

WALKING AND TALKING: THE INS AND OUTS (AND OCCASIONAL AWKWARD SILENCES) OF A HIGHLY COVETED COOP SHIFT

November 26, 2024



By Liz Welch

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One of the greatest perks of being a Coop Member is not having to worry about schlepping your bounty home (if you happen to live within walking distance) or to your preferred mode of transportation, whether that be by train, car, bus or bike. The orange vested PSFC walkers, whose job is to accompany you while you push your cart back home, are such a mainstay of Park Slope that when I posted on a local Facebook page that I was looking for stories about this bespoke service, one woman commented that while she has never been a “cart returner” (the official work slot title for walkers), she dressed her toddler as one for Halloween one year—to huge fanfare.

A friend suggested that I write this story after the person who walked her towards her home in Gowanus one afternoon refused to take her to her door. He would not cross 4th Avenue, the edge of the boundary printed on the large maps that are attached to the sturdy carts that can handle the sometimes cobblestone and mostly potholed terrain.

"I live one block away," she explained to her walker, who'd dug his heels into the sidewalk. "Are you sure you can't help me?" she asked, as she unloaded her bags onto the street.

"Insurance reasons," he insisted. "If a car hit me outside of the bounds of the map then the Coop would be in legal hot water."

"But what if a car hit you during the other 59 days and 21 hours of your life between shifts?" she asked, trying to reason with him. "Then who is legally liable?"

The stickler was unmoved, so my friend called her husband and waited for him and their children to meet her and help her shlep a great many bags home.

The story left us both wondering: Was this legal liability excuse true? Who came up with it? Why?



Longtime (and soon to retire) Treasurer and General Manager Joe Holtz set the record straight: “The boundaries are not about insurance at all. That is complete non-truth. The boundaries were once closer in and then they were expanded... only once, I believe.”

General Coordinator Ann Herpel added the reason for the boundaries is really about time and fairness: the Coop does not want walkers to be gone for too long as there could be other members waiting to be walked back at the Coop. The Coop also strongly advises that walkers do not enter another member’s house.

According to the five walkers who were interviewed for this story, though, those boundaries are still open to interpretation. All the walkers interviewed for this story decide on a case by case basis. Shoshana Dornhelm, a member since 2016, recalls being taken advantage of once when she first started walking 8 years ago. “One man took advantage of my newbie status and took me all the way to Eastern Parkway and Washington Avenue!”

ONE TIME I WALKED A WOMAN WHO TOLD ME ABOUT HER SEX LIFE! AND THEN SHE SAID, 'DON'T WORRY! I'LL NEVER SEE YOU AGAIN!' BUT WHEN I DROPPED HER OFF, IT TURNED OUT THAT SHE LIVED IN THE SAME BUILDING AS MY RELATIVES.

The cart return shift was created for a surprising yet sensible reason. "To discourage members from bringing their cars to load outside the Coop, thereby causing the Squad One firefighters to arrive at life threatening emergencies later than they would have," Holtz explained. "Picture a curbside filled with members' cars and members loading into their cars. Picture other members needing to double park. Picture traffic coming around the double-parked cars. Picture a Squad One fire truck trying to go toward 6th Ave."

We think you're a hero, Joe! As do the following five cart returners who spoke with the *Linewaiters' Gazette* about why they love this shift and how they each interpret the (not set in stone) rules.

