



GROWING *with* PURPOSE



EST. 1972

.....
FORTY YEARS OF SEWARD
COMMUNITY COOPERATIVE
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Growing with Purpose

Forty Years of Seward Community Co-op

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Dedicated to the members of Seward Co-op,
past, present, and future.

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Foreword, Part One

I often stop by the Seward Co-op in between meetings to grab a quick bite for lunch—or at least, that’s always my plan. In reality, I can never leave without not only my planned lunch, but also a basket full of impulse purchases of the best food and food products anywhere.

I am not alone. Seward Co-op has been attracting happy and satisfied customers since 1972.

The co-op today is far larger, offers much more, and has a dramatically larger customer base. But from that day it opened in 1972 to today, the common purpose of Seward Co-op has been to put people in charge: in charge of what they put in their bodies and in charge of the food systems and shopping environment that reflects cooperative values.

All of us who shop at Seward Co-op owe a tremendous debt to original founders and board members over the years.

Your hard work and commitment has built Seward Co-op into an institution that reflects the very best of who we are and the land we live on.

—R.T. Rybak, mayor of Minneapolis

Foreword, Part Two

Those of us in agriculture are well versed in miracles. You know the clichés. The miracle of seeds germinating in spring rains, the miracle of spring itself. And without getting too misty-eyed about it, I can tell you from experience that a lot of this is true; there is something transcendent about walking through a field of squash buzzing with bees, seeing the stout vines stretching out along the soil.

As someone who has grown and sold produce for twenty-five years, in areas as diverse as New England and the Central Valley of California, I can also tell you from experience that we have, right here in South Minneapolis, one of the great miracles of the local, organic food scene in these United States: Seward Co-op.

Seriously, think about it. Seward is a vital, community-grown and community-based business committed to nurturing local producers small and large, certified organic or otherwise, from startup through success. And Seward has been consistently ahead of the curve on many things related to community-supported agriculture (CSA)—from drop-site hosting to the annual spring CSA Fair. What better formula could there be for making Seward Co-op the “small farmer’s best friend?”

My wife and I have been associated with co-ops our entire

lives—food co-ops, housing co-ops, and community land co-ops. We have had the great fortune to work with dynamic, cooperatively minded people all over the country. Yet I am still struck every summer when I get the call from the Seward produce department, asking about what new tack to take on this year’s “Know Our Grower” profile. Seward is a tireless ally. This co-op walks the walk of local, organic foods year in, year out, day in, day out, in a way that I find completely inspirational...even miraculous.

This book describes Seward Co-op’s history, and the people and the vision that made this miracle a reality. No doubt understanding history is a prerequisite not only for avoiding its mistakes, but also for replicating its successes in the future...for creating a more just, more cooperative, and more sustainable model for the American food system. This book is therefore an important contribution to that future.

I am both proud and humbled to be able to say that my farm and my family have had a hand in creating this miracle at Seward. I hope that you, too, feel some of this pride—and excitement—every time you read through these pages, or walk through the doors of our local, miraculous Seward Co-op!

Here’s to another forty years!

—Jack Hedin, *Featherstone Farm*

Cooperation Is for Everyone

When the founders of Seward Community Co-op chose cooperation as a way to do business with their neighbors, they weren't planning on eventually building a big green store, much less a legacy. Nobody knows exactly whose idea it was to start the co-op, but group synergy and neighborhood circumstances combined to allow the co-op to open its doors in 1972. They were looking to do the right thing for each other by creating a community-owned store that promoted specific values, including protecting the health of people and the environment. The idea grew far beyond their wildest dreams, in much the same way it has for many co-ops in the Twin Cities and elsewhere.

If there is one constant in the storied history of the co-op, it is this: energy applied to solving the issues of the day, combined with equal dashes of luck and pluck over the years, manifests into great food, sustainability, and cooperation every day.

Seward Co-op's first building was located at the corner of 22nd and Franklin avenues (where Welna II ACE Hardware is now located), as a storefront of less than 700 square feet, and was run by volunteers. Most of the food available was sold in bulk and stocked (if you could call it that) in buckets and bags on the floor. Today, the co-op is a multimillion-dollar business that



The first storefront and sign, with three Os in “co-op,” c. 1972.

employs more than 200 people; does almost forty percent of its business with small, independent farmers and vendors; and has a far-reaching impact on the Seward neighborhood, as well as on communities and farms all across the Midwest region.

Through its many effective programs, the co-op has grown into a force for sustainability, community development, food education, and healthful eating. Although the Seward Co-op of today may barely resemble its early beginnings, the desire for making the world a better place has always been a part of its

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9

Statement on the Cooperative Identity

Definition: A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

Values

Cooperatives are based on the values of:

- self-help
- self-responsibility
- democracy
- equality
- equity
- solidarity

In the tradition of their founders, cooperative members believe in the ethical values of:

- honesty
- openness
- social responsibility
- caring for others

The Co-op Principles

The cooperative principles are guidelines by which cooperatives put their values into practice.

1st Principle:

Voluntary and Open Membership

Cooperatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political, or religious discrimination.

2nd Principle:

Democratic Member Control

Cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary cooperatives, members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote), and cooperatives at other levels are also organized in a democratic manner.

3rd Principle:

Member Economic Participation

Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their cooperative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the cooperative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their cooperative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the cooperative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

4th Principle:

Autonomy and Independence

Cooperatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter in to agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their cooperative autonomy.

5th Principle: Education, Training, and Information

Cooperatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their cooperatives. They inform the general public—particularly young people and opinion leaders—about the nature and benefits of cooperation.

6th Principle: Cooperation among Cooperatives

Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional, and international structures.

7th Principle: Concern for Community

Cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.

identity. The bedrock of the co-op's activities has been to focus on being a meaningful part of the local community, functioning as a resource for food education, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

Community Support: The co-op continues to expand its reach by supporting its local community with regular donations to neighborhood groups, through programs such as the SEED program, which raised more than \$100,000 in its first year for local nonprofits from patrons' choosing to "round up" their receipt totals at the registers, and the Seward Community Fund, which champions nonprofits and co-ops.

Educating Consumers: Seward Co-op has always been actively engaged in educating consumers about food choices, and in doing so, has given a generation the tools for healthful eating. The co-op now has a state-of-the-art classroom in which lectures and demonstrations about cooking and natural approaches to health are held. It is an educational resource for myriad topics, including special diets, recipes, local and organic agriculture, and holistic remedies. The co-op also is an enthusiastic sponsor of the Midwest Food Connection, an organization founded by local food co-ops in order to bring nutrition education into the public schools.

Sustainable Agriculture: Seward Co-op's efforts to advocate for local growers and encourage consumers to support their local farms have been nothing short of remarkable. Through the co-op's P6 program, shoppers can easily identify food that comes from small, local, and cooperative producers and farmers. The co-op also has led the way in promoting community-supported agriculture (CSA), starting with hosting the nation's first CSA Fair more than a decade ago and continuing to do so every year since. The encouragement of the direct connection between farmer and consumer through the co-op has meant a strong revival of sustainable, local agriculture in our region.

All of these things have been made possible by adhering to the principles and values of cooperation. A co-op is a business model that allows a group of people with a common need to combine their resources to achieve their dreams. Whether a member from the beginning or new to the co-op, everyone can be proud of what the co-op has accomplished in forty years.

Seward Co-op is building a community focused on great food, supporting local farmers, and sustaining health and nutrition. However, the cooperative idea is more than a bricks-and-mortar store. It's built upon the idea that local owners and neighborhood investors reap the

benefits of the co-op's success. Simply put, cooperation benefits everyone.

The co-op's way of doing business is to be open, fair, and democratic. When the co-op makes money, members determine how profits are used. All co-ops, regardless of what type of services they offer to their members—electricity, insurance, or groceries—share the same values and principles. These concepts are based on a set of values and principles called the Statement of the Cooperative Identity. This statement is often referred to as the International Cooperative Principles or the Rochdale Principles. These eleven values and seven principles (see previous page) define the baseline standards for how co-ops operate regardless of the type of business operation.

Seward Co-op demonstrates its commitment to these principles every day, by promoting a safe and sustainable food system and partnering with individuals and organizations to improve communities.

Cooperation is such a powerful positive force that the United Nations designated the year 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives, recognizing and honoring the influence of cooperatives worldwide. It is a thrilling convergence of Seward Co-op's fortieth anniversary with this year's special focus, as we share our story with people and co-ops from all over the world. Our message is clear, and we say it with pride: decades of local ownership have made life better for everyone involved in the co-op.

ON THE LONGEST NIGHT of the year of 1844, the founders of the consumer cooperative movement opened their grocery store in Rochdale, England, with little fanfare and five items for sale. Their store was lit with candles, not because it was a solstice celebration, but because the gas company wouldn't supply them with gas. Throughout the evening, a cadre of young factory boys stood outside the store on Toad Lane taunting its members. It was a long and gloomy night for the Rochdale Pioneers.

Yet the twenty-eight people who formed the core of the cooperative grocery store's ownership remained steadfast. They wanted to put a stop to the practices of the company store that left them indebted to the textile factories for which they worked and without an alternative to inflated prices and shoddy goods. At the outset, the Toad Lane store was open two nights a week and did not accept credit. To their way of thinking, credit was one of the evils of the system that needed to be stopped.

Although they had little means individually, their membership investment was intentionally steep. The co-op required two weeks' wages up front to join, with a total commitment of ten weeks' wages. The Pioneers believed they needed to cover any liabilities the co-op might incur, in part because of the financial risk at hand, but also because they expected the capital to be the building block for more cooperatives to grow the movement.

Rochdale Pioneers' Toad Lane Store



PHOTO FROM THE WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The original Rochdale Pioneers store on Toad Lane, near Manchester, England, is now a museum.

By the 1860s, the co-op had expanded its departments, increased its number of locations, and raised its level of consumer activism. As virtually every basic consumable of the day—flour, coffee, sugar, butter, tea—had been mixed with impurities (such as dirt, wood shavings, iron fillings, nut shells, etc.), they built their own flour mill in a protest against the adulteration of flour and became champions of pure food. They also were committed to promoting “honest weight” and “fair dealing” when it came to selling goods by the pound.

Although the Pioneers got their start by selling groceries and advancing the idea of cooperation, they also believed that education was the tool that led to a good job and thus a better life. However, educational opportunities at the time were limited at best. There were no public schools or lending libraries. In order to better serve their members, the Pioneers built

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a classroom above their store for night classes focused on literacy, and they invested in books for a library. Ultimately, what they created through their efforts was a university extension service for adult education in England, and they set a worldwide precedent for such programs.

In the end, the Pioneers wanted to create a cooperative society that helped people find good jobs and proper homes, have access to healthful food, and belong to a strong community. They continually strove to do something constructive in the world based on the values of sharing resources for the common good. Today, thanks to one little grocery store, cooperatives of all kinds exist around the world, and millions of people share in the benefit of cooperative ownership. Those small candles lit on a solstice evening long ago grew into a beacon that lit the way for others to follow.

The First Twenty Years

MINNEAPOLIS, 1972

The activism that had emerged in America during the 1960s peaked in the 1970s, and the changes brought about by new ways of addressing economic and social issues left a profound mark on Minneapolis and society as a whole.

Day after day, people watched on TV the devastating escalation of the war in Vietnam, which generated protests and draft-resistance actions. Closer to home, civil rights issues were at the forefront of movements to end discrimination and protect the disenfranchised, including African-Americans, women, and gays. In 1972, when Seward Co-op was founded, the Democratic Party headquarters at Watergate would be broken into, causing a cascade of controversies and exposing corruption at the high-

est levels of government for years to come. Food costs began to rise because prices on primary commodities—coffee, sugar, beef, and grains—began to go up at historically unprecedented rates, predating the 1973 oil crisis. Some commodities would quintuple in price by 1975, and inflation was rampant.

For many people, their fundamental trust in the goodness of humanity had been shattered. They were actively seeking change in the major institutions that affected their lives, from education to government, because the status quo appeared to be focused on protecting its own interests here and abroad. The world seemed increasingly fragile, alienating, and volatile, and people responded by participating in grassroots organizing to build a better world. They believed it was time for a system that valued transparency over secrecy, one that promoted fairness over abuse of power.

Seward Co-op's creation, for the people who founded it, was a natural extension of the era's social justice activities. Starting a food co-op was part and parcel of an anti-establishment ethos that encompassed the environmental, civil rights, urban renewal, and antiwar movements. The idea behind the food co-op was to provide an antidote to corporate capitalism, to create a place where an alternative economic order could flourish and the average person would have a voice.



In the early days, the co-op focused on bulk commodities.

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DON BARTON IS ONE OF THE FOUNDERS of Seward Co-op and a longtime passionate advocate for neighborhoods. He moved to Minneapolis more than forty years ago from Ohio to work as a VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America) volunteer, working in the area of tenants' rights and urban renewal, and he has lived in the Seward neighborhood since 1970. Not only was Barton instrumental in starting the co-op, he was also one of the people who set the foundation for the neighborhood's path to cohesion and stability over the past forty years.

Don Barton

He was part of the ad hoc committee to Save Seward West. The Seward neighborhood had been divided into four areas slated for development by the Minneapolis Housing Authority and the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development in the early 1970s. At the time, Seward, a solid neighborhood with a mix of lower-income working-class families and students, was perceived as one of the city's grittier neighborhoods, and the plan was to "clear" four blocks in the western quadrant of the neighborhood and build low-income high-rise apartments. Barton and others in Seward and the city successfully fought these plans. The revitalization and restoration of Milwaukee Avenue was one outcome of their efforts.

The group's dedication to enhancing and preserving the neighborhood's single-family housing stock cannot be understated. "It was quite a task to turn it around," Barton said. Because Barton and others like him believed in the neighborhood's prospects, Seward is now recognized for its livability, including its proximity to the river, public transportation and bike



trails, hospitals, and the University of Minnesota. Barton said he is proud of the diversity Seward has maintained throughout the years, with residents welcoming immigrants and continuing to refurbish the neighborhood's 100-plus-year-old houses. The co-op is also a big part of the neighborhood's attraction.

Barton described the time of his involvement in starting the Seward Co-op and working on urban renewal as all part of the changes brought about by the social and economic tumult in the 1970s. "It was such a different time. It was the antiwar era, and a lot of students and seniors, an array of people from different economic classes banded together to save the neighborhood and banded together to open the co-op. We wanted to have a co-op partially because of the anti-establishment movement, not trusting big business with our food. We wanted better control."

Young people like Barton dedicated themselves to causes, doing what they could to live cheaply to commit to social change. By buying whole foods and food in bulk at the co-op, they were able to sustain themselves. "People were marginally employed. You could get an apartment for \$90 a month and split it three ways by sharing with other people. People were not putting time into professions," Barton said.

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During the co-op's first year, Barton was the frozen food coordinator. He distinctly remembers ordering an entire case of lutefisk (a strong-smelling and -tasting traditional Nordic dish made with dried whitefish and lye) around the holidays—supposing it was a staple food item for Minnesotans. [Read his letter about this and other memories of the co-op's founding years on page 120.] Barton became less involved as the co-op stabilized. He took some courses in piano tuning and technology at the McPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis and has been tuning and restoring pianos for the past forty years. Even though he loves the co-op's most recent

expansion, he said he still gets "an odd sensation" after all these years when someone else bags his groceries.

Nowadays, you'll find Barton ensconced in his studio, Barton Player Piano Company in Minneapolis, where he is still in the revitalization and restoration business, but this time, fixing player pianos. He works surrounded by fragile rolls of music and dozens of pianos in need of repair. As he sat down to work, he said the invention of the player piano was not the work of just one person, it was a succession of people set on re-creating live music that could be available outside the realms of dance or concert halls. As Barton described it, it's a story of invention and persistence. It's a refrain that sounds familiar.



The co-op's old dairy cooler.

