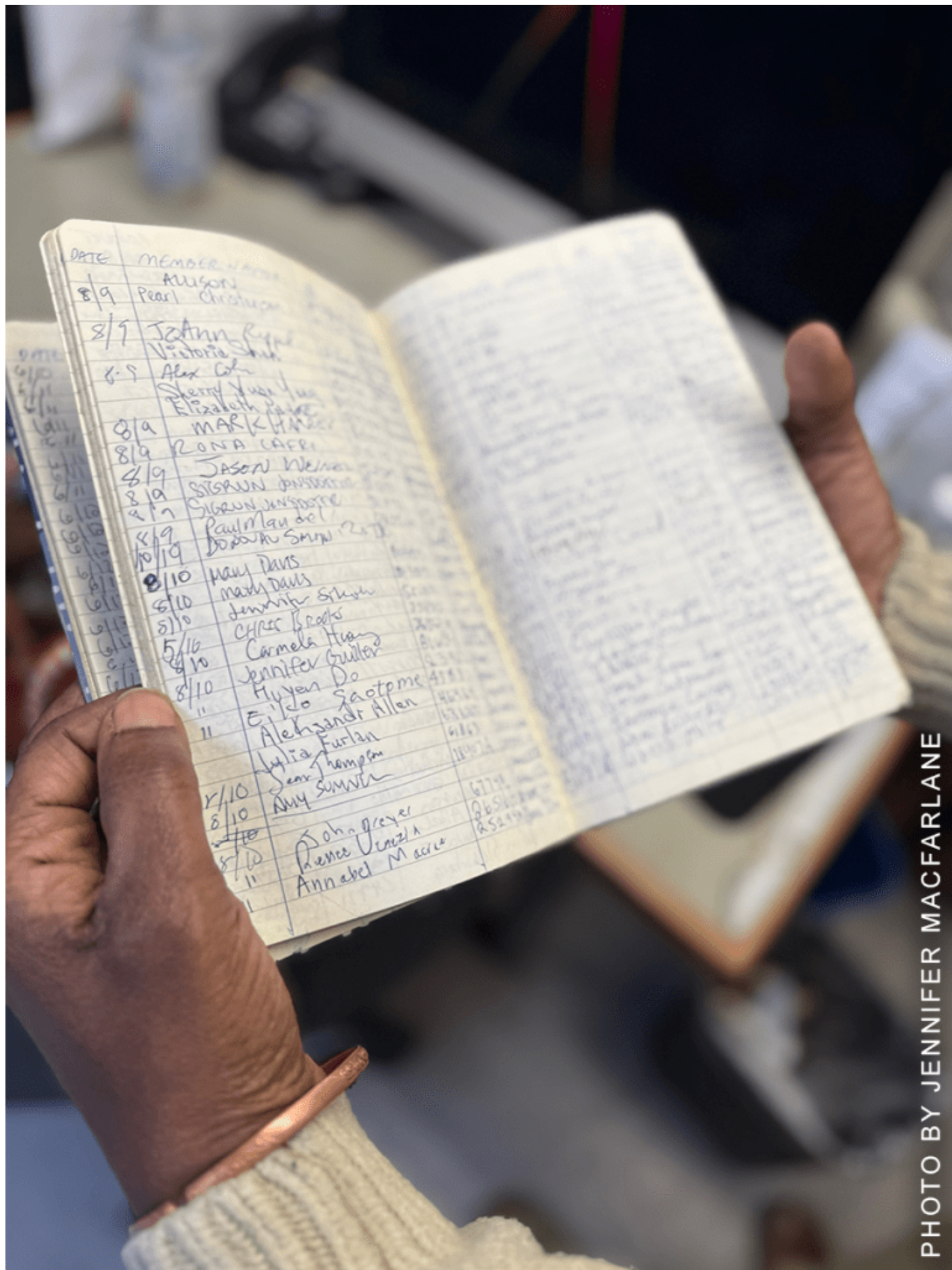


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From the start, sales of CBD products have been recorded in a special book, to keep close track of inventory.

Gray enjoys keeping abreast of the cannabis industry and evaluating products. She attends cannabis trade shows in Manhattan and Brooklyn. “I have to know about regulations, I’m always just keeping a sharp eye on what is going on in the market.”

When Gray undertook health and beauty buying responsibilities, she studied up on what goes into the foods that we put into our mouths every day. She recalls when the Coop stopped carrying Cheerios. “Babies love Cheerios but they have ingredients that are so bad...we decided collectively that we shouldn’t really be selling them,” Gray says. (Cheerios have been found to have trace amounts of a pesticide linked to reproductive problems in animals, according to a 2024 study in *Nature*. General Mills, which makes Cheerios, has said food safety is a “top priority” for the company.) Working Health and Beauty, Gray became aware of sodium laurel sulfate, a degreaser in most toothpastes, conditioner, mouth washes and soap. “I noticed that companies like Tom’s of Maine started taking it out,” she says. I thought that was interesting. If you care, these manufacturers will do something,” Gray says.

After Gerber sent her samples, Gray started to learn about CBD’s power to reduce inflammation. Gray designed a special case, which Gerber built. “He built and donated a case to my specifications,” she says—light, lockable, visible, an upper and lower--case with side shelves that didn’t detract from the traffic of the vitamin and gift card area.



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PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLANE

Before the pandemic, suppliers came to the Coop to give demonstrations. Gray's case was extremely popular. "Greg Kerber set up the table in front of the case, and he gave out the product," Gray recalls. During the pandemic, her case became more popular. "People weren't sleeping, they needed to be calm...it really skyrocketed." But the demos had stopped, which made it hard to introduce new products to the case. "Without the demos, it's just hard to bring a new company, especially a CBD company, into the Coop."

Gray remembers in the height of lockdown when the Coop had chefs cook meals for staff working. Suffering from wrist pain, a chef named Kate came to Gray looking for relief. Gray offered a new cream that had arrived on her desk. "She rubbed it on her wrist, walked away, and like two minutes later she said, 'Oh my God, it's awesome.'" Gray ordered more for the case. (The product is called Alchemy.)

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Today, the cabinet contains oils, creams, pills, gummies and even her favorite CBD honey, which Gray says can be mixed in warm (not hot) water—scalding water degrades many of honey's nutritional and medicinal properties.

Today, Gray is engaged primarily in her day-to-day receiving coordinator role. She is still the CBD buyer, distributes samples when suppliers send them and makes sure the case is well-stocked.

"I am so proud that I was able to even give the energy and time to this," she says, reflecting on her work bringing CBD to the Coop. "It was a necessity for me. I think it just helped me to take care of myself better. And I think that's important. Everyone should be taking care of themselves."

Asked about the possibility of the Coop ever carrying dispensary-style THC products, she smiles. “A long time ago we didn’t have meat and we didn’t have beer,” she says. “I’m not counting it out.”



PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLANE

Susannah Jacob is a native Texan and PhD student of US history.