BELLA MUCCARI

Member since 2010

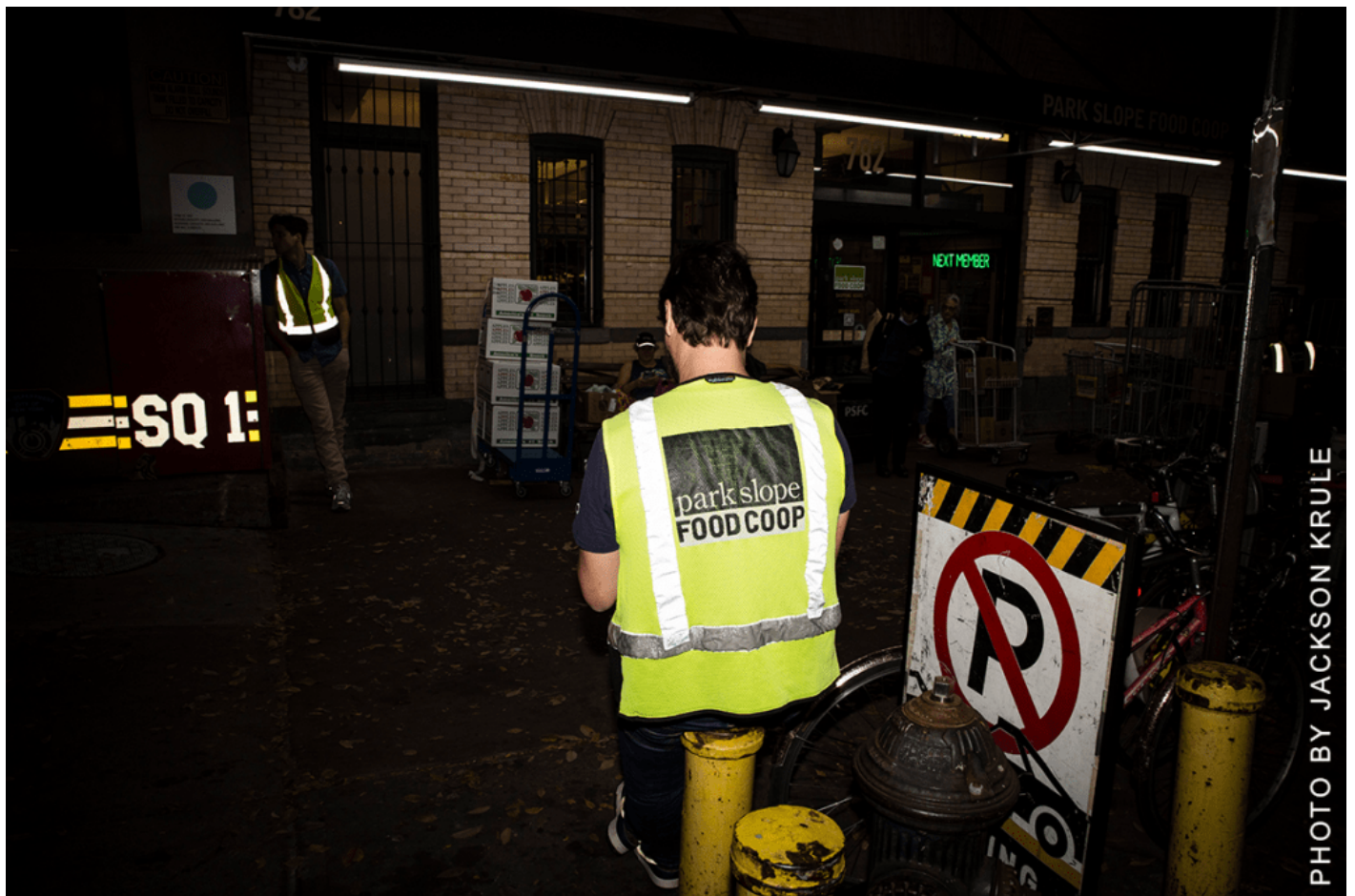
"Before Covid I did a morning receiving shift—but I always wanted to do walking! I was furloughed during the pandemic, so doing this shift was great! That was my exercise: When I did the shift, I was walking between 20,000 and 30,000 steps a day! I was in such good shape. I also banked a ton of shifts. Right now, I have 44 stored up, all from walking.

