

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

August 26, 2025



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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 person 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.

AFTER MANY YEARS OF SHIFTS, A GOLDEN REWARD: COOP RETIREMENT

August 26, 2025



By Zach Schiffman

Dolores Natividad had been a Coop member for more than 31 years. Hitting three decades of shifts marked an important milestone for her: retirement. She recalled being at the Coop on a Saturday, thinking to herself, “It’s been a really long time since I’ve been working here at the Food Coop. Since I am 65, how much more time do I need before retiring?”

Natividad went upstairs to the Membership Office and gave her member number. She soon learned that she had earned that golden ticket, Coop retirement, which offers her a well-deserved privilege: membership for life without having to do shifts.

The retirement program has an almost mystical air about it, which was made clear in discussions with several members.

“I hope I can afford to live in New York long enough to make it to Coop retirement, whenever that is,” one member remarked.

Early in the Coop’s existence, members could only ask to stop working when they reached 75. But in 2008, a new program was established with a sliding scale, granting retirement status to members based on a formula that takes into account their age and the number of years they have been a member.

Members who are 60, for example, can retire if they have been a member for 30 years, while members who are 70 or older can retire if they have at least 10 years of membership.

Walecia Konrad, a former reporter and editor for the *Linewaiters’ Gazette*, recalled that she realized that she might be eligible when she turned 64, given that she had been a Coop member for 22 years.

“I was just looking on the website, and I was really surprised,” Konrad said. “My husband is younger than I am; he was like, ‘Oh, you should look for the formula. I think you might be able to retire.’”

After applying through Member Services, approved members receive a phone call congratulating them on retirement.

“It had become really hard to get shifts,” said Sandye Renz, 66, who has been a Coop member for 19 years. “So I thought, ‘Hmm, maybe I won’t have to do any more.’ So I went to the office and was told I could retire, but I still owed one shift. And I still couldn’t get a shift.”

Renz, who primarily worked office and checkout shifts, later got a call clarifying she no longer owed that shift, along with congratulations on her retirement.

The retirement program is voluntary, as many long-time members enjoy their shifts

and elect to keep contributing to the Coop. Renz said she “won’t miss doing shifts,” but she looks back fondly on working days like Halloween. “We did costumes,” she said. “That was always fun. One year I was the tag for vegetables—I just wore it as a mask on my face.”

Retirement can spark a lot of reflection, as it does outside of the Coop. As a reporter for the *Gazette*, Konrad attended countless General Meetings, and she remembers votes that have changed the Coop over the years, from approving benefits like walking shifts and daycare to things we may take for granted now, such as the ability to purchase meat or beer.



Dolores Natividad in front of the Membership Office

Natividad recalled the days before the Coop accepted debit cards as payment.

“I used to do the new member orientation shift, and I remember getting tired of saying, ‘Debit cards coming soon!’ Every month, over and over,” she said. “If you didn’t have enough money, you’d have to run to the bank and get money or use a check.”

Major world events have shaped the membership experience. Many retired members mentioned the pandemic, which made it more difficult to feel a sense of community at the Coop. Others recalled the time on Union Street after 9/11, when a wooden sculpture was erected outside the firehouse next to the Coop. “Having that sculpture right between the firehouse and the Food Coop, it was very emotional,” Natividad said.

Over decades of membership, retirees worked a diverse array of shifts. The office shifts were a favorite. “I started doing the office for a while, because my daughter was little and she didn’t like staying in child care, so it was easy for her to run into the office all the time and hang out with me,” said Renz, whose children are now grown. “But when the office got more computerized, I started doing checkout, and then I did everything. I have done every shift pretty much.”

Way back when, Natividad said, she did some grueling shifts. “The first was helping to unload at the wee hours of the morning—helping get the food off the truck and put it on the gurneys—because I liked lifting heavy things. It was satisfying. It was like a workout,” she said.

She also served on the Coop’s Diversity Committee and gave new member orientations, though her favorite shift was serving food at CHiPS, the pantry and soup kitchen nearby on Fourth Avenue.

Natividad believes that her Coop shifts, specifically her time working on the Diversity Committee, informed her own field work as an exercise physiologist.

As an over-three-decade member, she said, the Coop has been involved in the fabric of her life. “Even when my husband asked me to marry him, I said, ‘The household needs to be in good standing and you need to join the Food Coop.’”

