

IN MEMORY OF JOSEPH OCCHIOGROSSO

October 17, 2023



By Thomas Rayfiel

Joseph Occhiogrosso, who joined the Coop in 1987 and was a squad leader for over ten years, died on August 20, 2023. He was 60 years old.

Maria Treglia, a member of his squad—a Friday night receiving shift—remembers him as:

An amazing guy. I used to wait for a cab in front of the Coop at the end of the shift, and he offered to drive me home. Our ride became a way to catch up about our lives and a way for Joseph to reflect on how smoothly the shift went. He was concerned when someone was absent and didn't call and often asked me about my feedback on ways to improve the efficiency of our squad. He was a kind squad leader who took on the task with care and understanding. I never saw him get uptight or argue with anyone. He never enmeshed himself in personality conflicts but made everyone feel comfortable and asked folks to do jobs they felt comfortable with. Shifts were pleasant and there was a strong sense of camaraderie. We got things done because we worked as a team.

“HE LOVED BEING A SQUAD LEADER AND THE CLOSE CONNECTIONS HE'D BUILT WITH OTHER MEMBERS OF THE TEAM. JOE LOVED THE COOP AS AN INSTITUTION. HE WAS VERY PROUD OF HOW LONG HE'D BEEN A MEMBER.”

JOSEPH'S WIFE, SUZY BORDEN

Joseph taught English for 30 years at John Dewey High School in Gravesend, Brooklyn. Testimonials from friends and colleagues mention his commitment to education, his passion for the Italian language and culture of his ancestors (from the Puglia region of Italy), as well as for music, photography, bicycling and the Mets. A student, Hryzoleta Ciercierka, wrote: “He was such an amazing teacher. Pushed me so hard and saw so much potential in me and my writing. To this day I think about how encouraging he was.”

Joseph is survived by his wife, Suzy Borden, and their adored cats Jasmine and Calypso; his loving sisters Joanne (Rob) and Marie (Steve); his niece Jessica (Jason);

nephews Jeremy and Michael; grand-niece Avalee; Aunt and Uncle Carmela and Angelo Silecchia; Aunt and Uncle Angela and Stanley Pearlstein; and Aunt Connie Marzella, as well as many cousins and their children.

Suzy, his wife, recalls:

He loved being a squad leader and the close connections he'd built with other members of the team. Joe loved the Coop as an institution. He was very proud of how long he'd been a member. I came along much later, and Joe liked to correct me: When I'd ask if "they" carry a certain item, Joe would say, "you mean if we carry it!"

Member Thomas Rayfiel is the author of eight novels. He has also written "living obituaries" for VICE TV.

IN MEMORY OF DONALD THOMAS

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PHOTO PROVIDED BY DONALD THOMAS PARTNER

By Thomas Rayfiel

Donald Thomas, who worked the Coop's Sunday night inventory shift for many years, died Aug. 18, 2022. He was 71. Donald joined the Coop in 1989.

"He was a quiet, kind, and reliable squad member," shift coworker Andrea Dobro recalls. "Always happy to train new squad members and to stay late to get the work done. Whenever I would run into him, either while shopping at the Coop or walking in the neighborhood, it was always nice to see him. He had a great smile and friendly demeanor."

"DONALD WAS NOT ONLY A LOVING HUSBAND, BUT A CARING AND COMPASSIONATE FRIEND TO EVERYONE HE MET."

DONALD'S WIFE, EVELYN DAVIS-THOMAS

Donald's wife, Evelyn Davis-Thomas, says on their first date he made her a Coop meal of salmon and jewel sweet potatoes.

"Donald was not only a loving husband, but a caring and compassionate friend to everyone he met. He was a master of conversation and always had some wisdom to impart to anyone who would listen. He had a sense of family and of friends, too, who were dear to his heart. There was nothing he would not do for either. He was cherished by everyone who had the privilege to know him."

Donald was born and raised in Brooklyn and lived here all his life. He was employed as a postal worker and a computer repair technician. He also volunteered at the Boys' Club of New York as a mentor and helped many young people individually. "A father to the fatherless," his wife said. In addition to Evelyn, he is survived by his sister, Maxine Eula Thomas, and his goddaughters, Anissa Smith and Tracy Alexis Ma-

cHolmes.

IN MEMORY OF RACHEL PORTER

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By Thomas Rayfiel

During the pandemic, Rachel Porter began hearing store-wide announcements referring to “shoppers” and “customers.” Dedicated not just to the efficient functioning of the Coop but to the concepts behind its creation, she immediately wrote, in the *Line-waiters’ Gazette*:

“The Coop has never referred to members as shoppers or customers, because those

phrases suggest competing interests between store owners (or staff) and those who shop. Our Coop is practically unique in rejecting that division, which is why members can trust the Coop to provide the groceries we want without advertising or deceptive practices.”