My experience has been mostly great. People appreciate that you are doing them a favor. While the rules are, 'Don't go outside of the range,' I decide on a case-by-case basis. I always try to be thoughtful and considerate. And I almost always say, yes.

There was one time when a woman who was younger than me told me to run and help her get to her bus. I did not do that. She missed the bus and said, 'Well now we have to walk all the way to Flatbush!' And I did do that.

Members share all kinds of interesting information with me: I once walked a guy from Scotland, and told him I was visiting his country that summer. He gave me tips of places to go in Aberdeen!

Another time, I walked a woman who told me about her sex life! And then she said, 'Don't worry! I'll never see you again!' But when I dropped her off, it turned out that she lived in the same building as my relatives."



MARIE ROMANO

Member since 2001

“Prior to Covid, I worked in the Coop’s office. I loved it and really enjoyed helping members with their accounts. After Covid, the set up in the office changed and I preferred to have a shift outside. I started the walking shifts as FTOP and then signed up for a regular shift.

I love being outside and at the same time helping members walk their carts to a destination. In addition to the walking, the sidewalks in the front should be cleared of debris and carts returned to their proper place.

The majority of people that I walk with drove to the Coop and parked nearby, so those are typically short walks. If someone says, ‘I need to go beyond the boundaries...’ I will take them if it is a block. My goal is to always service the members. For example, if I’m coming back from a walk, and see a shopper emptying their cart on 7th Avenue, I will offer to walk back with two carts. The shoppers are grateful, kind, love the Coop and always come first!”

SHOSHANA DORNHELM

Member since 2016

“Walking shifts are the best shifts the Coop has to offer, hands down! If I couldn’t be a walker, I don’t think I’d even be a member anymore. I love everything about it—being outside, getting exercise, even when the weather isn’t perfect. It doesn’t even feel like work to me. Plus, I prefer talking to people one-on-one more so than with people in a group setting, like how they described the coveted cheese packing shift during my orientation. That shift sounds like a nightmare to someone like me!

When it comes to walking people outside of the limits, I don’t mind going a block or two out—I believe that’s a good ‘buffer zone.’ Most people will let me know upfront if they’re in those ‘outer limits’ which I appreciate. In my experience, not many people have pushed those limits, but there have been some. When I first started eight years

ago, before limits were posted on the carts, one man took advantage of my newbie status and took me all the way to Eastern Parkway and Washington Avenue!

My most memorable walk was during the marathon last year. A family parked their bikes across 4th Avenue and Union Street, and we had to weave with the full cart through the runners (and then right back across, alone!).

I've had some really amazing conversations with people over the years. I've met journalists, doctors, people who have immigrated from other countries and people who have been here their whole lives. I especially love talking with people who have gone or are going through career changes, because I'm going through that too and it's encouraging to share the successes from our experiences.

SOME PEOPLE SEEM TO NOT WANT TO TALK AT ALL... IF THERE'S EVER AN AWKWARD PAUSE, I CAN ALWAYS ASK IF THERE WAS ANYTHING INTERESTING IN THE PRODUCE AISLE. IT NEVER FAILS!

I was nervous during my shifts when I first started walking. There was a lot of pressure to strike up light hearted, positive conversations with strangers. Over the years though, I've grown to be more attuned to people's energy and their social needs. Some people seem to not want to talk at all, which is great too—I'm always happy to daydream on my own for a bit. Having to read people's moods like this has helped me grow in all other areas of my life. And if there's ever an awkward pause, I can always ask if there was anything interesting in the produce aisle. It never fails!"

HANNAH DIAMOND

Member since 2012

"I missed the community of the Coop during lockdown—walking was the first shift that became available. I had previously worked checkout, which has similar advan-

tages in that I got to meet a whole cross section of Brooklyn. In day-to-day life we don't often get to talk to new people or meet people with lives very different from my own. As a walker I talk to people of all different ages, backgrounds, professions, etc.