Minnesotans Love to Cooperate

Cooperatives have always had a strong foundation in Minnesota. Many European immigrants from Germanic and Scandinavian countries brought cooperative ideals with them to the upper Midwest, where they founded strong cooperatives that promoted fairness in the marketplace against powerful mining and flour-milling interests. Over the past 150 years, a wide variety of co-ops have emerged, grown, and declined in Minnesota. Today, Minnesota still has the largest number of cooperatives of any state in the country, totaling 1,024. The types of coopera-

tives include agricultural, housing, electrical, food, insurance, financial, and many others. These co-ops employ 46,000 people, have 3.5 million members statewide, and boast combined assets of \$90 billion.

During the 1930s, Minnesota was home to a large network of around 100 conventional retail food co-ops, well-served by a warehouse in Superior, Wisconsin. Those cooperatives began to fail when marketplace changes gave rise to grocery supermarkets and memberships declined. Eventually, the food co-ops of the era stagnated before dying off almost completely in the 1950s.

Food cooperatives experienced a resurgence in Minnesota in the 1970s as a “new wave” of food co-ops emerged, shaped by the values of a new generation. In the summer of 1970, Suzie Shroyer had just returned to Minneapolis’ West Bank from San Francisco. She had the inspiration to open a place where one could get natural bulk foods at low cost on the West Bank, a food co-op similar to those she had experienced in California. People were seeking an alternative to heavily processed food. They wanted “whole” foods and access to staples like brown rice and real peanut butter—things that were not available in conventional grocery stores.

Alvin Odermann volunteered his West Bank home’s back porch and basement for distribution. The enterprise was called the People’s Pantry, and anyone was welcome to buy whole, natural food there. Customers paid for the food by leaving money in a box on Odermann’s porch. It grew to be a very popular place. So popular that Odermann was threatened with eviction on account of the all-hours activity it generated.

The time had come to move. In April 1971, Pantry orga-



The west-facing facade of 2201 East Franklin Avenue.

nizers sold \$2,000 in shares, obtained a \$1,000 no-interest loan, recruited volunteers, and opened as North Country Co-op at 2129 Riverside Avenue, on the Augsburg College campus in Minneapolis.

The People's Pantry and North Country Co-op's opening inspired people. Co-op food stores quickly opened in many other Minneapolis-St. Paul neighborhoods, and in their heyday, forty-four small bulk-foods co-ops were operating in the Twin Cities area. And it wasn't just food co-ops sprouting up everywhere. Cooperatives of all kinds were launched, such as the Riverside Café, People's Company Bakery, Our Daily Bread, Red Star Herbs, and worker co-ops that included other restaurants, office supply, clothing, bike, and hardware co-ops—all serving a clientele eager to create a new economy based not on wealth, but on people power. Almost without exception, volunteers

who dedicated themselves to a cause in which they believed ran these cooperatives.

Dan Nordley, an active co-op member and longtime member of Seward Co-op's board, was in high school during those years, and he remembers how all of the cooperative activity in Minneapolis piqued his interest in getting involved.

"There was communal housing, a collective café, food co-ops, a health clinic, a veterinarian, hardware store, a bike co-op, childcare. Everything you needed to live on was connected to this new economy," he said.

In the same way immigrants settle in a community by building stores and restaurants, the newly arrived counter-culture in the Twin Cities had built their own community, too.

Founding Seward Co-op

When Mike and Peg's Superette, on the corner of East Franklin and 22nd Avenues, was going out of business in the fall of 1971, the owners contacted North Country Co-op to find out if they wanted to buy any used equipment.

When a group of neighborhood North Country members visited the superette to check things out, they saw an opportunity to open a food co-op in Seward.

Organizers Jerry and Deane Dodge, Butch Hughes, Phyllis Scott, and Don Barton were instrumental in opening the co-op in Seward. Barton had just moved to Minneapolis from Ohio and was working with Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) on neighborhood revitalization when he became involved in founding the co-op. "We didn't plan. It just kind of happened," he said of the co-op's early days.

Organizers hit the streets, petitioning people to join the effort to start the co-op. Money was raised from community members and through the Model Cities Joint Urban Manpower Program to purchase the co-op's initial inventory. Seward Co-op member Howard Hickman also loaned the co-op \$1,000 in 1972—which he explained he could do because he was gainfully employed by the University of Minnesota as an engineering professor at the time. In fact, Hickman was one of only a few people involved in the co-op's startup who had stable employment and a steady income.

The co-op opened on one of those dreary days when winter is winding down, and the hope of spring is palpable. Everyone, including Barton, put in sweat equity, cleaning and stocking the store to get it ready for business.

"Why did we work so hard?" Barton said, "We thought the co-op could be part of the fabric of the neighborhood." [See Barton's eloquent letter describing those days on page 120].

In 1974, the co-op made plans to buy the storefront for \$37,000 from owner Peter Ivanow (known in the neighborhood as the "Mad Russian"). "This was a big leap for us," Barton said. "We didn't know if we'd make it to the other side." Nevertheless, an official contract for deed for the property went through in 1976.

Other like-minded businesses formed in the neighborhood, as well. Hickman was instrumental in organizing the Sunshine Collective, a group that launched the Seward Café in 1974, a collectively run restaurant across the street from the co-op on the corner of 22nd and Franklin avenues. The co-op also housed the first transmitter for Fresh Air Radio, now KFAI 90.3 FM community-supported radio, in the upstairs hallway of the building.

Revitalizing a Neighborhood

Founding the food co-op was just one initiative by a group of people who were actively engaged in fighting an urban renewal project proposed by the city of Minneapolis. Plans had been made to raze a four-block radius of the western quadrant of the neighborhood in order to build high-rise housing similar to the units now located on the West Bank of Minneapolis. Over the span of several years, dedicated students, seniors, and working-class people successfully fought the new development project. Preserving Milwaukee Avenue—named for the Milwaukee Road railroad and initially inhabited by Scandinavian immigrants—was the primary focus of their energy. At the time, most of the houses had deteriorated, and the city wanted to demolish them. Residents argued for the neighborhood's value as a historic district, and the modest Victorian houses on the two blocks were saved and restored. The preservation, revitalization, and development of a two-block corridor on Milwaukee Avenue in 1975 were the outcomes of the efforts of a group of invested people. Now the area is on the National Register of Historic Places, and people living there enjoy a unique environment, positioned as they are on a bike- and pedestrian-friendly mall.

Those involved in the co-op's founding instinctively saw the potential in what a food co-op could do for a community and pursued it, along with their other efforts on behalf of the Seward neighborhood. The Seward neighborhood, in particular, was part of the first wave of the back-to-the-city movements taking place around the country. People such as Barton and others believed that by committing to quality of life in cities and invest-

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DESCRIBING HIMSELF as “just a guy who came along,” Howard Hickman was instrumental in helping the co-op sustain itself in its beginning decade. After his involvement at Seward Co-op took hold, he ended up leaving his career at the University of Minnesota behind in 1974, opting to live a life of voluntary poverty based on the teachings of Dorothy Day, who led the Catholic worker movement and espoused an anti-materialist philosophy. “I questioned the culture and my own life,” Hickman said about the personally radical decision. He also felt aligned with the co-op’s values. “People power and local control were important for me,” he said, and that, along with access to whole foods, appealed to him.

Hickman distinctly remembers being about twenty years older than most of the people he knew from the early days of Seward Co-op, as a lot of people involved were in their twenties. Before he left his job at the university, he was able to offer Seward Co-op a well-timed \$1,000 loan. In 1974, he was involved in forming the Sunshine Collective that founded the Seward Café located across the street. During the Co-op Wars, he helped protect the co-op from the Marxist takeover group, the Co-op Organization (CO). Hickman was also the manager of Kris Olsen’s estate (see page 13) after his death in 1998, and until 2011 maintained the www.coopdirectory.org website that provided a directory of food co-ops and buying clubs located in the United States. The Food Co-op Initiative now operates the directory at the same web address.

Hickman was also the long-term occupant of the co-op’s

second-floor residential apartment during the years it was located at 22nd and Franklin avenues. He may be best known as one of Seward neighborhood’s most memorable residents, pioneering a lifestyle based on the ideals of living simply. During those years, he often shopped at the co-op barefoot, “not to conform to the idea of a free spirit,” Hickman said, but to avoid foot pain and keep himself grounded. Over the years, he was an omnipresent figure as witness to Seward Co-op’s day-to-day operations.

Hickman has good memories about life at the apartment and all that transpired there. In addition to the co-op organizing that went on, the apartment also housed the first transmitter for the radio station Fresh Air, now KFAI 90.3. “That upstairs apartment is very historical,” Hickman said.

Then, in 1991, Hickman, on his own initiative, wrote a letter to the mayor of Novosibirsk in Russia, proposing a sister-neighborhood relationship between the Seward neighborhood and the Maladozne micro-district in Novosibirsk. Later that year, in conjunction with the Seward Neighborhood Group, a small delegation went to visit the Russian city and the sister neighborhood. On the trip to Novosibirsk, Hickman met a woman and fell in love. He married his wife, Elena, in 1992, and soon their family grew to include her child Julia and their three children Eileen, Robert, and Alexander, as well as in-laws. Soon the apartment was too small. They moved to St. Paul in 1998, where Hickman is active raising the children (and keeping chickens and a massive garden) with Elena. On any given day, you will still find Hickman shopping at Seward Co-op—though nowadays, he’s wearing shoes.

Howard Hickman



ing in neighborhoods, they could positively affect their communities and keep the destructive wrecking balls at bay. “We banded together to save the neighborhood and banded together to open the co-op,” Barton said. The connection the co-op currently has with the neighborhood is strong because of this early organizing foundation.

Early Co-op Operations: The Potluck Years

The early years of Seward Co-op were defined by deeply held ideals about marketplace fairness and casual operations. People worked very hard, but it was akin to controlled chaos. Like a lot of other food co-ops at that time, Seward Co-op was run unlike any traditional retail grocery before or since.

Initially, the co-op was called the “Seward Community Cooop” because it was not legally incorporated as a cooperative. A Minnesota statute prohibits the use of the word “cooperative” by businesses not legally incorporated as one. Hence Seward’s extra “o” in the original name. The co-op was extremely relaxed, to say the least, as a business, especially through the first four years of its operation.

In May 1972, the co-op incorporated as a nonprofit (which, as it turned out, also was not legal since mercantile businesses are not allowed to be nonprofits, but nobody involved in the co-op knew this at the time). People became members simply by showing up and volunteering. Up to twenty people could be on the board, but there were no official recorded minutes of co-op meetings. Co-op leaders didn’t have a strong grounding in cooperation as a business model. After all, it was a “cooop.”

The workers were organized as a collective (with no boss),



Milwaukee Avenue, shortly after the 1975 renovation.

and those with some levels of responsibility—mostly product buyers—were called coordinators. With input from everyone who wanted to participate, coordinators divvied up jobs and held many meetings and community potlucks to discuss how to run the business. As part of creating this new economy, nobody wanted decisions made on his or her behalf. In the early years

of Seward Co-op, everyone embraced this approach, and it was an expectation that members would be involved in the process of running the co-op. It was at times a naïve as well as audacious and radical undertaking.

Meeting topics ranged from the minutiae of working schedules to passionate debates about the evils of white sugar. Decision-making empowerment and accountability systems were a long way off for the co-op. Instead, the co-op provided immersion into a burgeoning counterculture and emerging natural food lifestyle. Viewed with the hindsight of a generation, it wasn't an efficient process, but it met a profound social need of the times, and it established the important ethical underpinnings that characterize Seward Co-op's business practices today.

Coordinators received a five-dollar-per-week food allowance for their efforts in the beginning. Coordinators cashiered, stocked shelves, made "veggie runs," kept books, and cleaned the store. Everyone else supported the store with their volunteer hours in exchange for a discount on groceries. Nobody had training to do the work in the store; often vendors would deliver goods by car. Anyone shopping at the time of a delivery was enlisted to help unload. Food was sold in buckets, boxes, and bags, and most of it was left on the floor or stocked on a few shelves for people to choose the amounts they wanted. Most products were sold at a ten-percent markup. Oats were three cents a pound, brown rice five cents.

Customers paid for food by ringing themselves up at a cash register by the door. The level of trust in people, that they would not steal food from the premises or money from the till, was remarkable (although such thefts did happen on occasion). Barton said people were motivated to be a part of the co-op

because they didn't trust big business and wanted control over their own business, along with unadulterated, low-cost food.

For the coordinators, finding unprocessed food to sell could be a challenge. At the time, warehouses didn't often carry it, or if they had natural products, such as meat or produce, they didn't always deliver to small grocery stores. There was absolutely no infrastructure in the 1970s for what is now a multi-billion-dollar industry. Food cooperators, like the founders of Seward Co-op, were on the cutting edge of the burgeoning natural foods industry, dedicating themselves to sourcing food in challenging conditions. They did it because they believed in providing fresh foods for their customers; making money was a secondary consideration.

Coordinators had to go out at the crack of dawn (or earlier) to visit farmers' markets and warehouses to buy fresh foods for the co-op, load it into their own cars or trucks, unload it, and have it stocked at the co-op when it opened at nine o'clock. Former Seward Co-op coordinator and current Co-op Partners marketing and new accounts manager, Lori Zuidema, said she has fond memories of when "Wholesale Harry" took her under his wing (see page 26). As a woman and a hippie, she really stood out among predominately male workers who ran the warehouses. Sourcing some of the staples and basic foods sold at the co-op required enormous dedication from the coordinators. "It was haphazard, and we were reinventing the wheel every day," Zuidema said. "We were not business people. The co-op ran on pure energy and idealism."

It ran on those good vibes until serious challenges affected it in the mid-1970s.

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LORI ZUIDEMA MOVED into the Seward neighborhood in 1971 as a teenager. After the food co-op opened, she made her way there to find out what it was all about. She discovered she really liked being there. Before she knew it, Zuidema became a volunteer cheese cutter on Thursday nights.

As she got accustomed to the routine, she was asked to become a coordinator

as part of the co-op's collective and began

working for the co-op four days a week for twenty-five dollars. Her coordinating work included making the “veggie run,” which meant scouring farmers’ markets and warehouses to find fresh produce to bring back to the co-op for sale.

“That was my favorite part,” she said. “It’s funny sometimes to look back and see that I’m still in produce. I loved that part of the job, and it entailed being at the co-op at four o’clock in the morning when the shift started. You went in and did a quick inventory of what was in the cooler, got in this junky old truck, and drove to the Minneapolis Farmers’ Market.” Back then the farmers’ market was all growers and had only two lanes of stalls. “No frou-frou stuff,” Zuidema said.

Once she was finished buying at the farmers’ market, she’d drive to the Great Northern terminal in downtown Minneapolis, from which warehouse vendors serviced customers who pulled up to truck docks for stocking. “The place stunk bad, like a hundred years of diesel trucks and old trains that used to run through it. It was this rutted place with train tracks and stuff. It was really a trip.”

Lori Zuidema



Characters like Wholesale Harry, a guy with a limp, gravelly voice, and a heart of gold, took her under his wing. “I found that with a lot of people we did business with. They didn’t know what a co-op was, and they knew it was run by hippies,” Zuidema said, “but they were obliging and kind. We were green; we were novices. And they would just be so helpful in directing us on what to do, how to price things.”

Zuidema also said that food co-ops and the local and organic food movements grew up together. “I remember Martin Diffley coming around with his pickup truck when he was just getting started,” she said. Over the decades, Martin and Atina Diffley had built their farm, Gardens of Eagan (now owned by The Wedge Co-op) into a model for successful certified-organic farming. Both the Diffleys continue to be deeply involved in agriculture, educating new farmers on setting up a thriving operation.

At Seward Co-op, Zuidema poured her heart and her backbone into the job of bringing fresh, local, and organic food to customers. “We saw ourselves as on a mission,” Zuidema said, “to provide good food within co-op values of equity and equality in business.

“I think there was something about our energy and our idealism in those days that was really important to establishing the kind of organization that it was and that is even present today,” she said.

