

JANET SCHUMACHER OBITUARY

February 28, 2022



Janet Schumacher (left) and Joe Holtz (right) receiving an award from the Gowanus Canal Conservancy, on behalf of the Park Slope Food Coop in 2007.

By Thomas Rayfiel

In 1975, the Coop was in danger of collapsing . . . for the third time. Two previous methods of member labor had failed. A new attempt—the basis for the ABCD Week squads we were familiar with until the onset of the pandemic—was also running into massive difficulties. There was no way for one squad to pass on information to the next. When the Coop closed one day and then reopened on another there was an even greater disconnect. Janet Schumacher, an early and passionately devoted member, sought out Joe Holtz and told him that “we’ll fail again,” despite having finally come up with a workable system—unless a radical step was taken. Her idea was that

the Coop should hire a full-time employee to oversee member labor and coordinate the myriad of narratives that go into running a successful organization. At the next General Meeting, members voted to start accepting applications for its first employee. Janet encouraged Joe to apply. He did, and he got the job. It is from then on that the Park Slope Food Coop, as we know it, really began. In Joe's words, "Janet envisioned the demise of the Coop, and she envisioned a solution."

Janet Schumacher died on February 3, of pancreatic cancer. She was 76. As one of the twenty-five or so people who helped get the Coop off the ground after its inception, Janet devoted an amazing amount of thought and energy to its survival. Her contributions have come to be seen as foundational to the many aspects of the Coop we now take for granted. From 1989, when she became a General Coordinator, to her retirement in 2015, she was responsible for ordering 75-80% of what the Coop sells. Members will remember her as being everywhere: in the office, on the phone, paging out, in the basement, in the aisles. She was deeply involved in so much of the Coop's growth—from its early shift away from individuals pre-ordering groceries to the more recent introduction of scanners, which revolutionized our inventory system.

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She had an amazing sense of food—at early organizational pot-luck dinners her cooking and baking was almost always the star attraction—and a preternatural ability to determine which products were just fads and which were not, an important skill when dealing with limitations of space and capital. "You can't tie your money up in something you can't sell," she told Hayley Gorenberg in a *Linewaiters' Gazette* profile.

A constant presence, Janet was never too busy to answer a question or just talk. The community the Coop provided clearly answered a deep need in her. Allen Zimmer-

man, her fellow General Coordinator for many years, recalls: “When I think of the thousands of Coop members who knew or worked with and loved Janet, or of the thousands of Coop members I have known, I can say with certainty that no one loved the Coop more than Janet.”

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Janet Schumacher was born on a dairy farm in Clyman, Wisconsin. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin, she joined the Peace Corps and served for three years in Ethiopia. Her experience there, witnessing extreme poverty and hunger, reinforced her interest in food as being “a very practical, hands-on” way to effect social change. After completing her service, she crossed Asia, taught English in Japan, and ended up in New York. Although an extremely community-minded Brooklynite (she was particularly supportive of the Brooklyn Public Library), her interest in birding, at first confined to Prospect Park, The Green-Wood Cemetery, and Jamaica Bay, eventually took her to over thirty countries.

Janet is survived by her longtime companion, former General Coordinator Mike Eakin, as well as her sisters Barbara Jean Mullin and Mary Lee Peterman. Her ashes will be deposited in Mike’s plot in Green-Wood. The site, one of her favorite birding spots in the cemetery, will have a plaque bearing not her name but, as she requested, Emily Dickinson’s, “Hope is the thing with feathers.”

Guest Reporter Thomas Rayfiel is a novelist. Prior to his retirement, he spent twenty-eight years in the Coop dairy cooler.

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