I love talking to people and learning more about my community. I've talked to authors and directors and then read their books & watched their movies. I learn about jobs I never knew existed. I sometimes walk people back to their beautiful browns-tones and hear how cheaply they purchased them in the 1970s.

I also have 'regulars' who shop regularly at the same time, so I see every shift. I work by myself so in a way it's like having co-workers. We can catch up without really knowing each other.

Everyone at the Coop has an interesting story, and walking is the best way to hear as many as possible."

HEATHER HOPE

Member since 2010

"I'm a night owl. The walking shifts are usually posted after midnight. I check around 12:30 a.m.—and then sign up as soon as they are posted.

As for the rules, you are not obligated to push someone's cart. But I had one woman who was so pregnant she looked ready to pop. Her house was on 8th Avenue, so the walk was all uphill. I was happy to push for her. Another time, I walked an older man with mobility issues, so I offered to push his cart.



ILLUSTRATION BY OLEXA HEWRYK

Recently, I was walking a woman who had a newborn baby strapped to her. I had just started to seriously look for work after a long stint not working. As we were chit chatting, I told her I was looking for a part time job. As it turned out, she was on maternity leave and the owner of this local business! She asked me a few questions of what exactly I was looking for regarding employment and when I shared my previous work experience, she thought I could be a good fit.

She gave me the email of the person who was hiring. It was so kind! When I sent that person a message, I learned that the job had been filled. A month or so later, I got another email for another position. I had an interview with them on Friday.”

Liz Welch is a journalist, memoirist and book collaborator.

INTERESTED IN ENGAGING COOP WORK?

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DISPUTE RESOLUTION COMMITTEE (DRC) SEEKS NEW MEMBERS

SKILLS NEEDED

- Communication • Problem solving • Conflict resolution
- Dealing with complex situations
- Investigation • Writing • Research

OUR WORK INCLUDES

- Resolving conflicts between members
- Applying Coop rules and regulations

- Discussing policy issues related to the committee's work
- Investigating allegations of uncooperative behavior by members and engaging in problem-solving
- Frequent contact with committee members
- Participating in mediation, hearings and other conflict resolution methods

REQUIREMENTS

- In order to be considered for this position, any candidate must:
- Be a member for at least a year
- Have an excellent attendance record
- Possess the ability to work on a team
- Have good writing skills
- Have computer proficiency (Excel, Word, email)—this is essential
- Attend evening meetings every six weeks

We often work more than the 2.75 hours in a 6-week period. These hours are credited and can be banked for future use.

We recognize the importance of various points of view when considering cases brought to us. We are seeking a candidate pool that reflects the diversity of the Coop's membership.

CONTACT

foodcoopdrc@gmail.com with the subject line: Joining the DRC

Join us to make the Coop the best place it can be for everyone.

WORDSPROUTS REVIVED: A NEW PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE PARK SLOPE FOOD COOP AND THE OLD STONE HOUSE

November 26, 2024

By Sarah Schenck



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We are happy to announce the revival of WordSprouts, the Coop's reading series featuring Coop authors.

Due to the lack of availability of space at the Coop, we will be hosting events in partnership with our neighborhood nonprofit, the Old Stone House. Our next few gatherings will take place at the Old Stone House's beautiful upstairs meeting room.

We are seeking:

- Potential speakers (who have written a book, article, play—fiction or non-fiction—and would like to be considered for our 2024-2025 line-up).
- WordSprouts' featured authors receive 1-2 workslot credits for participating and may sell copies of their books at the event.
- We are also seeking potential squad members.

We are especially interested in addressing these two topics at upcoming gatherings:

- New approaches to community mental health.
- Our State of the Union (an open conversation about overcoming political polarization, defusing the epidemic of loneliness, and reviving our civic institutions).

Please contact Sarah at SarahSchenckFilms@gmail.com if you are interested in proposing yourself or another member who is an author as a potential special guest, or if you are interested in joining the squad.