Zuidema was part of the cutting edge in the natural foods business, and through the food co-op, her efforts helped set

“A lot of people we did business with didn’t know what a co-op was, and they knew it was run by hippies, but they were obliging and kind.”

the stage for a marketplace that would soon enough provide more customers fresh, local, and organic food. “Back then we were a fringe element. Nobody could have foreseen our success or mainstream acceptance,” she said. They did it because they believed unadulterated food grown without harmful chemicals was healthiest for people and

the Earth. “It’s important for people to know we did that basically with no resources, starting from zip, like a \$500 loan from someone to pay the first month’s rent...and a whole industry grew up around it.”

Zuidema was one of the instrumental people who nurtured an approach to healthful eating. She has devoted her entire career to natural foods and cooperatives. Throughout the years, she has also worked for Cheese Rustlers (a consortium of cheese buyers), Roots & Fruits (perishables warehouse), and is currently the director of marketing and new accounts at Co-op Partners Warehouse in St. Paul. Co-op Partners is the warehouse owned by The Wedge Co-op that serves clients all over the upper Midwest.

She said she never charted a course, never wanted to go down in the history books, and just did work that interested her. “I was seventeen years old and fell into a community that cast the direction for my whole life,” she said. Some people she knew got burned out and left for other business sectors, but that never happened to her. “I’m grateful to have had a chance to be part of it,” she said.

Trouble Brewing

Many Twin Cities co-op leaders dreamed of creating an alternative food system that would change communities for the better, and they hoped other people would join in the movement to support it. A distribution warehouse, the People's Warehouse, had formed in 1971 and was gaining retail customers as more food co-ops began to dot the landscape of nearly forty neighborhoods around the Twin Cities. Kris Olsen was one of those people who held this dream close and, during his lifetime, he worked tirelessly to organize the startup of food co-ops in communities all around Minnesota. Olsen was a coordinator at Seward Co-op, and it was his home base for many of his co-op travels. He was the Johnny Appleseed of his day, helping to spread cooperative ideals wherever he went. He was known for dropping everything to meet with people in remote Minnesota towns to start a food co-op. Seward Co-op coordinator log books from the 1970s are teeming with notes reminding Olsen to call so-and-so about starting a co-op. Finally, Olsen added his own note to the log, asking people not to give out his home phone number anymore.

Although co-op startups were quickly opening all over, the idea that everyone would jump in and join the movement didn't quite happen the way some of the founding members had expected. The dynamic atmosphere was offset by tension. At the time, those involved in the food co-ops often lived what many people outside the movement considered "alternative" lifestyles and ate foods those same people considered strange. Many of the very customers the co-ops were trying to attract

in their communities were turned off by what they perceived as the co-op's judgmental attitudes about pure food and hostilities toward the mainstream, of which these would-be patrons were themselves a part. The possibilities for what the food co-ops could accomplish, were they not hampered by such myopia, were unrealized. Yet others outside the food co-ops saw the powerful potential in the cooperatives and swooped in to exploit their lack of structure.

The Co-op Organization (also known as the "CO") organized in 1974 on Winding Road Farm in western Wisconsin to formulate a strategy for taking over the Twin Cities food co-ops in order to finance and further their own political ambitions. The CO turned out to be a Marxist-Stalinist group headed by a secretive cult figure named Theo Smith, who recruited people to fulfill his political agenda. The CO declared that food co-ops were being run by "hippie elites" who were promoting an unrealistic natural-food agenda when they should be using their stores to improve the material needs of the poor and working class by selling inexpensive food that "real" people ate. Additionally, the CO used the fact that the food co-ops were being mismanaged to demand that they become more accountable, claiming the CO was the organization that could bring about a new order.

The CO began promoting their ideas in 1975, systematically asking people within the food co-op movement to join study groups and learn about their doctrine. However, recruits were sworn to silence about who was involved and the nature of their activities. Before long, recruits were out distributing flyers, befriending and working side-by-side with people at the food co-ops. Their intention was to foment a revolution that would change the fundamentals of society.

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KRIS OLSEN IS one of the food cooperative movement's heroes, and it was Seward Co-op's good fortune to have him as an active member during his lifetime. He grew up in Minneapolis, spent his entire adulthood in the Seward neighborhood (residing two blocks from the co-op), and was involved in the co-op as an active shopper, coordinator, and board member. He served the community in many ways, large and small, and he generously shared his personal resources to further the cooperative mission locally and nationally.

Food co-ops owe Olsen a debt of gratitude for his belief in the historical significance of the memos and records from the new-wave food co-op (see page 14). He archived these materials in his house, and when he ran out of room, he donated them to the Minnesota Historical Society. Part of the collection is a compilation of log books that were kept by the Seward Co-op collective. Much of the historical research for this book would not have been possible without Olsen's foresight.

Olsen could be described as a gentle giant. He was a six-foot-six-inch man of Norwegian heritage who had a great sense of humor and an ever-present twinkle in his eye. In the annals of new-wave food cooperation, it is doubtful there has been anyone

more beloved for the kind of person he was and for what he contributed.

Many described him as the Johnny Appleseed of the food co-op movement, and it is believed he was responsible for helping start as many as forty-three food co-ops during a developmental heyday in the 1970s. Olsen would get a call from

someone in the five-state region, scrape up money for gas and chocolate malts, and meet with a group wanting to start a food co-op.

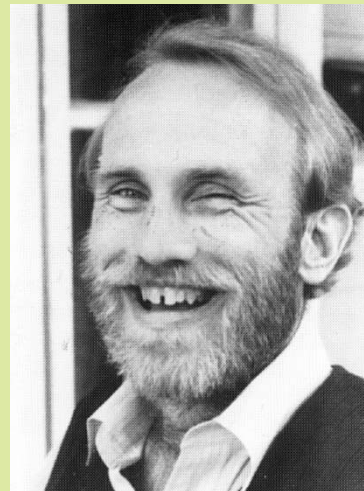
Olsen began his cooperative career in 1970 at the People's Pantry in Minneapolis and, during those early years, volunteered at a number of other local co-ops before joining the collective at Seward Co-op. In 1975, he was elected to the board of the People's Warehouse and was instrumental in the creation of the All Co-op Assembly, a group dedicated to sharing resources and starting new co-ops. He later found himself a target during the Co-op Wars, and helped protect Seward Co-op from being violently overtaken. Olsen served for six years on the Seward Co-op Board of Directors and also could be

found virtually anywhere around town championing the cause of cooperation.

A construction accident in 1980 left Olsen wheelchair-

Kris Olsen

(1946–1998)



bound but did not lessen his devotion to cooperatives. In fact, he became a strong advocate for accessibility for the handicapped. In the 1980s, he published the only cooperative directory of natural food co-ops available at that time and provided a referral service for people seeking information about food co-ops, long before the Internet made such a task easy.

With Olsen's death in 1998, the co-op movement lost one of its most ardent advocates and a dear person who spent his life helping shape the vision of co-ops. He lived a life dedicated to public service, and he did so without hesitation or expectation of reward, and always with a smile. Leo Cashman [see page 31] said, "If Kris were alive, he'd be beyond excited [about the co-op's latest expansion]. He'd want everyone to shop there."

In 1999, the Northcountry Cooperative Development Fund founded the Kris Olsen Traveling Cooperative Institute in honor of Olsen's work with rural cooperatives. Olsen's efforts in chronicling, networking, and promoting co-op enterprise will be appreciated for generations. His cooperative vision and generous spirit are his legacy to us, embodied in all of Seward Co-op's steps forward.

**"If Kris were alive,
he'd be beyond
excited [about
the co-op's latest
expansion]. He'd
want everyone to
shop there."**

—Leo Cashman

The CO's charges of elitism struck at a question natural food co-ops are challenged by to this day: How can a food system based on fairness and transparency be created when some people believe they are denied access by economic realities such as poverty? Ironically, the hippies the CO accused of elitism in the 1970s were flat broke.

Yet the CO's message was appealing to a significant number of people involved in the food co-ops, given the upheavals occurring in society and their own fervent desire for change. Some people genuinely believed that the revolution was at hand, and the CO was speaking their language. This made those who disagreed with the CO's philosophy uneasy and suspicious of the CO. Frequently, arguments played out in the *Scoop*, a newspaper in the Twin Cities at the time focused on and sponsored by the food co-ops. As it grew in strength and numbers, the CO's influence became increasingly divisive, pitting anarchist Marxists against those who cared more about quality food.

The CO's arguments had the intended effect of generating controversy and conflict. Meanwhile, at the People's Warehouse, members of the CO now comprised the workers' collective, which aligned itself against the warehouse's Policy Review Board (PRB). The PRB consisted of representatives from food co-ops around the Midwest. The CO argued to the board that the warehouse was mismanaged, and on May 4, 1975, wielding iron pipes, they took over the warehouse. Nobody was hurt, but the PRB was kicked out, shocking the entire

food co-op community.

Peace-loving hippies were suddenly confronted with a confounding and increasingly dangerous problem. A handful of Twin Cities co-ops began to accept the CO's ideas and leadership, and, all of a sudden, a takeover by the CO looked alarmingly easy.

Two Seward Co-op coordinators, Kris Olsen and Leo Cashman, were instrumental in fighting against the CO's attempt to control the future of Midwestern food co-ops. They were literally thrust into the role.

The Co-op Wars

In the morning of January 9, 1976, a delivery truck arrived at Seward Co-op, ostensibly to deliver milk, but the truck's cooler was secretly packed with members of the CO. Olsen, who was at the cash register at the front of the store, heard cries for help coming from Cashman at the back of the store. In short order, Olsen was also surrounded, and members of the CO began kicking and punching him. It wasn't easy, but they succeeded in dragging Olsen and Cashman out of the store and throwing them into the snow. "I passively resisted," Cashman recalled. "I didn't fight back because I didn't want to get hurt, and we were dragged out of the store." Across town, at 26th and Bloomington, the same scenario was being played out at the Mill City Co-op.

The CO's emissaries proceeded to board up the



Members of the Powderhorn Food Co-op, at 359 S. and Bloomington Av., conducted a non-violent picketing effort and "shop-in" March 27 to protest control of that alternative food store by a disaffected co-op faction called the Co-op Organization (COs). About 75

protesting men, women and children marched into the store where for business and set up an cash register. Claiming they were shopping, the CO locked them in. Undoubtedly, it was spirited the food they had

For the cooperative food movement, the battle has turned a power struggle between those who want to maintain whole grains, organic foods and those who want the stores to first serve the interests of the "working class."

One side, a group calling itself the Co-op Organization, wants to sell second-hand goods and such items as white bread and sugar when it believes "working people" need it. Members of the Co-op Organization, the "natural food" co-op leaders of "class unbalanced" and "of watering the needs of the working class," which the Co-op Organization claims to represent. The other side wants to continue to serve "natural foods" and criticize what it believes are the dictatorial policies and "narrow" tactics of the Co-op Organization.

The Co-op Organization last May took over the People's Warehouse, 123 S. 26th St., the central food co-op distribution center. Since then, most of the food co-op stores have formed a new distribution center, Distributing Alliance for the North Country.

The first Co-op Organization members who were arrested Friday in a takeover of the Mill City Food store cooperative, 202 Bloomington Av., have yet to be charged.

Star Photo by Charles Riegman

NEW BURTON CLAIMS HIS TRUCK WAS FIREBOMBED LAST WEEK. He is the coordinator for the Bryant Central cooperative.

THE MINNEAPOLIS STAR, Wed., Jan. 14, 1976

Star Photo by Charles Riegman

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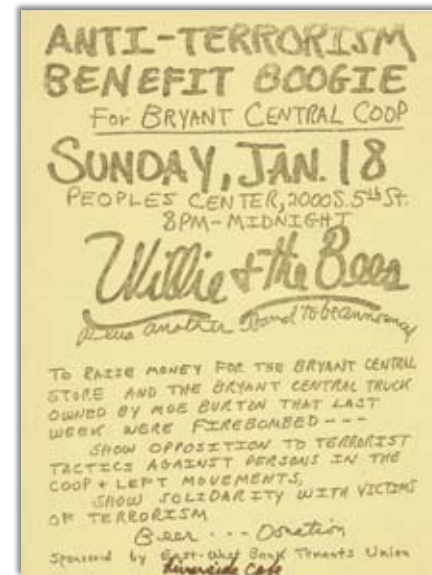
Star Photo by Charles Riegman

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Flyers and newspapers clippings from the Co-op Wars.



Star Photo by Charles Riegman

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'OK, we had a call that the Socialist Whole Wheat Workers' Party had seized the Fiber Diet Health Co-op, whose members split with the Organic Earth Food Storehouse over their alliance with the Fatty Tissue Trotskyites'

Cartoon by Craig Macintosh, reprinted with permission from the Star Tribune.



Seward Co-op and bring in their own supplies—such as white flour and canned goods—and posted a sign on the door declaring the former Seward Co-op had been liberated and was now People's Co-op #6.

Cashman and Olsen regrouped at the Seward Café. "We were all shaken up," Cashman said.

However, unlike during the takeover of the People's Warehouse, this time Olsen and Cashman called the police immediately. (The PRB debated for days about whether or not to call the police after the takeover because food co-op activists typically had little trust in the authorities. They eventually did call the police.) When the police arrived, the officers wanted to know who the rightful owners of the co-op were. Both the CO's representatives and Cashman claimed the co-op belonged to them.

"The police settled it by not letting anyone in," Cashman said. The cops said that the co-op would remain closed until ownership could be established.

The Seward Co-op reopened that night with the help of an attorney who successfully argued on the co-op's behalf that the CO takeover was the "action of hoodlums." Howard Hickman stayed up on alert all night in the co-op just in case members of the CO gang returned. The threat of ongoing violence from the CO suddenly was very real. Personal and community relationships were torn apart as people took ideological sides, trading verbal and literal blows.

In the months that followed Seward's takeover, the CO remained aggressively active: firebombing a delivery truck in Minneapolis, throwing a Molotov cocktail through the window of Bryant Central Co-op, and unsuccessfully attempting to take over the North Country Co-op. In response, food cooperators

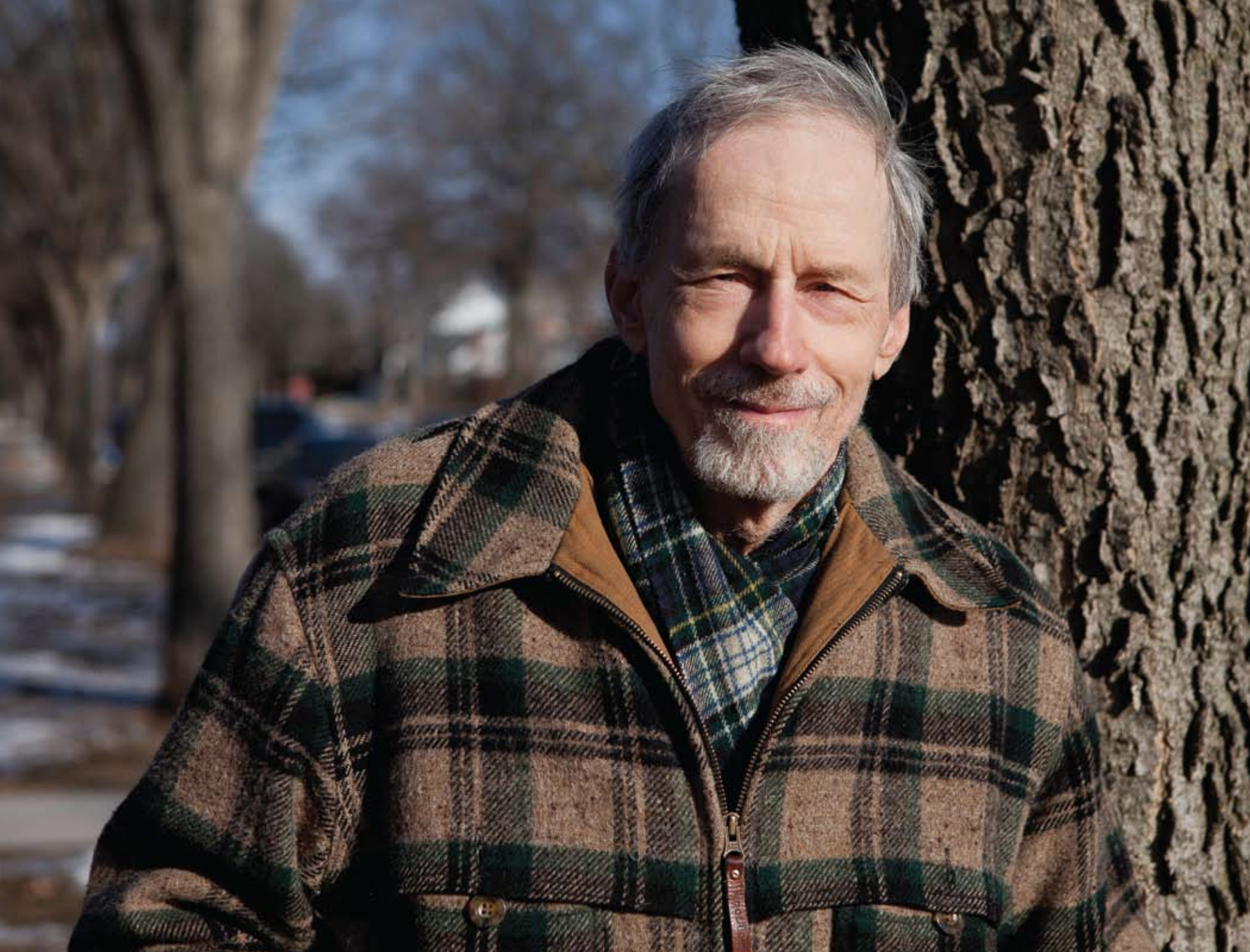
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Pete Wagner

'YOU CAN MOVE OUT, YOU ANTI-WORKING CLASS ELITIST HIPPIE! ME AND JERRY AND BOB ARE TAKING OVER!'