RECEIVING COORDINATOR MIRIAM EUSEBIO PULLS UP STAKES FOR WEST COAST PARENTS

August 26, 2025



By Hayley Gorenberg

In the late 1990s, Californian Miriam Eusebio set off to pursue a master's degree in directing at Brooklyn College, and her friend enrolled at New York University in the West Village. "We looked at a map, and put our fingers on the campuses—and in between was Park Slope. So that's where we decided to move," she said. The roommates soon learned of the Coop. "I thought, 'This seems kinda weird and cult-y. Don't know about that!'" Eusebio said. "Plus, I was going to be in grad school, which is designed to be more work than is humanly possible."

A turning point came when Eusebio tried to buy a single zucchini at Key Food. The squashes were packed in plastic-wrapped polystyrene trays, three zucchini to a package. Eusebio inquired about purchasing a single zucchini. An employee disappeared into the back with the heavily wrapped three-pack, and returned to Eusebio after breaking open the package, discarding the original wrapping, and rewrapping a single zucchini in more plastic and polystyrene. “That was it,” she said. “I had to join the Coop.”



Eusebio has been a receiving coordinator for nearly 25 years.

Even though Eusebio and her roommate were frequently on work alert for missed shifts, and she had to reschedule for a new squad whenever her semester schedule changed, she stayed. “I really found a place that matched my values as a person in the world,” she said.

She earned her graduate degree in directing, but with jobs in theater scarce, Eusebio needed other work. She recalled being encouraged to apply for a part-time receiving coordinator position that seemed flexible enough to accommodate her efforts in “the real off-off-Broadway world, lots of self-produced stuff.” She landed the Coop job in

1999, and even made some connections to fellow members that led to theater work, stints teaching theater arts summer camps, etc. At one point she left her Coop job to do teaching artist work for a few semesters, but she soon came back. “The Coop does not forget you!” she said.

“SOMETIMES LEARNING TO BE IN A COOPERATIVE IS LIKE LEARNING TO SHAVE OFF THE CORNERS OF YOUR SQUARE PEG TO FIT IN A ROUND HOLE.”

MIRIAM EUSEBIO

Needing more money, she took on more hours. She had started as coordinator for “health and beauty” items, but over time her responsibilities shifted to other disparate categories: stationery, batteries, and super-local Union Street Honey, advertised as “produced by a father-son duo who keep four beehives in Park Slope, Brooklyn.” Eusebio enjoys working with the distributors, recounting how she keeps in touch with the local honey business: “John calls me and says, ‘The bees have made some honey!’ And I say, ‘Send me as much as you can!’ And we get maybe ten cases.”

While she’s enjoyed her work at the Coop, Eusebio feels a pull back to her hometown of Davis, California, where her parents, now in their mid-eighties, could use her help. “It’s a pretty big life change, and I have a lot of sadness about leaving New York and leaving the Coop,” she said. “But I also feel really positive about the next part of my life.” Living with her parents, she plans to focus her outside work on theater. This spring she will direct a play with Acme Theater Company, a youth theater where she participated when she was growing up. The group plans to stage David Ives’ “The Liar,” based on a 17th-century French comedy full of “mistaken identities, running in and out of doors.”



PHOTO BY ROD MORRISON

Eusebio uses her theatrical directing skills to teach members how things should be done.

Eusebio applies her directing and teaching chops at the Coop, as a staff member connecting with working members. “It takes a lot of effort to teach 15,000 people something,” she said. “In other relationships you have, you say a thing, and it’s said: ‘This is how you stock the eggs.’” But at the Coop, with members who take shifts for a couple hours every few weeks, “even if someone is experienced, you always teach them how to rotate the yogurt, even if they think they know.” On a standard stocking squad, accumulating the working hours that would correspond to a week of labor in a new, full-time job could take a year, she noted. “You feel like you’ve been [at the Coop] a year, so you know stuff. But you’ve only had the job a week. Sometimes [members] feel like they know stuff, but you still have to teach them without alienating them,” she said. “It’s the nature of the lightly controlled chaos of the Coop.”

“YOU FEEL LIKE YOU’VE BEEN [AT THE COOP] A YEAR, SO YOU KNOW STUFF. BUT YOU’VE ONLY HAD THE JOB A WEEK... IT’S THE NATURE OF THE LIGHTLY CONTROLLED CHAOS OF THE COOP.”