Rachel, who died recently at the age of fifty-three, joined the Coop in 1995. She was, as her friend Sara Ivry recalls, “a principled, strong-minded brilliant individual who lived her ideals in a way that few others I know do. She was fiercely committed to the mission of the Coop and was a great champion of it.” A squad leader for ten years, she then worked on both the Revolving Loan and Committee Oversight committees.

“Rachel was the driving force behind the Coop having a 40th birthday celebration in 2013,” General Coordinator Joe Holtz remembers. “About a year before that, Rachel co-founded the Revolving Loan Committee whose purpose is to financially support start-up coops that use our member labor required model. Rachel loved our Coop and was always working to encourage us to build on our foundational strengths and not take continued success for granted.”

“SHE VALUED THE STRUCTURE OF INDIVIDUALS ORGANIZING THEMSELVES FOR THE COMMON GOOD. FOR HER, I THINK, IT WAS THAT VERY RARE AND TREASURED EXAMPLE OF THE WORLD ACTUALLY WORKING AS IT SHOULD.”

DAVID TEPPER

At Edward R. Murrow High School, where she was a special education teacher, Rachel initiated and led a Restorative Justice Initiative, “striving to establish an effective, evidence-based alternative to retributive criminal justice policies and punitive school discipline, capable of reducing violence and fostering public safety.” She was also, for many years, a social justice researcher volunteering for organizations involved in progressive causes.

But Rachel's engagement with the Coop extended well beyond serving on committees and monitoring store-wide pages. Almost everyone who remembered her raves about her phenomenal skills as both a baker and warm-hearted host.

"I have images of her cart overflowing with enormous amounts of produce, always the most straight-from-the-earth variety in terms of no extra packaging or pre-washing, of her leaving the Coop on her bike with a Garden of Eden bursting from her bags and basket, ready to be orchestrated into splendid food," says Lara Tabac.

"As a very skilled baker," David Tepper notes, "a voracious reader of recipes and all kinds of food writing, and an incredibly generous host who always had a crowd at her table. Rachel loved the Coop for its food and culture. (She was very upset when we stopped carrying yeast in bulk.) Moreover, she valued the structure of individuals organizing themselves for the common good. For her, I think, it was that very rare and treasured example of the world actually working as it should."

Rachel is survived by her two sons, Ulisse and Sasha Narici-Porter, her former husband Manlio Narici, her mother Joan, and her brother Josh.

IN MEMORY OF HELEN HOLTZ

October 17, 2023



By Thomas Rayfiel

Helen Holtz, a longtime Coop member and organizer of many memorable celebrations at the Coop, died recently. She was 74. Helen joined the Coop in 1979. In the early 1980's, she chaired many General Meetings and was later Recording Secretary, but it is for her pioneering work on the Fundraising Committee that she will be most fondly remembered.

"She was creative and dedicated to making every event work well," Sarah Zahnstecher recalls. "She made it fun to paint signs announcing the latest event and even kept one of mine after it was over. Importantly, she was a fighter for gender equality and social justice before many people understood the divisive society we live in. What else would you expect from someone who spent so much time making the Coop thrive and the world a better place by her presence in it? Helen was the kind of person I thought would always be here with us."

Martha Siegel, who succeeded Helen on the Fundraising Committee, points in particular to her organizing of huge parties for the Coop's fifth, tenth, fifteenth, and twentieth birthdays as well as the Food Coop Music Festivals from 1983-1987, which took place at PS 321. "Helen probably organized the food. Steve Browman and I ran the music," Siegel says. "They were very successful events and definitely increased the feeling of community."

Daniel Brooks, also a member of the committee, notes: "Helen led a dedicated team of 'Funsters' who organized dances, auctions, performances and other festival opportunities. We would meet in her apartment and discuss and argue over themes and events and the kind of flowers that would decorate the tables. She let no detail slip through the cracks and kept us all thinking of new ways to socially engage the Coop members."

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DANIEL BROOKS, FUNDRAISING COMMITTEE MEMBER

In her professional career, Helen liked to say she worked first as a “stripper,” a job that involved removing a photographic emulsion with its image from an individual negative and combining it with others in position on a glass plate. When that skill became obsolete, she retrained to become a diagnostic medical sonographer, a health care professional trained to use imaging technology to help physicians diagnose heart problems.

“She made a tremendous effort in going back to school in order to make a living for the purpose of helping people,” Zahnstecher adds. “It was very hard and she kept at it.”

Helen is survived by her husband, David Chorlian, her brother, Coop General Coordinator Joe Holtz, her sister-in-law, Kathy Blyn, her niece Sarah, and her nephew David.

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