Cartoon courtesy of Pete Wagner, originally printed in the *Minnesota Daily*.



LEO CASHMAN GREW UP in Minneapolis and went to high school in Faribault, Minnesota, but he lived in California during most of his college years. Between 1967 and 1972, while going to graduate school in La Jolla and getting a graduate degree in math, a girlfriend got him interested in health foods. He discovered whole-grain breads and other delights shopping at a People's Food co-op in a little town just up the coast from there. When he moved back to Minneapolis in 1972, he asked, "Where are the food co-ops?" He was pointed to a busy little store, Seward Co-op, in an old building on the corner of Franklin and 22nd avenues.

"It was the only place where I could find what I was looking for," Cashman said. "I was looking for good bread, whole-some whole grains, organic grains, beans and produce, and all the sorts of things you can still find at the food co-op."

In Minneapolis, Cashman landed a very "straight" job working as a systems programmer for Sperry Univac. But Cashman knew that, long-term, a job in a big corporation would not satisfy him. He resigned from Univac in 1974 to go to work at Seward Co-op as a part-time coordinator, which turned into full-time work. Ever since then, he has worked only in food co-ops, non-profits, and as a freelance accountant. It was important to him to be employed where he felt rooted in the community, and in his job at Seward Co-op he felt at home. "We often had potlucks right in the store. We'd close on Sunday evening and bring in our [food to share], and we'd sit around and have the potlucks

and then we'd often have community meetings," he said.

During the mid-1970s, Seward Co-op experienced explosive growth in sales and importance to the community, and Cashman was one of a number of capable leaders who guided its pathway to growth and serving the community better. The co-op needed better accounting and Cashman, largely self-taught, became a solid accountant. Along with figures like Kris Olsen and Ellen Wersan, he was known as a groundbreaker in the new-wave food co-op movement. "Seward people contributed a lot to the wider food co-op movement," Cashman said. The co-op had a national reputation for leadership, even in its earliest years. "We wanted to influence all of society in the direction of food quality, community empowerment, and health. We had questioned the war in Vietnam, and we were building a counterculture."

For Cashman, the Co-op Wars were a huge turning point on many levels. Early on, the Co-op Organization (CO) tried to recruit him into their undemocratic vision for the co-op movement, but he disdained their pitch. So, he became a target, a symbol of the resistance. "Kris [Olsen] and I were outspoken opponents of the CO, and we'd push back at community meetings when the CO would try to take over...we had a sense there would be a new phase in this polarization. We were hoping it wouldn't be too violent," he said. Cashman was there, along with Olsen, the day a dozen CO fanatics invaded and took over the co-op. Cashman was battered and bruised, but not

Leo Cashman

seriously hurt. Working with the police and an attorney, Cashman and his co-managers got back in and regained control in the course of that hectic day.

For months that followed, an atmosphere of crisis continued as the CO continued to harass the food co-ops. Cashman's role afterward foreshadowed pivotal change for Seward Co-op and other food co-ops nationwide. He understood the importance of clarifying the co-op's legal structure that led to its reorganization from being an unincorporated association into a Minnesota cooperative. This was in the wake of the fear and confusion that the CO had spread due to its devious and sometimes violent tactics. But their violent eruption in January 1976 was the beginning of the end for public sympathy for the CO, as people could finally see them as the extremist group they were.

Even though Cashman has long been involved in other work, Seward Co-op's history isn't far from his mind. Every January 9 he remembers the day he and Olsen were physically beaten and thrown out of the co-op during the CO takeover.

"I am thankful that we in the co-op and the co-op itself survived that difficult crisis. I am still kicking, doing the work I care about, and I'm glad that the co-op is prospering and doing so well," Cashman said. Ringleaders of those who attacked

Even though Cashman has long been involved in other work, Seward Co-op's history isn't far from his mind. Every January 9 he remembers the day he and Olsen were physically beaten and thrown out of the co-op during the CO takeover.

Olsen and Cashman on that fateful January day have come to apologize and seek forgiveness from them; and they have been forgiven.

"One thing the struggle taught me is that historical change and conflict can occur in Minneapolis, not just Africa or Yugoslavia. We have important struggles, and we need to study an issue and pick sides...and the decisions we make are important," he said.

In the years that followed, Cashman took on a lot of the tasks of dealing with Seward Co-op's accounting and tax returns, as well as helping to clarify its legal structure. Cashman not only brought those skills and understanding into Seward Co-op's operations, but he also would give workshops and tutorials for others in the co-op movement in the Twin Cities and around Minnesota and Wisconsin.

After a lot of thinking about how to ensure accountability of a co-op's management to the co-op's board (and thereby, its members), Cashman made a heretical proposal: that the collective management structure should give way to a general manager who could more easily be held accountable by a board. His proposal was given an icy reception at the time, but within a few years of his leaving the board, the transition for collective management to a general manager occurred.

It was another decision that set the stage for Seward Co-op's next phase and also demonstrated to the food co-op community at large that a change in management structure would likely be the key to long-term survival and growth. "You look at the long-term good of the business and the benefit to the community. If it is serving the community, it is fulfilling its mission," he said. "The co-op structure can allow co-ops to be as good as they can be as a business."

After the collective dissolved, Cashman became involved in other activist projects. He has continued to use his organizational and financial skills on behalf of several organizations, many of them related to health education. Cashman worked on health freedom legislation, signed into law in 2000 by then-Governor Jesse Ventura, protecting the rights of such unlicensed practitioners as massage therapists, homeopaths, and traditional naturopaths to practice without fear of being charged with the "illegal practice of medicine." He is currently the executive director of the Dental Amalgam Mercury Syndrome Solutions (DAMS) organization, an internationally known nonprofit educating people on the mercury amalgam issue and other ways that dentistry may affect health. Cashman still shops at the co-op and is a strong advocate for holistic nutrition.

would be tipped off, and groups would form a human chain around their co-ops to repel the CO. "People put their bodies on the line for the co-ops," Hickman said.

The Food Co-op Crucible

Eventually, the CO realized their violent tactics were not working and backed off—but the whole experience led to years of fallout among those who stayed in the food co-op movement. However, a lot of good resulted as well. All of the food co-ops were vulnerable to the CO, including Seward Coop, because their finances were in shambles and their so-called business practices were ineffective. The close call with the CO was no laughing matter. It was time for the food co-ops to pull it together, at least legally, on behalf of those who identified themselves as members. The impact of this new direction cannot be underestimated.

Even though co-op leadership at that time was a long way from understanding and embodying the Co-op Principles inherent to the cooperative business model, Seward Coop became an official cooperative when it incorporated as Seward Community Cooperative in April 1976. Members were required to make a three-dollar stock purchase, and the co-op could elect a board of directors from the membership.

Leo Cashman took on the crusade of pushing Seward, and other co-ops, to get their accounting in order and the businesses legally legitimized as cooperatives. Because of the Iron Range miners who had organized co-ops in Northern Minnesota nearly a century earlier, co-op law in Minnesota is very strong. Only a legally incorporated co-op can use the word "cooperative" in its business name—something the Coop founders already knew.

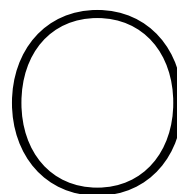


The produce department at 2201 East Franklin Avenue.

Now it was time to gain the legal benefits of cooperative status.

Because the viability of the co-op was threatened, “we cleaned up our legal structure following the Co-op War,” Cashman said. In some ways, that was the easy part. Getting the co-op to run in the black was an even bigger challenge for the co-op’s coordinators.

The Collective Steps Up



One of the things the collective learned after incorporating was that they would have to pay off sales tax liability dating back to 1972. This was a sum of \$1,205, which seemed astronomical to the collective. The co-op’s checking account was perpetually overdrawn and the physical plant was dilapidated. Broken pipes flooded the basement. Coolers kept breaking down, and the Health Department was tallying violations.

The collective also had power struggles over daily decisions regarding stocking, pricing, and cleanliness. Arguments ensued over the lack of order and disregard for procedures.

It was a stressful time.

It was also a time of hunkering down and gaining newfound maturity in addressing operational problems.

The collective took more responsibility for the business and began to realize a bigger role for themselves and the co-op movement. After the People’s Warehouse takeover, the food co-ops started a new warehouse, the Distributing Alliance of the Northcountry Cooperatives, known as DANCe. The name was inspired by the Emma Goldman quote, “If I can’t dance I don’t want to be part of your revolution.” DANCe founders dubbed the company an “antiterrorism boogie.” After a court settlement, the People’s Warehouse assets were dissolved and/or turned over to DANCe, which in the long run was a very positive development.

The co-ops in the Twin Cities also began to focus more intentionally on the communities they were building. Food sold in the co-ops was purchased through DANCe, which offered

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THERE ARE COUNTLESS people in the history of Seward Co-op who were involved in the co-op over the years, contributing in ways large and small to the co-op's success. They are the true backbone of the co-op: people who like to get the job done and be of service.

One of those people is Mary Weber, who describes her

Mary Weber

contribution to Seward Co-op as a “worker bee, not a visionary.” But

when the co-op needed people to step up, she was there.

As a young woman, Weber was drawn to alternative lifestyles and natural foods, and in addition to her work at the food co-op, she was a lay midwife attending home births. Weber also has lived in the Seward neighborhood for more than thirty years. She was hired as a collective member at Seward Co-op in 1980. It was a tense time, she recalls, as she and two others were hired to replace half of the collective who had just quit because of conflict with the other half.

Weber recollects the discussions about changing the management structure being protracted. “Ultimately, we decided on the principles we live by now, but we didn’t see it at the time. We wanted to have the best food at the best prices, and education was part of that. We wanted to bring people more options,” she said. When P.J. Hoffman was hired in 1983, Weber had a memory of the first time she ever saw him—playing guitar and singing at the Seward Café—and wondered what kind of manager he’d be. But soon she was devoting herself

full-time to midwifery, and she wasn't a staff member again until 1988 when she became one of the Twin Cities co-ops' most esteemed cheese buyers, introducing co-op customers to high-quality cheeses in a champion cheese case.

When the consolidation vote was being discussed in 1993 with other Twin Cities co-ops, Weber felt like she took on a "watch-dog" role. Things were moving too fast, she believed, and without a whole lot of discussion by the members at large. She thought the co-op's values of working together within an independent framework were at risk. "I had this fear of us being swallowed up," she said. The vote did not pass and the co-ops remained independent. It was a watershed event for the Twin Cities co-ops, and for Seward Co-op, and it didn't stop the co-ops from working together.

Weber also recalls what she calls "classic co-op moments." Like the day she found a mitten in the bucket out of which people scooped bulk tahini. Or when her daughter Hallie was a toddler and would come to the co-op and try to eat raisins off the floor. And what it felt like when the regulars would come in for their coffee, bagel, or muffin, and shop and chat about their lives. All of these things are indicative of the experience for her. The co-op grew because of and in spite of its idiosyncrasies, and those who grew up in it are now bringing

"We were able to keep improving our store and our place for people to work, and we're contributing to the community in bigger ways now. That just blows me away."

their own children to the co-op.

What the co-op has accomplished since its early beginnings continue to impress Weber. "We were able to keep improving our store and our place for people to work, and we're contributing to the community in bigger ways now. That just blows me away," Weber said. "We did have some really visionary people, I think. When they would talk about being a part of the community and giving back, they

could see things, maybe not in these details, but they would see it in ways I couldn't imagine."

Weber also sees how much the co-op has changed in response to the neighborhood. "Anybody in the community can get involved in the store and feel like they'll be heard if they have requests, and they'll be welcomed. As a store, we look at what the needs are where we are and where we live. With Africans moving into the neighborhood, the co-op has figured out how to hire people and provide a different range of African food. It works both ways," she said.

Today, Weber is an American Sign Language interpreter. She is proud of all the co-op has accomplished over the years. "Forty years from now, I imagine, we'll have more stores and a wider range of goods, not just groceries, other [kinds of] stores. I imagine I'll be able to spend most of my money in a co-op system. It's an awesome thought."

the co-ops a platform and a resource for pooling their resources. Co-ops formed softball teams. Potlucks resumed. A committee was created at Seward Co-op to research food quality and make recommendations as to what products to carry. It was Seward Co-op's focus on food issues, combined with other co-ops' efforts around the country, that established the foundation of the natural food industry as it's known today. Seward Co-op's main goal of providing healthful food to the community peacefully resumed.

The Collective Disbands

By the early 1980s, the collective's own limitations had begun to chafe. The co-op's ability to grow was hampered by the difficulties of managing by committee. Having everyone involved in every decision was not working well. Accountability to the co-op's members was an issue because the board was also primarily made up of collective members, and that made for a messy governance process. The dynamic was causing gridlock for the board and frustration for the collective. Then, in 1983, the collective arrived at a crucial and difficult decision. They agreed to disband in favor of appointing a general manager—one person who could be held accountable by the board—to carry out the policies of the co-op.

Initially, due in part to the collective's idealism, the idea was a hard sell. "We recoiled at the idea of managers," Cashman said. But what they really wanted—nonhierarchical leadership based on group decision-making processes—was not being adequately achieved by their collective management. The everyday realities of managing a grocery store, in conjunction with the



Co-op staff, c. 1981.

necessity to be answerable to a legal cooperative business structure, tempered their idealism.

Mary Weber, a Seward Co-op collective member during that time, remembers that, above all, everyone wanted to have a store to serve the community. "We had debates about what it meant [to do that] that went on endlessly on different ends of the spectrum," she said.

It was the practical implementation of grassroots democracy that carried the day. A general manager was necessary for

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P.J. HOFFMAN WAS deeply committed to social justice as a precocious youth growing up in Niagara Falls, New York. In 1965, when he was in eighth grade, he spent part of his summer in Connecticut at the Committee for Nonviolent Action's farm and training center. He got back to school that fall all fired up and was impatient (he said "a pain in the ass") with students who didn't know anything about farm workers, the antiwar movement, or civil rights. He was inspired by Gandhi's idea of organizing for nonviolent change, and he led demonstrations against the Vietnam War in his hometown. After high school, he studied nonviolent social change at Pendle Hill, a Quaker study center in Wallingford, Pennsylvania. "I was by far the youngest person there," he said. This increased his involvement in the social change movement, which included developing training programs and attending many demonstrations, including the large marches in Washington, D.C. He also learned to play the guitar, was in a band in high school, and was a serious singer-songwriter when he was in his twenties.