MIRIAM EUSEBIO

Monitoring the Coop floor, she often finds herself “communicating and teaching, saying the same thing over and over again.” She admitted having felt “ticked off” early on at some of the required repetition, and she had to learn to approach members with patience. “I’ve learned to recognize the look in people’s eyes when they actually understand, which, as a director, is useful. I don’t have to wait as long to figure out whether they got it or not. You get a lot of practice.” She described the sequence: “Teach! They do something different. You recognize what you said taught them that thing that they did. You have to switch the way you say it. You get another chance to teach that same thing. Because we’re constantly stocking the shelves.”



Both workers and shoppers need to have a good experience at the Coop.

Further melding her directorial mindset with her Coop approach, she said, “You have to pay attention to the psychological balance of the ‘cast.’ I want everyone to have a good experience at the Coop, whether they’re working or shopping.” She tries to pay attention to how members are feeling about what she asks them to do, telling a member nervous about working the dairy case, ‘Do it as long as you can stand it,’ so that they have an out. It’s not quite a cast, but it sort of is. It’s a little group of people who are working together on a particular project for a particular length of time.”

Among the most memorable events at the Coop was the impromptu marriage ceremony of two coworkers. They were moving out of town, and realized that as a same-sex couple who eschewed certain heteronormative institutions, they nonetheless needed health insurance benefits available through marriage. With their departure clock ticking, another staff member who had secured a Universal Life Church ordination offered to help. An announcement over the PA system summoned staff to the ups-

tairs community room, where the couple exchanged twist-tie rings, “because they hadn’t been planning it, and it was what they had,” Eusebio said. “It was just the most wonderful and moving ceremony. They’re still together and happy.”



Eusebio uses the PA system to thank members at the end of their shift.

The spur-of-the-moment wedding PA announcement may be most memorable for Eusebio, but her own end-of-shift PA announcements have secured special regard. “I like to have an ending point rather than the shift just fizzling off,” she said. She makes a practice of announcing appreciation for the squad. “I thank them for being part of this weird experiment that’s been thriving for 50 years,” she said. “People don’t always understand the nature of what they’re part of. We’re so trained in our whole lives to being in a hierarchical structure. Sometimes learning to be in a cooperative is like learning to shave off the corners of your square peg to fit in a round hole. I emphasize they’re not a customer; they’re part of something. They came, and they’re running the business that they’re part of owning,” she said.

“It’s kind of a little miracle, a place to find community and to stretch your brain about how the world works, and the structures that we live in,” she continued. “We are so interconnected. The Coop shows how much we gain when we depend on each other, and when we’re responsible to each other. The Coop is a place where you can really live that out—not only to members, but to the world, to say, ‘Look at this thing that works!’”

When she’s not writing for the Gazette or teaching LGBTQ rights, Hayley Gorenberg may be found playing the Brazilian dobra with the Fogo Azul drumline.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT: MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR JANA CUNNINGHAM’S QUARTER CENTURY OF SERVICE

August 26, 2025



By Leila Darabi

If you've ever been shopping at the Coop when a shopper uses the intercom to ask "Are we out of almond milk?" you may have heard the voice of Membership Coordinator Jana Cunningham. She keeps her ears open for food-related intercom pages, and if the Coop is in fact out of the product, she sometimes shares a recipe instead.

"Call me if you want to learn how to make the best almond milk ever in five minutes!" she recently invited.

AN ISLAND GIRL

Cunningham was born in New York City. "I'm an island girl," she said, explaining that she was born "on the island of Manhattan, in the village of Harlem," before moving as a young child to "the mainland" and growing up in the South Bronx.

She describes her mother as an excellent cook. “My goodness! We could go to any restaurant, and she could walk out of there and recreate whatever the dish was from taste.”

When Cunningham was 13, she discovered Islam through her older sister and converted. Rather than explain to her mother that she now wanted to follow a religious diet and avoid non-Halal meat, she announced that she was vegetarian. Nearly five decades later, diet and nutrition remain extremely important parts of her life.

While her mother continued to cook meat, she also served vegetables and “beautiful salads” with every meal, and Cunningham said the “unintended consequence” of her shift in diet was feeling healthier.

“At 13, you don’t think you’re not feeling optimally well. You think this is how you feel,” she explained.

LEAVING CORPORATE LIFE

In her early years, Cunningham studied theater and dance and practiced yoga at home, and she has continued throughout her life. As an adult, however, she worked a corporate job at AT&T. One day, while listening to the radio on her lunch break, she heard a promotion for a yoga event. As a child, she had loved the PBS program “Lilias, Yoga and You” and she described watching the show, following along, and then teaching her younger sister the poses she had learned.

