

IN MEMORY OF ANDREA “TRACI” O’KELLY

September 16, 2025



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*By Thomas Rayfiel*

Andrea “Traci” O’Kelly, who joined the Coop in 1985, died on April 1 at her home in Brooklyn. She was 74 years old. Traci studied acting at the Afro-American Studio for Acting and Speech in Harlem. She performed a musical tribute to Billie Holiday at Danny’s Skylight Room and Don’t Tell Mama. Later, she settled in Park Slope and worked at several businesses, including Jumpin’ Julia, Tarzian West for Housewares and the Plaza Center for the Healing Arts.

At the Coop, Traci worked checkout and had a near-perfect attendance record. Her daughter Raine recalls that “the Coop was an essential space for my mother. She was very proud to be a member. She primarily worked at checkout because she loved talking to people and learning about all the items the Coop carried. She appreciated its affordability and organic food. My mother raised four young children as a single mother. Being able to provide us with artisanal, organic high-quality products was the reason she was grateful to be a member.”

Some of Traci’s favorite Coop items were chicken for roast chicken Sundays, kombucha, fresh corn, ramps, cantaloupe, and essential oils such as lemon, peppermint and lavender for sleep and meditation.

Membership Coordinator Jana Cunningham, who was often in charge of Traci’s shift, remembers: “Traci was always wearing a smile. She was one of those people who made the room brighter by just being present. Traci worked on the Shopping Squad, which could at times be very hectic and stressful, yet she remained pleasant, helpful, kind and...smiling.”

A great animal lover, Traci always had dogs and cats in her house. She was particularly fond of Irish setters, cocker spaniels and Maine coon cats.

“THE COOP WAS AN ESSENTIAL SPACE FOR MY MOTHER. SHE WAS VERY PROUD

TO BE A MEMBER.”

*RAINE, DAUGHTER*

Traci is survived by her daughters, Lani, Toi, Raine and Jurnee; her sisters, Donna and Frances, and her dog, Joey. Her mother, Helen, predeceased her in 2006. Her brother, Arnold, predeceased her in 2015. Her only son, Hunter, predeceased her in 2020.

*Coop member Thomas Rayfiel is the author of eight novels. He has also written “living obituaries” for VICE TV.*

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## IN MEMORY OF DAN CLEARWATER GROSS

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*By Thomas Rayfiel*

Dan Clearwater Gross, a Coop member who was heavily involved in composting, both in Park Slope and other parts of Brooklyn, died unexpectedly on July 14. He was 40 years old. Dan joined the Coop in 2010, left in 2013 then rejoined in 2022. Dan's partner, Alexia Cohen, describes how "for the past two-plus years we did the composting shift together on Saturdays at the Old Stone House community garden. We hauled and processed the compost in the garden. We loved our composting shift so much. We often did it while playing music on our speaker, chopping the compost to the rhythm of the music. Little kids would stop by and ask what we were doing. They loved participating in the process for a couple of minutes. We had nice interactions with all sorts of folks in the park. Dan was a socialist, and the Coop aligned with his values."

Sherry Showell, squad leader of the Composting Squad, remembers Dan as “a fascinating and enthusiastic person. I filed it in the back of my brain to try and introduce him to my son. I thought they had a lot of things in common—hands-on building, inventing, physics. This just is too sad. He really impressed me.”

Dan was also on the board of BK Rot, a bike-powered, fossil fuel-free food waste hauling and compost service that operates at the local level, enlisting community members. In the photo accompanying this obituary, he is standing in front of a compost sifter he and Alexia designed and fabricated.

During his previous time as a member, Dan was on the Commando Squad, an elite cleaning unit that met once every 12 weeks and gave the Coop a deep cleaning on Sunday nights from 8 p.m. to 2 a.m.

Dan’s professional life was varied. At the time of his death, he was Senior Director of Membership for the Newlab Brooklyn in the Navy Yards, a company devoted to helping startup technologies gain a foothold in the commercial world. Previously, he was a scientific instrument maker. He also collaborated with artists to create various art pieces and installations.

He is survived by Alexia Cohen, his life partner, his parents Penni Harmon and Alan Gross, his brothers Eliot Harmon and Mowgli Holmes, and his sisters Crystal Clearwater Gross and Lily Harmon.

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MEET TOM RAYFIEL, THE OBITUARY WRITER FOR THE “GAZETTE”



September 16, 2025



August 26, 2025

*By Emmett Lindner*

Tom Rayfiel, a Coop member who spent many a shift working in the dairy cooler, has been writing obituaries for the *Linewaiters' Gazette* for years. It may sound macabre to deal in death, but obituaries solidify recollections of loved ones that might otherwise fade over the years—in both memories and conversations. Through Rayfiel's writing, a Member remains a part of the Coop's collective memory and history for generations.

He aims to capture someone's life by speaking with their loved ones and acquaintances to boil down decades of experiences and find the core personality of the per-

son who has passed.

Some of the members Rayfiel has written about include Tim Mohr, a food-processing squad leader, who was also a translator with accomplishments that “are almost too many to name”; Shelly Weiss, an early Member who was “a force of nature at whatever she set her mind to”; and Alison Rose Levy, a longtime writer for the *Gazette*.

“WE SHOULD ACKNOWLEDGE WHEN ONE OF US DIES,” SAYS RAYFIEL. “OTHERWISE, A PERSON JUST FAILS TO SHOW UP FOR THEIR SHIFT A FEW TIMES AND FADES FROM MEMORY.”