When he was a teenager, Hoffman got a job at a grocery store across the street from his high school. As he got older and moved around the country working with various organizations and causes, he supported himself by working at other grocery stores. Being an experienced grocer meant he was employable when he needed a job—and this came in handy when the food co-ops came calling. Here was a guy who embraced the idea of cooperation, and at the same time, knew something about the grocery business. He could straddle both worlds. The job wasn't always

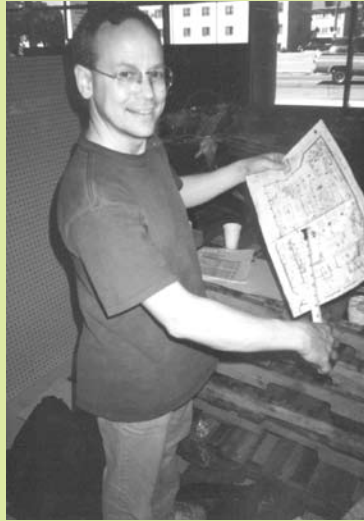
P.J. Hoffman



easy, but he was the perfect person to be the co-op's first general manager.

P.J. Hoffman is largely credited for “modernizing” Seward Co-op when he became the general manager in 1983. “I don’t know to what degree people wanted to quote-unquote modernize, but that’s what happened,” Hoffman said. In addition to creating systems for a more efficient workplace and focusing on customer service, he also led the first remodel of the co-op’s crumbling physical plant. “The collective saw what needed to be done with the renovations and systems changes and moving the co-op forward,” said Hoffman. They felt that they and the structure weren’t the right vehicles for that again. At the time, the board saw a need for strong leadership, and Hoffman said he was hired to “make things happen.”

And a lot of things happened. “Because of my supermarket background, I knew how to get a lot of work done at once. We did a lot of business on relatively few labor hours,” he said. The co-op grew exponentially during the three years he worked there. Hoffman was the person who purchased the co-op’s first computer in 1986 after convincing the board of its necessity in a rather entertaining fifteen-page memo. He wrote: “Buying a computer is a ‘sexy’ prospect, and the co-op would be wisest to look into the matter with prudent demeanor.”



P.J. Hoffman, c. 1983.

Hoffman was always thinking forward, and his work revolutionized the co-op’s business practices by using technology to do accounting, receiving, inventory control, pricing, and tracking member purchases. Hoffman left Seward Co-op to work for the co-op warehouse DANCe in 1986, but his influence on food co-ops didn’t end. He spent many years providing technical assistance for food co-ops, offering workshops on operations, merchandising, and customer service.

Currently, Hoffman works for United Natural Foods, Inc., as a retail grocery store designer and is also a longtime member of the CDS Consulting Co-op. Over the years, he’s done the floor plans for Seward

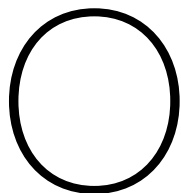
Co-op’s last three retail expansions. “We don’t have wealth until we make a profit. That’s our currency for the future,” he said about how good business practices, together with co-op ideals, can build a better world.

“There should be a thousand food co-ops, not just 150 or 250; there should be a thousand of them around! I like to think the co-ops doing what they’re doing now are setting the stage for something bigger and better. That whether it’s the co-op in Sacramento or Brattleboro, or wherever, that we’re developing real assets and putting money on the bottom line in order to do something more,” he said.

the co-op's democracy to function. "The board needs to have the power to hold someone accountable on behalf of the members," Cashman said. "It's a democratic process that is good, and I admire it."

For everyone involved, the decision to hire a general manager was the period at the end of a long sentence. It signaled the end of a decade of collective experimentation and instability. It was simultaneously a letdown, a relief, and, finally, a release toward a more sustainable future.

The First of Many Firsts



One of the benefits of being a collective member of the co-op was getting a key to the store. Hungry in the middle of the night? Go to the co-op and get a tub of Ben & Jerry's ice cream. With the transformation to a new management structure, twenty-four-hour member access to the co-op was one of many policies about to change.

Logbooks were no longer the main source of interpersonal communication and day-to-day squabbling. Instead, operational problems were solved in the course of daily business. Everyone was expected to do his or her part, and that was a change, too.

P.J. Hoffman was the co-op's first general manager. Hoffman came to Seward Co-op as a young manager with his own well-defined set of ideals. He had long been involved in social justice movements, and to support himself had also worked in grocery stores: at first for conventional grocery stores and later for natural food co-ops, including a stint managing the West Bank Co-op. Hoffman had a lot of experience as a grocer and manager, and he went about introducing Seward Co-op's alternative culture to

standard business practices.

Hoffman was a dynamic leader; Weber called him a "happy prophet" with a vision for "getting the job done." Despite Hoffman's positive outlook, the co-op experienced some tremendous growing pains during his tenure. There were times, Hoffman said, when "the co-op had me in tears." He experienced resentment from people who felt like something had been taken away from them, and even though the co-op was operating more efficiently, the new procedures stung their pride. Nonetheless, Hoffman and the co-op's staff carried out the most ambitious set of changes ever to occur at Seward Co-op in a three-year span. It was a complete overhaul of the co-op's systems and way of doing business in the community.

The co-op received a grant from the Minneapolis Community Development Agency, and in 1984 Hoffman led the co-op in a much-needed major remodel, repairing the building and enhancing the shopping experience. He introduced basic retailing concepts—such as inventory tracking, margin pricing, and customer service—in addition to writing operational procedure manuals. The co-op began focusing more on broadening its appeal through its products and services.

The operational changes underway at Seward Co-op during those years were also taking place at other co-ops in the Twin Cities and around the country. Many of the bulk food co-op storefronts founded in the 1970s suffered from mismanagement, poor location, and subpar customer service. More of them closed than stayed open. The heyday that led to their founding was over.

Those food co-ops that survived did so because their leaders awakened to the idea that cooperation and good business

ASK ANYONE WHO'S BEEN INVOLVED in the cooperative movement over the past forty years if they recognize the name Annie Young, and chances are they'll say yes. Young has been involved in the co-op movement since the very beginning. In the early 1970s, when food co-ops were only a dream, Young was a hippie living in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, with her young son and a few friends. Lacking any access to whole foods, the group had started a buying club. She and her friends would drive to Minneapolis in their old station wagons and pickups, load them up with food from the People's Warehouse, and trek back to Sioux Falls.

During the many trips to Minneapolis, Young met several people involved in the Twin Cities co-op scene, and in 1975, at the height of the Co-op Wars, she moved to Minneapolis to work at the People's Warehouse. Young was very involved in the struggle against the CO and was instrumental in founding DANCe, the Distributing Alliance of the Northcountry Cooperatives.

In 1975, Young met a farmer who lived on a collective farm near Winona, Minnesota. She moved there to help found the Wiscoy Valley Land Cooperative and chose to stay in the country for a while.

While in the Winona area, Young helped develop an education program and build membership for what was then the Famine Foods Co-op (now Bluff Country Co-op). She worked with Evelyn Roehl and several other women she had met through

DANCe to develop nutritional fact sheets about all the bulk foods sold at the co-op. At first the fact sheets were posted on the food barrels and bins in stores throughout the Midwest, but eventually they were compiled into a book titled *Whole Food Facts*, which is still available today.

In 1981, Young moved back to Minneapolis to accept a job as membership coordinator for Seward Co-op.

Like many other co-ops in the Twin Cities at the time, Seward was in rough financial shape. The board called in Young to boost membership, and she brought in Scott Beers to establish a business plan and get the finances in order. Young remembers these years fondly:

"We had interesting board meetings in those days," Young said. "We had a president of the board, Shirley Krogmeier, who was a teacher at Sanford Junior High. She had a really nice house over here in Seward, and she also had a sauna in her basement. So after board meetings, we would take saunas, and we would often enjoy the fruits of the basement wine cellar. We were comfortable enough with each other to do that. They were really wonderful, wonderful years."

The amount of trust and comfort among board members enabled the store's collective, Young, Beers, and the board to accomplish what was needed to turn the co-op around. Young brought order to the membership-development program and established the membership-numbering system that's still in place

Annie Young





today. Under her guidance, membership grew, and with Beers's business know-how, finances stabilized. Discussions over the need to be more businesslike eventually led the collective and the board to decide that it was time to hire a general manager, and P.J. Hoffman was the first to fill that position.

Young left Seward in 1984 to become the executive director of the All-Co-op Assembly. In this role, she conducted education, training, and outreach for co-ops in the upper Midwest. This was a difficult time, and many co-ops, especially those in smaller, rural towns, shut down.

"In the beginning, lots of co-ops were based on volunteer labor," Young explained. "In the 1980s, as the movement grew and hippies started getting married, having children, or going back to school, the lifestyle changed. That lifestyle shift changed how the co-ops functioned. Everyone couldn't work on free love at that point."

Young later returned to Seward Co-op as a board member, eventually becoming president of the board when Gail Graham was general manager. She relished helping to organize

"In the 1980s, as the movement grew and hippies started getting married, having children, or going back to school, the lifestyle changed. That lifestyle shift changed how the co-ops functioned. Everyone couldn't work on free love at that point."

the twenty-five-year All-Co-op reunion celebration that took place on Nicollet Island during the summer of 1997.

Young left Seward once again, this time to work on community development projects in the Phillips Neighborhood of Minneapolis. In 1993, she helped start the Green Institute, an organization that worked to establish green practices and improve the urban environment through eco-friendly initiatives. Since 1990, Young

has also been elected as a citywide Park Board Commissioner, serving on the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board.

But, try as she might, Young can't seem to keep her mind off the co-op movement. For the past few years, Young has been the driving force behind the initiative to open Wirth Cooperative Grocery in the Harrison Neighborhood near North Minneapolis, a project Seward Co-op has supported financially. When this dream is realized, Young will have succeeded in bridging two of her passions: improving the community life of inner-city residents and making whole, healthful food available to those who need it.

practices go hand-in-hand. Co-ops are accountable to their members and community, and the purpose of the co-ops is to serve them. Seward Co-op was an example of how a co-op could thrive with the right leadership and dedication to making good choices on behalf of its members.

From 1983 to 1986, the co-op doubled its sales, completely overhauled its entire operation, and shifted from collective management to a general management structure. When Hoffman moved on to work for DANCe and the co-op hired Gail Graham to be its general manager in 1986, the dust didn't get a chance to settle.

A Real Grocery Store

After Graham was hired, planning for the co-op's first expansion began in earnest. The co-op was able to purchase the small strip of land between the co-op and the Minnesota Bar (now Tracy's Saloon) next door in order to expand.

The board also worked on improving the systems governing the cooperative to prepare for growth. They created a procedure for distributing a patronage refund to members during profitable years, and the first dividend checks were issued to Seward Co-op members in 1986.

In 1987, in order to raise money for an expansion, the board, with the help of staff member Annie Young, led the membership in a vote to change the stock purchase requirement from three dollars to seventy-five dollars. This was a very critical decision for the future development of the co-op. Without significant capital from members in the form of their stock purchases and member loans, the co-op would not have

ROSE WILLIAMS WAS one of Seward Co-op's most beloved and endearing characters, leaving a legacy of kindness and goodwill connected to food and community. She lived next door to the co-op on 22nd Avenue, and for many years she made the best guacamole in the Twin Cities for Seward Co-op. This was no ordinary guac. It had the power to bring sunshine to dreary days, make a bad mood good again, and above all, draw in new customers.

Once or twice a week, Williams would come in to the co-op to make her special guacamole, and it was always an occasion. A diminutive woman, there she'd be up to her elbows in ingredients, wearing a scarf and sporting an old-fashioned kitchen apron. She'd set out

the cases of avocados that had been ripening during the week and begin the task of chopping onions and tomatoes, pitting the avocados, and assembling all the other ingredients to mash together in a giant bowl.

While she worked, Williams loved to dole out hugs and

Rose Williams

aka "Lil' Mom" (1914–2001)



CONTINUED ON PAGE 46

words of encouragement to co-op staff, and in that way the dip was infused with her generous spirit. Before she was finished and the guac was packaged for sale, she would set out a giant plate of her guacamole for customers to sample and sit back to watch as people were irresistibly drawn to it. It was a guaranteed conversation starter.

Williams also remembered birthdays, and she always baked a super-sweet, and totally delicious 7-Up cake for people on their special days. Whenever she baked one, the cakes would end up as a plate of crumbs in no time.

Tana Haugo was the deli manager at Seward Co-op in the 1990s, during the height of the guacamole's popularity, and she remembered how William's charm was such a big part of that. "I think what I remember most is just what a piece of living history she was. She was truly of a different time. Her language was ripe with idioms that no one uses anymore, and she had a kind heart," Haugo said.

Billy Williams (no relation to Rose), the co-op's current deli manager, also remembers Williams because his mom worked at the co-op when he was a boy. "The best thing I remember about Rose was her hugs and her kindness to children. I truly felt like she was my grandmother," he said.

Rose Williams not only made guacamole for the co-op, but she also was a big part of the Seward neighborhood at large. Her husband was Bishop William B. Williams, who was the minister at the Emmanuel Tabernacle Church of God and Christ located on the 2500 block of 22nd Street East in the Seward neighborhood. She had many friends in the neighborhood and

was universally adored. It was a sad day when—well into her eighties—she had to leave the neighborhood because she could no longer live alone safely. Her relatives reported that after she moved, they found two cases of avocados left behind in the house. Williams had set them out to ripen for guacamole.

Rosie's Guacamole Recipe

2 large ripe Hass avocados
2 Roma tomatoes, chopped
1/3 cup cilantro, chopped
3 Tbsp. minced red onion
1 lime, juiced
1–2 jalapenos, minced, to taste
1 clove garlic, minced
1 tsp. chili powder
1/2 tsp. kosher salt
A whole lotta luv



Mash the avocado in a bowl, leaving a few rough chunks. Gently stir in the remaining ingredients. Don't forget to add the luv! Serve with chips, or as a garnish to other dishes.

It is best to make this just before serving, but if you have to keep it longer, place plastic wrap directly on the surface of the guacamole to keep it from turning brown.

been able to move forward with financing the expansion.

The newly expanded Seward Co-op opened its doors in 1988—complete with beautiful tiled floors, big windows, brand-new shelving, professional lighting, and a natural foods deli—becoming the first food co-op in the United States to expand and install features comparable to those in an upscale grocery store. At around 1,200 square feet, it was small by today's standards, but it was a radical departure from the co-op's former cramped quarters. The co-op also began doing business as the Seward Co-op and put up a new sign facing Franklin Avenue. This change opened up the co-op to the public and allowed more people to feel comfortable shopping there. "We believed if we built the right store, we'd have success," Graham said. That aspiration was realized.

In 1989, the co-op's sales topped \$1 million, an increase of thirty-seven percent from 1987. Staff wages were up ten percent, and membership was at 460 households. The co-op started a newsletter, *The Whole Wheat News*, and began hosting in-store events and sponsoring occasional cooking classes at the nearby Matthews Park Recreation Center. The community responded. People began to view Seward Co-op in a more positive light, as an asset to the neighborhood, rather than as an insular hippie hangout.



Expansion work underway in 1987.

The co-op's success led the staff to think about how to keep growing and reaching out to the community. The food co-ops that were thriving in the Twin Cities were looking to each other, and food co-ops across the entire region, discovering new ways to work together and build on this momentum.

Scenes from the co-op's grand reopening after expansion, 1988.



IN LATE 1981, Scott Beers was working at a holistic health clinic when he got a call from Annie Young, a friend he had met while working at Whole Foods a couple years earlier. Young needed his help; she had just taken a job as membership coordinator at Seward Co-op, and she could see that the finances were in disarray. She immediately thought of Beers and recommended the collective bring him on to help put the co-op's financial house in order.

Scott Beers

Beers agreed to meet with the collective, and in November 1981, he became an independent contractor for Seward Co-op. Beers recalls the dilapidated building and management team on the verge of burn out when he first started working there. The volunteer worker model that was in place was failing. To their credit, the collective recognized that although they were committed to making the co-op work, they themselves did not have the skills required to turn the business around. If big changes didn't happen soon, the co-op would have to shut its doors for good.