The lunch break radio promotion reminded Cunningham of this early passion, and she decided to attend the event to meet the teacher. While there, she caught the teacher’s eye. “What are you doing in my class?” the teacher asked. “You should be teaching yoga.”

Cunningham eventually became a yoga instructor.

DISCOVERING THE COOP

Cunningham joined the Coop in 1993, not long after moving to Brooklyn. “In those days there was a street squad,” she explained—members whose work shift involved setting up a table in front of the store, talking to people who walked by, and canvassing for new members. Cunningham agreed to a tour and signed up.



Cunningham has seen the Coop evolve from the over 3,000-member community she joined to a peak of over 17,000 members just before the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I had made a commitment to all-organic food, and I had three young children, and I practically emptied my savings account sticking to that commitment,” she said. The access to organic produce without breaking the bank and the cooperative philosophy of the Coop appealed to her.

In the beginning she worked different shifts, trying out different roles as a member. “Then I went to the office and I was like, ‘Oh, I like this best.’” One day in 1997, while working that shift, a staff member informed her of an open role for a paid position. Cunningham applied and got the job.

MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR

Twenty-five years later, Cunningham remains on staff and has seen the Coop evolve from the over 3,000-member community she joined to a peak of over 17,000 members just before the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Running the Coop’s membership office has always been a very challenging job and requires a balanced, compassionate approach with great attention to fairness,” said Coop founder and General Manager Joe Holtz. “Jana has mastered this and more and has been a positive example for her colleagues. The Coop is lucky to have hired her more than 25 years ago.”

Cunningham said working in the office appealed to her “mommy gene.” She has always enjoyed both helping people and teaching, as she did when she taught yoga. (She continues to teach tai chi.) As a Membership Coordinator she counsels members on “cooperative behavior” and encourages them to be considerate and mindful of their roles in the Coop community.

When asked what advice she has for shoppers, Cunningham said, “When people come to shop here, they should not be in a rush.”

PANDEMIC SHIFT

Like all Coop staff, Cunningham’s role changed when the store adopted strict COVID-19 protocols.

“The pandemic happened, and I went from an office job to managing a grocery store and being on the floor eight hours a day,” she said.

Only staff could work, and members of any status could shop, eliminating the need for a team upstairs tracking member work shifts. “It didn’t matter if you were suspended with five makeups, you could still shop,” said Cunningham. “So all the membership coordinators went downstairs to run the store.”



Like all Coop staff, Cunningham's role shifted when the store adopted strict COVID-19 protocols.

Rather than working from an office and managing member labor, she and her colleagues found themselves managing the store and temporary workers. "It was very different. It was a physically very demanding and exhausting couple of years," she said.

PERMANENT CHANGES

Now that the Membership Office is back open, Cunningham and her colleagues have shifted jobs again, though they have not fully reverted to the roles they played prior to March 2020. "A lot of what we did [pre-pandemic] has moved online, so the job is changing," she said.

While several membership coordinators have left their jobs in the past few years, the Coop has not filled every opening, in part because the labor needs have shifted. "The

jobs here continuously evolve,” Cunningham explained.

“When I first started, there were only five or six Membership Coordinators.” Two years ago, she said, the membership staff was around 18 people and is now about 12, including a few on parental leave.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Cunningham typically works Tuesday through Friday, four 10-hour shifts per week. She arrives at 7 a.m. to open the store and set up the membership office. She makes sure the cashiers have what they need, that there are tags at the entrance to help count the number of members shopping at any given time, and she sets up the office for her colleague who arrives at 8 a.m. to greet members working that shift.

Then it’s time to “open the gates.” Over the course of the day, Cunningham might help someone on suspension get a day pass to shop, respond to pages from members working on the floor who need assistance, and attend a staff meeting. A big part of her job is the behind-the-scenes office work that helps manage membership.

Cunningham shops at the Coop every day, purchasing greens and avocados to make a salad for lunch, or picking up blueberries and yogurt for the next day’s breakfast. On Fridays she does a larger shop for her days off and likes to walk the produce aisle to see what’s new.

One of the many perks that has kept her happy in her job for over 25 years is the constant possibility of new discoveries.

“I like to try new things,” she said.

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She is the cohost of the Cringe-watchers podcast and shares photos of the things she cooks with Coop ingredients @persian_ish on Instagram.