“I never thought of writing them myself until I saw a makeshift memorial notice on the wall of the Coop’s receiving area announcing the death of our (very young) beer buyer,” said Rayfiel. “I felt, if we are a community, we should acknowledge when one of us dies. Otherwise, a person just fails to show up for their shift a few times and fades from memory.”

Mr. Rayfiel is a writer by trade and has published novels including *Split-Levels* and *Colony Girl*. He has also worked with *VICE*, creating tongue-in-cheek “living obituaries.”

In this interview, Rayfiel discussed how he writes obituaries, how he began his career and what writing about death has taught him. (Note: This interview has been edited and condensed.)

### **Can you tell readers a little about yourself?**

I was born in Westchester and grew up in northern New Jersey and went to school in Iowa, Grinnell College. Then, I lived in various other places, Saratoga Springs, and in Paris and London for a while, doing odd jobs and was always writing.



In Paris, I did screenwriting for a bit. I worked with French directors who were hoping to make it big in Hollywood by writing scripts and I helped them out.

I always wanted to be a prose writer. Screenwriting was more a way to make money. It's a very interesting craft, but I knew pretty early on that I wanted to be more in control of the final product than you are as a screenwriter. You're basically there to help the director achieve his vision, I suppose, and it's all subservient to that.

### **And you can be more independent as a novelist.**

Yes, you can also be more poverty stricken.

I did write short stories first. I published short stories in various literary quarterlies and eventually, I published several novels. The novel as a form has always fascinated me.

### **When did you move to Brooklyn?**

Maybe 34, 35 years ago. My wife is a potter, Claire Weissberg. She's Claire of Claireware, the pottery store down on Union and Nevins in Gowanus. We moved to Brooklyn because we wanted to be near a gas-fired kiln she had found on Third Avenue. It was not chasing after some trendiness at all. It was just one of the few gas-fired kilns she found that she could have access to.

### **Did you join the Coop when you first moved here?**

Pretty soon after. At that time, it was very different. It was only open a few hours a day, and it was a much smaller space. Obviously, it hadn't expanded the way it is now.

At first there was no dairy cooler. It used to be just a refrigerated cabinet that you would haul everything out of and rotate one by one and put new stuff in. My first job

was at the bottom of the conveyor belt. No one told me that you had to brace all the items because the conveyor belt was angled way too steeply.



Photograph by Michael Berman.

So, the first thing I sent up was a load of flour and a load of cucumbers. The flour tipped over and broke, and as I was staring up at the conveyor belt, this cascade of cucumbers and flour came out. Any other job, of course, I would have been fired on the first day, but it being the Coop, they just explained to me what I needed to know, and eventually I figured the rest out.

I enjoyed seeing how a coop works from the inside, instead of just seeing the finished product. It's kind of amazing to me how all the moving parts fit together as well as they do.

THERE IS—NOT TO GET TOO CORNY ABOUT IT—A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AT THE COOP THAT I CERTAINLY DON'T FEEL WHEN I GO TO WHOLE FOODS OR KEY FOOD.

### **At what point did you think about writing obituaries for the Coop?**

I saw that flyer, which I still occasionally glimpse when they have the door to the receiving area open for our beer buyer. It was a little homemade announcement that he had died. And that really struck me as being insufficient. That's when I got the idea of going to Joe Holtz with this idea of being the obituary writer for the Coop.

### **What is your process for writing the obituaries?**

I go where they lead me, but I keep them all about the same length. There's a sort of general underlying form, which is: I talk a little bit about the person's life outside the Coop, but then I also emphasize what they did in the Coop and what the Coop meant to them. I try to talk to people who worked with them at the Coop, people who knew them. Often I find the Coop had a real place in their lives. And that's the part I try to emphasize.

There is—not to get too corny about it—a sense of community there that I certainly don't feel when I go to Whole Foods or Key Food.

I don't have a template. I try to wing it each time. I'm sure that I am, in fact, asking very similar questions, but I never wanted to become so rote that I'm just reeling off questions from a boilerplate email I have. I try to make it a little more individual.

I'm very intent on not making it a literary performance in any sense of the word. I just want to stay out of the way as much as possible. I want to get the information out there, and I love getting quotes from people who knew the person. I don't want to

have some kind of flourish that's mine. So mostly it's a question of staying as invisible as possible.

WHAT STILL AMAZES ME IS THAT WE ARE INDIVIDUALS AND EVERYONE HAS THEIR OWN STORY. IT'S A TRUISM, BUT IT'S GREAT TO FIND OUT AGAIN AND AGAIN.

**Is it ever difficult to speak with family members or friends for the stories?**

Yes, I always prefer email, because I think for both sides, they get to sort of gather themselves more than if you're on the phone. There have been times when people aren't comfortable writing it out, then I've talked to them. Sometimes it's been hard for them, and I certainly tread lightly. I'm not a muckraking obituary writer. All I want to do is memorialize these people, not find out some hidden truth about them.

**What do you take away from writing about death so often?**

What still amazes me is that we are individuals and everyone has their own story. It's a truism, but it's great to find out again and again. And it's very often very touching to see the impression people made on other people, even if it's just tangential. After they're gone, people still leave this sort of resonance with other people. And I pick up on that.

It does reinforce this sense I have that we've created—not to get too grandiose about it—but we have created this low-level sense of community, which, especially in these times, I feel is kind of rare and worth preserving. Now, luckily, we're all united in the fact that we're all going to die, so maybe that will keep us at least together in that sense.

*Emmett Lindner works on the breaking and trending news desk at The New York Times.*