Beers is the first to admit that his bookkeeping experience at the time amounted to little more than good financial sense and a couple of accounting classes he had taken in high school. Young didn't have a lot of business experience, either, but both she and Beers had ideas, and they were willing to suggest changes. Collective members like Stuart Reid and Leo Sanders bought into the need for change and championed it with the board and customers.

"I think that what we brought was a certain amount of



hope in the idea that we could try something different,” Beers explained. “We could identify what the issues were and start trying to make a change, and I think that’s what started to happen.”

When Beers began to examine Seward’s finances, it was clear that the situation was dire. At this critical time in the co-op’s history, he was able to stand back, quantify the problems, and put into words what needed to be done to fix them—none of which would be easy or popular. Beers came up with a financial plan to “stop the bleeding,” which included the recommendation that the co-op decrease wages and raise prices.

“There was definitely some shake out, both in terms of the personnel involved and in terms of the people who were participating as shoppers and members,” Beers recalled. “The collective realized it was time for them to change from this volunteer worker-based model to more of a consumer model. I think the wisdom of that has been borne out by the success that the co-ops have had since. Almost all that are still in the

When Beers began to examine Seward’s finances, it was clear the situation was dire. At this critical time in the co-op’s history, he was able to stand back, quantify the problems, and put into words what needed to be done to fix them—none of which would be easy or popular.

Twin Cities today have adopted and used that model. And certainly the ones that have flourished the most have embraced it wholeheartedly.”

Once Beers’ plan was in place, and the co-op began to climb out of its financial hole, he began providing regular reports to the board. Eventually, Beers’ role shifted to creating annual budgets and monitoring the business with these established goals in mind. For the next twenty years, Beers and Lottsa Tax & Accounting Services, Inc., the business he established in 1982, man-

aged the co-op’s books. Now, as a member and shopper at the co-op, Beers is amazed by the growth Seward has experienced over the past several years.

“That Seward Co-op is successful is not a surprise. But that it’s so fabulously successful is hugely surprising,” Beers said. “Especially since the growth has continued in this [recession-afflicted] economic environment, which is a credit to the community it exists in and to the management team that’s in place.”

The Second Twenty Years

Twentieth Birthday Bash, Seward Style

In the summer of 1992, Seward Co-op closed off 22nd Avenue and threw a party to celebrate twenty years in business. And there was good cause to celebrate. At a time when many Twin Cities food co-ops were in financial straits, even teetering on the edge of closing, Seward Co-op's leadership was laying the groundwork for days ahead. So, on a beautiful summer day on July 19, people from the co-op community gathered to enjoy a slice of watermelon or a cob of roasted corn, eat cake, sing happy birthday, dance in the street, and commemorate this monumental occasion.

"We had a big party, and we blocked off 22nd Avenue on a Sunday afternoon. We invited this group, Farm Accident, to play—a really fun group playing at the time," then-President of the Board Uli Koester said. "There was dancing in the street, and I remember thinking, 'Wow, this is just for our little co-op.'"

The twentieth anniversary was a great celebration, but once it was over, there was work to be done. Since 1989, co-op circles had been abuzz over the possibility of consolidating several food co-ops within the Twin Cities area. Now, those discussions were once again bubbling to the surface.



Tom Wozniak, along with his son, Adam, at the twentieth anniversary celebration.



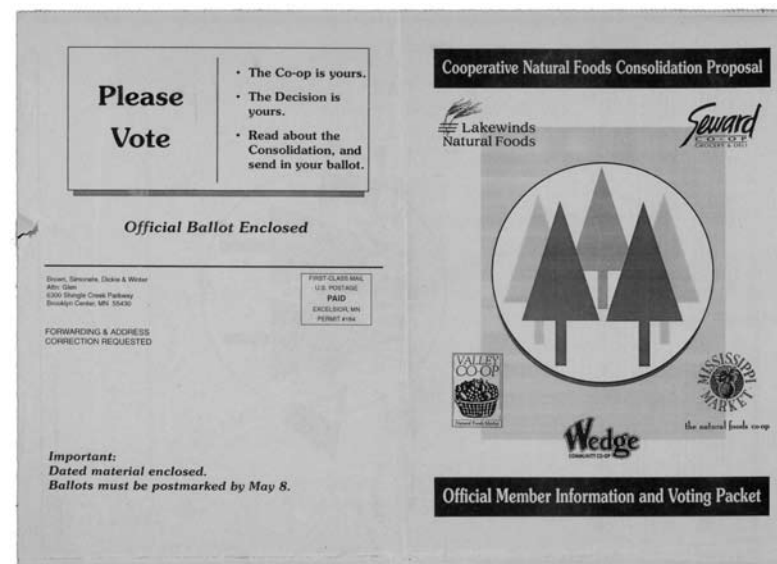
The store, with new awnings, c. 1992.

To Consolidate or Not to Consolidate?

That June of 1992, members of Seward Co-op's board of directors began meeting with board members from other area co-ops—including The Wedge in Minneapolis, Lakewinds in Minnetonka, Valley Co-op (now River Market) in Stillwater, and Mississippi Market in St. Paul—to discuss the possibility of consolidation. Natural food giant Whole Foods had recently announced plans to open three stores in the Twin Cities area by the end of 1993. Commercial grocery competitor Rainbow Foods had also thrown its hat into the ring, installing natural food sections in many of its metro-area stores. In light of these developments, smaller member-owned co-ops like Seward were feeling the pressure to adapt and grow, and consolidation offered an opportunity to do so.

Under the proposed consolidation plan, each co-op would retain its own storefront and original name, while simultaneously falling under the umbrella of the larger consolidated cooperative structure. The thought was that banding together would provide a number of advantages, including merging all memberships into one co-op. This would make members' shopping more convenient, as their purchases would accumulate into one account regardless of which co-ops they shopped. It was also felt that the consolidated co-op would increase buying power through purchasing in larger volumes. Co-op staff would also have greater career opportunities, and additional resources could be freed up for the development of new stores.

Those opposed to consolidation, Seward Co-op included, argued that individual stores would lose their autonomy and



The ballot used by co-op members to vote on consolidation.

identity—two characteristics that many members saw as essential. For certain members of the Seward Co-op, and many of its employees, the idea of consolidation was difficult to accept. Because of its strong ties to the neighborhood out of which it had grown, many feared that, although it would still be Seward Co-op in name, the co-op would no longer be independently run with elected board members from the immediate community.

Seward Co-op urged all members to educate themselves on the pros and cons of consolidation and, most importantly, to speak up and give their opinion. Patricia Cumbie, editor of the *Whole Wheat News* (Seward Co-op's member newsletter at the time), invited members and staff to write editorials on consolidation for publication in a special March 1993 edition of the

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GAIL GRAHAM, Seward Co-op's second general manager, is a dynamic woman whose vision and persistence have transformed the food co-op world. In addition to managing the day-to-day operations of the co-op during a time when management needed to be very hands-on, she also looked outward to how the food co-ops could put the Co-op Principle of Cooperation Among Co-ops into practice.

"I really believed in a vision of co-op success, not only here, but in the region. I really worked hard to see if we could build a coalition," she said.

Graham has devoted her career to food co-ops, and over the years has managed the Wedge, Seward Co-op, and currently Mississippi Market. She was always active on the food co-op scene and was a board member for the food co-op warehouse Blooming Prairie (formerly known as DANCe). She was the steward of numerous food co-op expansions, including Seward's first expansion in 1988 into the space between the co-op and the building next door, and the expansion in 1998 to 21st and Franklin avenues. "We wanted to raise the bar continually for our level of success because cooperation is such a great idea, [one in which] people in a community can own such a tremendous asset as Seward Co-op, an organization that connects them around food and empowers them in their food choices," she said.

The first expansion incorporated upscale

merchandising, and the second was a high-wire act of financing and negotiating acumen that had a huge impact on developing the Franklin Avenue business corridor. The co-op's stalwart tree pillars and green fascia resulted in a dramatically changed streetscape and the realization of a plan that Seward Redesign—a neighborhood nonprofit dedicated to supporting redevelopment projects that improved the Seward community—had for the avenue.

"Seward Redesign played a very important role in creating a vision for Franklin Avenue and Seward Co-op by pushing for and taking over that empty parking lot that was Montanita's. [The 21st and Franklin store] started a whole domino effect of development and served as an important financial anchor and source of stability that allowed other

money to flow into the community for other development to take place. We've built on that community asset, and now it's the major employer on Franklin Avenue," Graham said. "Seward Co-op has been able to deliver on its commitment to serve the community and is fortunate in being able to be part of a growing community."

Graham was also influential in leading Twin Cities food co-ops to discuss the possibility of a merger in 1993. While the effort was not successful, it did result in much greater cooperation among the Twin Cities' food co-ops and those in the upper Midwest.

Gail Graham

"We wanted to raise the bar continually for our level of success because cooperation is such a great idea, [one in which] people in a community can own such a tremendous asset as Seward Co-op, an organization that connects them around food and empowers them in their food choices."

Graham was a co-founding member of the Cooperative Grocers Information Network, as well as a founding member of the Twin Cities Natural Food Cooperatives, a group that helped set the stage for the creation of the National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA) and greater food co-op collaboration nationally. Seward is an active member of the NCGA, an organization devoted to finding ways for food co-ops to capitalize on their strengths in the marketplace.

Graham is an inspirational leader who understands the connection between co-op business ethics and just-minded livelihood. She has inspired countless people to take leadership positions in food co-ops, including Sean Doyle, Seward Co-op's current general manager. Graham's leadership has been outstanding, and in 2004 the Consumer Cooperative Managers Association recognized her contributions with a Cooperative Service Award.

She's also built up an impressive collection of historic and antique co-op-branded product containers. When she left Seward Co-op for Mississippi Market, the collection moved with her, and some of it is displayed there now. Graham did bequeath one piece to the Seward Co-op Deli. Place an order at the juice bar, and you will still find the co-op coffee tin holding the straws, a small token of the indelible mark Graham has made at the co-op.



Old co-op branded coffee tins from Graham's collection of co-op memorabilia. The tins now sit on Seward Co-op's deli counter.

newsletter dedicated to the topic. Meanwhile, Seward held several forums to discuss consolidation.

On April 25, 1993, Seward Co-op members gathered at the Seward Square Apartments to cast their votes on consolidation. In the end, the consolidation proposal was voted down. The Wedge and Lakewinds voted in favor of consolidation, while Mississippi Market and Valley voted against it. At Seward, fifty-six percent of the voting members favored consolidation, but according to the Seward Co-op bylaws, a two-thirds majority was needed for approval. Ultimately, Seward Co-op voted "no," and the consolidation did not proceed. Had fifteen more voters said "yes," instead of "no," Seward Co-op would have consolidated with the Wedge and Lakewinds.

TCNFC Is Born

In the aftermath of the vote that narrowly defeated consolidation, a group of co-op managers who still wanted to find ways to work together—short of consolidation—decided to form the Twin Cities Natural Food Cooperatives (TCNFC). This was one of the first Cooperative Grocer Associations in the country. TCNFC would allow the co-ops to work together to pool resources and learn from each other. In time, this group would grow from the original six metro-area stores to include eleven co-ops: Minneapolis-based Seward, The Wedge, Linden Hills, and Eastside food co-ops; Lakewinds Natural Foods in Minnetonka and Chanhassen; Mississippi Market in St. Paul; Just Food in Northfield; St. Peter Food Co-op; River Market in Stillwater; Valley



Clockwise from top left: The Wedge, Lakewinds, and Mississippi Market were among the other co-ops in TCNFC, c. 1994.

Natural Foods in Burnsville; City Center Market in Cambridge; and Harvest Moon Natural Foods in Long Lake.

As members of TCNFC, co-ops agreed to pay annual membership dues. In return, TCNFC co-ops could take advantage of group purchasing discounts; joint promotions, advertising, and public relations; and leadership training. In 1994, TCNFC published their first issue of the *Co-op Consumer News*, a bimonthly newsletter also edited by Seward's Patricia Cumbie. The new publication, a precursor of the *Mix*, provided members of all

Twin Cities co-ops that belonged to TCNFC with information about food, health, nutrition, local growers, and classes.

Over time, TCNFC members found such success working together that other co-ops in the Midwest and TCNFC joined together to form the Midwest Purchasing Co-op (MPC), launching a store-specials program and jointly purchasing grocery bags. In 2006, TCNFC and MPC merged with other regional Cooperative Grocers Associations to form the National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA). By working together, Seward and other local co-ops were able to remain independent yet work together, capturing the true spirit of the co-op movement.

A Move on the Horizon

In April 1994, Seward Co-op board of directors member Peter Fleck made the following comments in *Whole Wheat News*: "The best news to come out of recent board meetings is from the Finance Committee: the store is doing well. Profit margins are excellent and sales are growing. We are close to budget in all areas. Net income for the fiscal year is 2.8 percent of sales, or double what we budgeted."

On solid financial footing, with the promise of continued growth ahead, General Manager Gail Graham and the Seward Co-op board announced plans for a proposed expansion. After making the original location at 2201 East Franklin Avenue work for twenty-two years, it was time to explore other possibilities. Top priorities for a new space included additional parking, a greater number of checkout lanes, wider aisles, a larger selection of foods, and the addition of general merchandise items, such as housewares and books.

The search for a new location began in earnest in the latter

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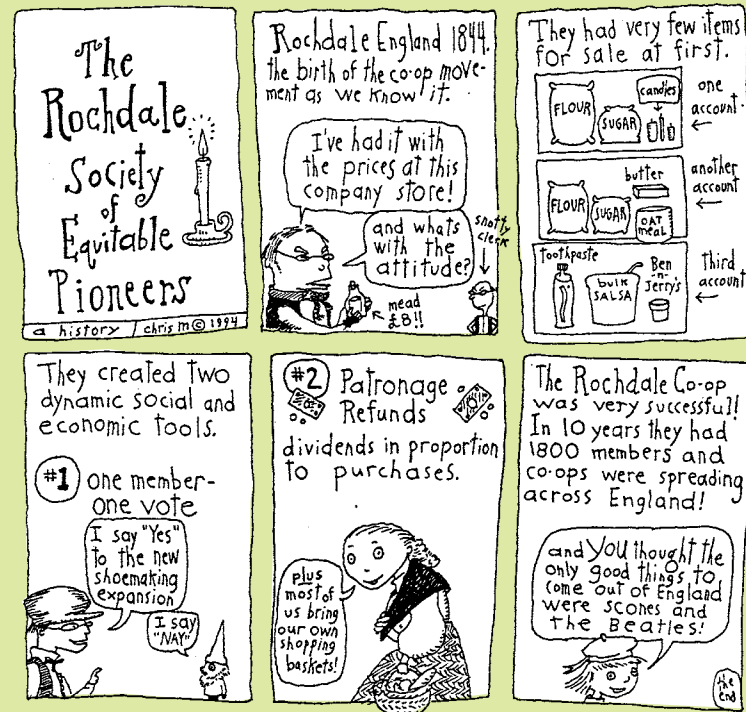
CHRIS MONROE IS probably best known for her work as a children's book author and illustrator. Through her *Monkey with a Tool Belt* series, her book *Sneaky Sheep*, and her illustrations for Kevin Kling's latest book, *Big Little Brother*, she is rapidly gaining a national fan base. She is also the creator of *Violet Days*, a comic strip that runs weekly in the Variety section of the *Star Tribune*, and she was named Best Local Cartoonist in 1999 by *City Pages*.

Before gaining a widespread reputation as an artist, Monroe worked at Seward Co-op as a stocker in the early 1990s. She also created comics about life at the co-op for the co-op's newsletter. A perennial favorite

Chris Monroe

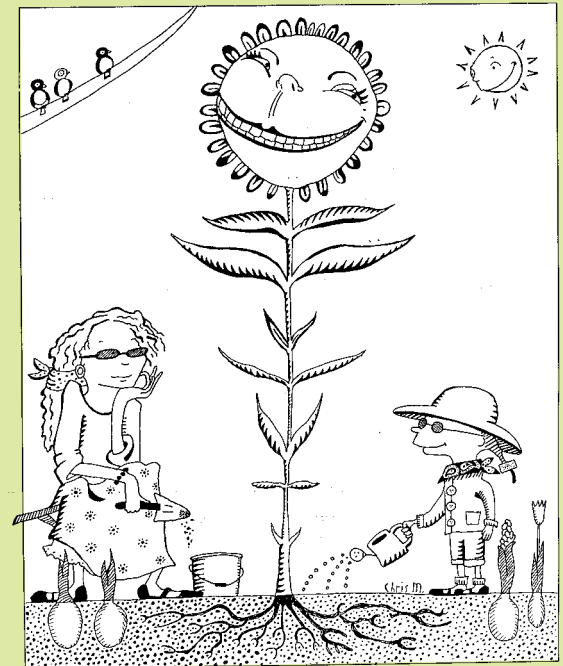
is her comic about the Rochdale Pioneers (see below), the nineteenth-century founders of the modern cooperative movement. She said she still includes those comics in her portfolio because they consistently get laughs.

Nowadays Monroe calls Duluth, Minnesota, home. As for life and work at the old Seward Co-op, she referred to it as, "One of the best times of my life. Good food, good friends, and the occasional yogurt machine mishap added up to a really fun job. My only regret is balancing a gallon jug of Dr. Bronner's soap on the shelf above the mop sink and having it fall on Dean Lange's head. I still feel bad about that."





Chris
Monroe



part of 1994. With nine percent sales growth over the previous year, the need to expand the store to better serve members and the Seward community seemed all the more urgent. Graham and the board met with the Seward Neighborhood Group to discuss the possibility of the co-op building a new store on the site of the nearby vacant Montanita's Restaurant as part of a Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Project to develop and improve the west end of East Franklin Avenue. But by early summer, the Blue Nile restaurant had signed a purchase agreement for the Montanita's building, and the co-op was left still searching for an adequate space.

In the meantime, Seward Co-op was proceeding with other elements of the expansion plan. To help fund the project, the co-op initiated a membership drive in the spring of 1995, with the goal of increasing membership by 200, bringing total membership to 1,000 households.

In September, the co-op signed a purchase agreement for a



Members of the co-op staff, c. 1996.

parcel of property at 2001 Minnehaha Avenue. This was a promising new development in the expansion project, but as Graham lamented in the October/November 1995 issue of *Whole Wheat News*, the purchase was contingent on other factors, and much work still lay ahead.

"Many things have to fall into place for this project to work," Graham said. The co-op still needed substantial city money to help finance the project. In addition, they still had to sell the building at 2201 East Franklin Avenue, and—perhaps most significantly—raise nearly \$100,000 in member loans. "For a store our size," Graham noted, "that is a daunting task."

Ultimately, the board opted not to build on the 2001 Minnehaha Avenue site. The site was not adequately sized for the co-op. Graham and board members were working closely with Seward Redesign, a neighborhood nonprofit dedicated to supporting redevelopment projects that improved the Seward community. Rich Thomasgard and David Fey of Seward Redesign encouraged the co-op to build closer to the original store, believing that the Seward Co-op expansion project had the potential to anchor the revitalization of East Franklin and the surrounding neighborhood.

"There's a renaissance of friendly, positive activity on [Franklin Avenue]," Fey told the *Seward Profile*, the Seward neighborhood's publication at the time.

The co-op was able to parlay its role as a neighborhood anchor and the goodwill of the community into the capitalization of the project. In 1996, Seward Co-op applied for funds through the Seward Neighborhood Group Development Committee and was approved for an \$85,000 loan through the Neighborhood Revitalization Program. Another \$54,000 and

ULI KOESTER DISCOVERED the Seward Co-op in 1989 when he was a renter on Milwaukee Avenue while studying at the University of Minnesota to be a teacher. He began shopping at Seward because it was close and convenient.

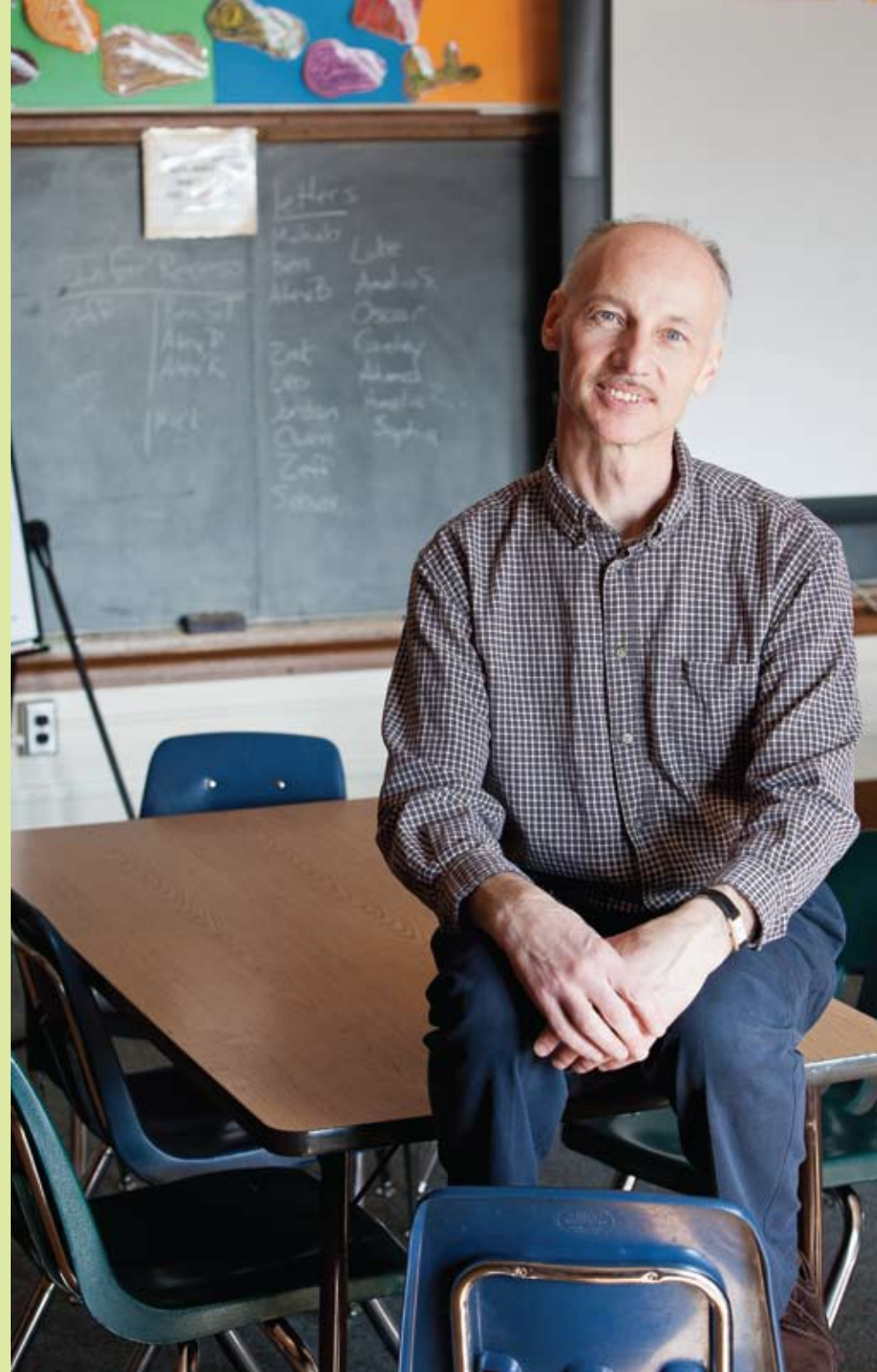
Before long, he was volunteering at the co-op, helping stock shelves and filling in for other employees when needed. After Koester finished his training at the university, he spent his days working at the co-op until he found a teaching job. Over the years, he also created puppet shows for kids and wrote for the *Whole Wheat News*. What he came to value most about Seward Co-op was the strong sense of community it provided to members and to the neighborhood. He relished the opportunity to play a role in the day-to-day operations of a place that was more than just a grocery store.

“There’s a power in having a store where you can be involved and make a difference and at the same time have such good decisions made for you,” Koester said. “There are not many places that exist like that.”

In 1990, Koester was elected to the board of directors, where he served on the finance committee. “I remember it being kind of neat, being the president of the board and walking to the co-op and thinking

“There’s a power in having a store where you can be involved and make a difference and at the same time have such good decisions made for you.”

Uli Koester



‘I’m president of the board.’ I was twenty-nine or thirty,” Koester said.

He remembers poring over spreadsheets with Gail Graham and Scott Beers in the co-op’s “office”—a few chairs clustered around a single table in the basement. In those much-leaner times, the finance committee kept a careful eye on the bottom line. In 1991, Koester was elected board president. He was the board representative who signed the purchase agreement when Seward Co-op bought the Park Pantry in St. Louis Park in 1991. Koester remembers the overwhelming sense of relief he and others felt when the board made the decision to close the store six months later, before actually losing money on the venture.

He can still recall many sleepless nights in 1993, when the Seward Co-op was considering consolidating with a handful of other Twin-Cities area co-ops. Koester was against the idea of consolidation and wrote an editorial stating his views in the *Whole Wheat News*.

Thinking back on that decision, he said, “I voted against consolidation. I felt there was a strong community [at Seward] and, nothing against the other co-ops, we wanted to tend to the community. In the face of all these other co-ops that were going under, though, it was a struggle. It was a hard decision.”

Like many other people involved in the co-op throughout the years, Koester went on to become a leader in the natural

“I remember it being kind of neat, being the president of the board and walking to the co-op and thinking ‘I’m president of the board.’ I was twenty-nine or thirty.”

foods movement in his own right. In 1995, he co-founded the Midwest Food Connection, a nonprofit organization that teaches elementary school children about the importance of eating healthful food and how food is grown. As executive director of the program, Koester still maintains a connection with Seward Co-op, which has provided funding for

the Midwest Food Connection since 2002.



Students on a Midwest Food Connection field trip.

\$50,000 came from the Neighborhood Economic Development Fund and the Minneapolis Consortium of Community Nonprofit Lending, respectively.

It was during this time that a new opportunity presented itself. The Blue Nile agreed to a land exchange. As a result, the co-op would build on the parking lot across the street from the original Montanita's site, at 2111 East Franklin, while the Blue Nile would use the land the co-op purchased at 2001 Minnehaha for parking. Additionally, the Blue Nile and the Riverside Assembly of God Church agreed to allow the co-op to develop the shared parking lot that was in disrepair in exchange for the co-op customers' use during the store's business hours.

2111 East Franklin Avenue

The year 1997 was an eventful one for Seward Co-op. On February 20, the co-op quietly celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with cake and coffee at the store. Expansion planning continued to move forward, but slowly, as the co-op addressed neighboring businesses' concerns in turn. Because the project involved substantial funding from neighborhood grants, approval from all parties had to be secured at each phase. Seward Café, for example, was worried that the new building would infringe on their green space, specifically, a row of trees that bordered the properties. Graham and the board worked to ensure that most of the trees would not be harmed before proceeding with construction.

Seward Co-op enlisted the services of Seward neighborhood architects Close Associates to help envision and design the new space at 2111 East Franklin. Graham and the board



Rendering of the 2111 East Franklin store by architect Gar Hagen.

wanted the new store to be bright and inviting, with an exterior that reflected the character of the Seward neighborhood. Close Associates' design incorporated stripped tree trunk beams and a green "canopy" over the entrance. Landscaping featuring native plants, plenty of space for bike racks, and ample parking was part of the plan.

Just when it looked as if winter would hit before the construction could begin on the new co-op, the pieces started to fall into place. On December 1, the board closed on the sale of 2201 East Franklin to Mark and Jim Welna. This not only provided necessary capital for the expansion project, but it also brought to the neighborhood a much-needed, wonderful hardware store. Members also showed strong support for the project. By February 1998, Graham reported that the co-op had secured \$109,000 in member loans—nearly ten percent above



Ground-breaking at 2111 East Franklin in December 1997.

the original goal of \$100,000.

On December 17, 1997, with the necessary financial backing in place, the co-op broke ground at 2111 East Franklin. At the ground-breaking ceremony, Graham posed for a photo with Seward Redesign's Fey and Thomasgard, both of whom had been instrumental in making the new co-op a reality. The \$1.7 million store new store would have 5,200 square feet of retail space out of a total area of 9,100 square feet. This was four times larger than the old store, which had consisted of 2,400 total square feet, including the basement and 1,300 square feet of retail space.

Moving and Growing

As the building began to take shape at 2111, Graham turned her attention to staffing the new store. Board member and Front-end Manager Leo Sanders was tremendously supportive in this process. In addition to hiring and training thirty new employees prior to the move, Sanders assisted P.J. Hoffman in designing the layout of the new store and led the process of installing the first point-of-sale system for the co-op.

In the weeks leading up to the move, Graham enlisted the help of members and volunteers from the community to plant the gardens and paint the fence on the co-op grounds. To

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IN TALKING TO Operations Manager Leo Sanders about his time at Seward Co-op, it quickly becomes clear that he's been there for a long time. He is, in fact, the only employee who's worked for the collective and all four general managers in all three locations in all of their formats.

"I see myself as the Forrest Gump of Seward Co-op," Sanders explained. "I've stood by and participated in many of the most important stages of development in the evolution of Seward Co-op. Just watching the arc of that success has been really good."

Sanders moved to the Seward neighborhood in January 1977 and began shopping at the co-op. As a vegetarian, he was grateful to live so close to a source for natural foods. In late summer 1981, he attended a volunteer orientation at the Seward Co-op. He quickly became a valued volunteer, picking up hours here and there stocking shelves, running the cash register, and handling general store operations. Before long, he became a contract employee and was the first non-collective member to be paid for his work at the co-op.

In spring 1982, Sanders was hired into the collective, diving headfirst into important discussions and decisions regarding the future of the co-op. Within the next year and a half, the co-op would take on a major renovation, develop a functional board of directors, and become a bona fide consumer co-op.

Throughout his tenure, Sanders has

Leo Sanders

"I've participated in many of the most important stages of development in the evolution of Seward Co-op. Just watching the arc of that success has been really good."

experienced many changes at the co-op. He was instrumental in keeping the 2201 East Franklin Avenue location open during the first renovation of the store in the winter of 1983–1984. Stuart Reid, who was the produce manager at the time, had secured a Minnesota Career Development Association grant from the city to expand the store, which was long overdue for an upgrade. This meant that for many weeks during the coldest part of the Minnesota winter, the store had no windows, leaving it vulnerable to the elements. Sanders remembers snow blowing in while he worked the cash register in his winter coat, mittens, and boots.

In October 1984, Sanders accepted a job as grocery buyer at Mississippi Market, only to find himself working back at Seward Co-op six months later. He stayed until August 1985 then left to go back to school. By the time Sanders returned to Seward as a board member in October 1997, the co-op was in the process of building a new store one block west on East Franklin Avenue. In the time Sanders was away, Seward had undergone two more expansions to the existing store, but

continued growth made a new location necessary.

Having just left his job at the University of Minnesota, Sanders found himself with plenty of time on his hands, so in his new role as the board vice president, he helped General Manager Gail Graham with the sale of the old building. The co-op sold the old building to Mark and Jim Welna, and he

and Graham closed on the sale of 2201 and on the subsequent purchase of 2111 East Franklin Avenue.

In March 1998, Graham hired Sanders to help with the move to the new location, and he got straight to work. He hired many of the employees needed to staff the new store, increasing the number on the payroll from eighteen to forty-eight. Sanders coordinated the purchase of the new cash registers and learned how to use them so he could provide training to staff. And he helped P.J. Hoffman, who was working for Seward as a consultant at the time, establish the layout of the new store. During this time, Reid returned to Seward as the new deli manager and, within two years, was to become Seward's third general manager.

By June 1998, the new location was ready for business. Sanders and several other employees and volunteers made the move to the new store. On the first day of business at the new location, Seward Co-op had sales of \$8,000. At the time, that was huge. Sanders and the rest of the staff realized almost immediately that they would quickly outgrow the new building. And, there were definitely growing pains as staff



Sanders in 1982.

On the first day of business at the new location, Seward Co-op had sales of \$8,000. At the time, that was huge. Sanders and the rest of the staff realized almost immediately that they would quickly outgrow the new building.

adjusted to the dramatic increase in sales and the doubled membership. Sanders remembers getting many phone calls at home from staff with every little question.

He recalled, "The first two years were really miserable and grueling. There were many times when I thought, 'What are we doing here?' We had few systems or structure, we were just making it up as we went along. It was pretty chaotic, and we were often operating in crisis mode. But gradually we got better at it."

During that time, Sanders learned an important lesson about management. It's one thing to train your staff, but it's quite another to write down those procedures and policies and make them official. With policies in place, Sanders and

the rest of the staff at Seward Co-op found their groove. Ten years flew by, punctuated by growth that far exceeded projections. Sean Doyle had returned as Seward's new general manager and, by 2007, Sanders found himself in the midst of helping to plan another move, this time to 2823 East Franklin Avenue. With many lessons learned and plenty of time to plan, moving to the current location went very smoothly.



avoid a major disruption in the hours of operation, plans were made to move the co-op during the evening. Graham called for more volunteers to help move the merchandise from the old store to the new, urging anyone who had a pickup truck to bring it.

Sanders described the frenzied scene at the time of the move. “We didn’t hire any movers,” he explained. “We closed the old store at 7:30 at night and opened the next day at 9:00 in the morning. Volunteers and all the staff were throwing everything into trucks—it was chaos. I said, ‘I’ll never do this again in my life!’”

On the morning of Wednesday, June 24, 1998, Seward Community Co-op opened for business at 2111 East Franklin Avenue. Volunteers greeted customers as they entered the store, handing each shopper a map of the new layout. The new store offered an increased selection in products, dozens of new grab-and-go deli items, a soup-and-salad bar, and an expanded health and beauty section.

Seward Co-op staff, board, and members had succeeded in building the store they had envisioned. However, it would take the co-op staff some time to adjust to the new space. The operations needed to change dramatically with the new, much-larger space. It was also a challenge to meet the needs of the



The store at 2111 East Franklin Avenue, c. 2002.

overwhelming response from members and customers. Sales on the first day in the new store were an unprecedented \$8,000 (prior to the move, average daily sales were \$3,900). In the December/January 1998–1999 issue of the *Seward Co-op Member News*, Graham reported a ninety-three percent increase in sales over the previous year for the months of July, August, and September. And with the increase in sales came new members. In 1998 alone, 365 new members joined the co-op.

In recognition of her innovation and creativity, Graham was awarded Blooming Prairie’s 1998 Leadership Award. She had successfully guided Seward Co-op staff, board, and membership through the daunting process of raising the capital, building a new store, and making the move. But she

had little time to rest on her laurels.

By the end of 1999, sales, staff, and membership continued to grow rapidly, though this tremendous growth didn’t happen without a few growing pains. Although, during the planning stages a few years earlier, Graham had been thrilled with the idea of a parking lot that accommodated forty cars, the space was now jammed with cars on any given Saturday. Khaiti French, one of the new employees hired just after the move to the new

location, remembers the steady stream of customers.

"Being part of that growth was so exciting," French said. "It really felt like we all were fueling that. We'd set up all of the displays for merchandising, and we'd have an endcap just wiped out the next day because everything sold."

The influx of members and customers exceeded all projections and hopes. To effectively serve the growing membership and keep pace with increased sales, staff needed to develop new systems and processes. Managers worked hard to establish procedures and devise new and improved systems for communicating with employees and members.

An Anchor in the Community

The new co-op building had provided a much-needed facelift to East Franklin Avenue. Stuart Reid, who was deli manager at the time of the move, saw the co-op as an anchor in the community.

"As the co-op grew, more and more of the surrounding businesses improved or upgraded," Reid said. "The attitude of the community became one of 'This is something we want to fix up and improve.' I really believe that the co-op anchored that whole thing. Not just business, which is important, but in a way of thinking. The members and the staff and all the people involved with it had this very high social consciousness about what it means to be neighborhood-oriented."

The co-op was also providing jobs to people from the surrounding—and changing—neighborhood. Minneapolis' Cedar-Riverside area was becoming home to a large population of East African immigrants. As more Ethiopian and Somali families moved into the Seward neighborhood, they began to shop



The front-end staff at 2111 East Franklin Avenue, c. 2005.

and work at the co-op. The co-op responded by expanding their offerings to include foods such as injera bread, teff flour, and traditional East African dishes on the hot bar.

Employing people from the Seward neighborhood strengthened the co-op's ties to the community while also helping families assimilate to life in the Twin Cities. When Misra Abubaker began working at the co-op in early 2001, she didn't speak much English. She admitted it was difficult in the beginning, but it ultimately became an excellent opportunity to learn the language.

"When I think back then, I don't even know how I was

hired,” Abubaker admitted. She was familiar with most produce names in her native Oromo, but she didn’t know the English translation. She had no idea what to call many of the items coming up to the register.

“When I had a customer with a full basket of groceries, I’d think ‘how am I going to ring all this up?’” Abubaker said. “I didn’t know what ‘parsnip’ was in English. I would pick it up and say ‘What is this?’ The customer would tell me the name, I would look it up on the chart and ring them up.”

Abubaker now speaks fluent English. “I learned all that from customers,” she said.

In addition to breaking down language barriers, conversa-

tions between East African and American co-workers reduced cultural barriers, as well, leading to new friendships and some interesting stories shared along the way. Reid remembers many such conversations during his time at the co-op.

“I learned a lot about human diversity in the working relationships of the co-ops,” Reid said. “We were a diverse workplace and open about it. We didn’t just work together, we talked about the issues. We worked through stuff. It served me well in my future life.”

A Change in Leadership

As Seward Co-op entered the twenty-first century, it continued to grow, both in terms of sales and its diverse staff. However, the co-op was about to face a new challenge, one during which Reid’s communication abilities, rapport with staff, and years of cooperative experience would prove invaluable.

In January 2000, Gail Graham left Seward Co-op to take the job as general manager of the Mississippi Market. Mississippi Market was in financial trouble, and their board had decided that if anyone could save the store, it was Graham. Before she left, Graham recommended that Reid, deli manager and long-time Seward Co-op member and employee, take over as interim general manager during the search for her replacement. Reid was hired six months later by the board of directors to be the new general manager. The co-op would continue to grow under Reid’s leadership, to the point where the store was again bursting at the seams.



The co-op at 2111 East Franklin Avenue, c. 2005.

STUART REID VIVIDLY REMEMBERS his first interview for a full-time job at the Seward Co-op: it took place in the living room of one of the collective members, with about twenty members of the board and collective on hand to ask questions. This was the late 1970s, Reid explained, when getting a job at the co-op had a lot more to do with one's political leanings than with anything else.

Reid did get the job and began working at the co-op during a time when questions about the effectiveness of collective management were rising and membership was dwindling. On one hand, these were great times; Reid enjoyed being part of the Seward Co-op community, and he was learning about food, management, and the group process. The collective would meet at a different member's house every week, eat a potluck dinner, and discuss everything from co-op business and policies to ideas for new product lines.

"One of the great memories from that time period was sitting down at collective meetings and passing the checkbook around and writing our own checks," Reid recalled. "It was so informal it was amazing."

As amazing as it was to have this level of trust among collective members, such informal business practices created a few problems. In 1981, when many co-ops in the Twin Cities area were going out of business, the collective decided that it was time for a change. Reid and a few of the members of the collective attended a three-week course in Madison, Wisconsin, where they were immersed in all aspects of co-op management, including the importance of maintaining a strong business

Stuart Reid



foundation and firm business practices.

All agreed that the collective management model was not working. The collective recommended that Seward reincorporate as a consumer co-op and hire a general manager. The board and membership voted on and approved the change in structure. Although none of the collective managers jumped at the chance to be the Seward Co-op's first general manager, Reid eventually threw his hat in the ring at the last moment. By that time, however, P.J. Hoffman had already interviewed for the position and was hired shortly thereafter.

Reid worked at the co-op until 1984, when he left to become a buyer for the Distributing Alliance of the Northcountry Cooperatives (DANCe). He admits that the move from collective management to a general management structure wasn't easy.

"It was difficult to make the transition," he said, "going from a higher level of accountability to answering to another person, as opposed to your own self-motivated work ethic. You know, it's just inevitable; it's going to be a little tough. But it was the right decision...and P.J. did a great job."

Fourteen years after his departure, Reid returned to the Seward Co-op to become the deli manager in early 1998, just before the doors opened at the second location. Having never managed a deli before, Reid had his doubts, but co-op General Manager Gail Graham reassured him. She knew he



**Reid as deli manager,
c. 1997.**

could manage people, so he could do the job.

Reid quickly found a groove as deli manager and began to enjoy the work.

"It worked out really well, as it turned out," Reid said. "In fact, I recommend hiring someone who doesn't think they're a deli manager to manage delis. You have to manage a lot of people and a lot of inventory, so it's a tricky place to be. I knew how to manage, and I liked to cook, so that wasn't an issue. We had some staff who were very good and did have experience in delis, and it just worked out."

In 2000, when Graham left the co-op to manage Mississippi Market, she asked Reid to take over as interim general manager at Seward. After six months, he was hired permanently. The store experienced tremendous growth under his leadership, and he oversaw the beginnings of the front-end expansion in 2003.

Although he loved the job, in 2004 Reid was offered the opportunity to manage the Just Food Co-op in Northfield, Minnesota, as they prepared to open for business—a job he couldn't pass up. Now Reid works for Food Co-op Initiative, a nonprofit organization that provides support, resources, and funding to those interested in starting new food co-ops. In the past eight years, Reid has played a prominent role in funding more than thirty grants and loans to jump-start the founding of new co-ops around the country.

Connecting the Urban and the Rural

In 2001, Reid oversaw the launch of a new initiative that emphasized the co-op's long-term role as an advocate and promoter of local farmers and producers. This would prove to be one of Reid's most enduring legacies. In April of that year, Seward Co-op held its first Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) Fair. Today, it is a hallmark annual event at the co-op, in addition to being one of the largest CSA fairs in the region.

Under the leadership of Produce Manager Hannah Lewis, the co-op decided to provide a venue for local growers to meet potential customers, answer questions, and sell produce shares for the upcoming growing season. In its essence, community-supported agriculture is all about making strong connections within the community. Share holders agree to pay a set amount to the farmer at the beginning of the growing season in exchange for a weekly box of produce and other items from the farm they've pledged to support. By making this commitment to local farmers, share holders provide them with the cash flow needed to grow, maintain, and harvest good, local food.

To some, hosting such an event seemed counterintuitive—why would a successful food co-op invite local farmers to spend a day in their parking lot, selling vegetable, fruit, and meat shares that could potentially detract from the sale of those same items at the co-op?

Growers like former co-op employee Khaiti French and her husband Andrew French, of Living the Dream (LTD) Farm, who have sold shares for duck eggs, chickens, and turkeys at the CSA Fair since 2009, understand the significance of CSAs, and they're grateful to Seward Co-op for taking the initiative.

"It was a good karmic move for the local movement, and it's a good PR move to have a CSA Fair. It does help CSAs get customers. We love that direct connection; it's so gratifying," explained Khaiti French.

Customers who've bought CSA shares and use the co-op as a drop site appreciate Seward's support of CSA, too. Although they may purchase less produce from the co-op during the growing season, they're also likely to pick up a few other items when they stop by the co-op to collect their box each week.

From its modest start as four or five card tables set up inside the store, the fair has grown into a signature event for the co-op, drawing thousands of people each year. In 2012, thirty farmers from Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin attended the fair, and despite a chilly drizzle, the tent was humming with activity. A crowd of enthusiastic attendees huddled under the tent to chat with local growers and sample some of the CSA offerings.

By hosting the CSA Fair each year, Seward Co-op fosters a strong sense of community, both locally and farther afield. Over the years, the CSA Fair also has enabled farmers to sell thousands of dollars in shares, giving them desperately needed startup funds during the volatile early months of the growing season. And, on a very basic level, the relationships that are formed at the fair are essential to the local growers who participate.



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JACK HEDIN HAS LONG BELIEVED that the co-op way of doing business is best for farmers, customers, and workers. Hedin and his wife, Jenni McHugh, were among the six founding members of the Zephyr Valley Community Land Cooperative in rural Winona, Minnesota. It was there that they launched Featherstone Farm in 1997 and began growing organic produce to sell to food co-ops in the region. When it was hit by a major flood in 2007, they decided to move the farm, and in 2010 were able to buy a 118-acre farm on a ridge nearby.

Jack Hedin

Hedin's first co-op experiences came when he worked with a food co-op in Bethesda, Maryland. He also worked on a farm in Pennsylvania that did business with food co-ops. "There was no question in my mind that it was the best way to do business," Hedin said. It inspired him to learn more about co-op ownership, and what he learned was a driving force in the creation of the Zephyr Valley Land Co-op. After starting Featherstone Farm, he recollects going in to the Bluff Country Co-op in Winona and overhearing a customer ask a produce worker, "Do we have carrots?" It struck him that the person said "we," using language demonstrating a strong personal connection to the co-op. "It was another real powerful thing about what it means to be part of a co-op," he said.



It's not unusual for local, organic farmers like Hedin to be closely connected to the food co-ops. Both farm and co-op are sustained by the relationship, but Hedin points out that what food co-ops do goes beyond what any other retailer would do. What's different is that food co-ops, being owned by consumers, rather than publicly traded on Wall Street, means they can focus on a long-term vision to be a sustaining force for local agriculture. From his perspective, Seward Co-op has always been a leader in this regard.

"They go the extra mile in educating consumers about why it is important to buy from small, local farmers." Hedin also pointed out that the conventional grocery industry is very volume-oriented, and Seward Co-op will buy from farms without large volume or capacity just to help them get started. "It's impossible to overstate the importance of that for us," Hedin said.

He said that the co-op's support of the community-supported agriculture (CSA) movement through its CSA fairs and being a delivery drop spot has given many farmers the necessary support to get started. "[Seward Co-op's] embrace of the CSA programs and willingness to go a long way to promote

"The co-op goes the extra mile in educating consumers about why it is important to buy from small, local farmers."

them and serve as a community clearinghouse and center is important." Together with Featherstone Farm, the co-op also participated in a pilot project in 2006 for establishing domestic fair trade standards for U.S. agricultural workers, a project that the co-op continues to be involved in and committed to.

The Seward Co-op also gave Featherstone Farm a loan of \$20,000 to assist the farm's installation of solar panels on a shed roof. "What better way to give back to a community of farmers?" Hedin said. "There's a real partnership here."

Hedin thinks a hundred years from now historians will look back and see how food co-ops and local farms were influential in transforming society. "I like to think of us on the leading edge of a wave of something that is going to draw the rest of society in a more sustainable and sensible direction, that those historians would say, 'Wow, those guys were out in front of that cultural wave,' not because they wanted the sunlight flashing on them, but because it was the right thing to do," he said.

"The people that founded Seward Co-op were trailblazers in this whole movement," Hedin said. "They did it for the right reasons before others recognized a need for change."

“We have twenty share buyers, and we know every one,” Khaiti French said. “We invited them to our [wedding] reception. It’s our farm community. They love what we’re doing and they support us, and then we feed them. It’s pretty basic. I love it.”

Stuart Reid Says Farewell

By 2003, Seward Co-op had grown to have sales of \$5.8 million, more than 300 percent over what it had experienced in the last year at the old store. In fact, the “new” store was no longer feeling quite as spacious as it had back in 1998. After weighing the options, Reid and the board made the decision to expand the front end of the store with a modest 1,500-square-foot addition. The extra space provided a seating area and more room around the checkout stations.

Midway through the expansion project, in April 2004, Reid decided to leave Seward Co-op to take the position of general manager at Just Food Co-op, a startup in Northfield, Minnesota. The opportunity Just Food offered, to bring quality natural foods and a cooperative enterprise to the people of Northfield, was, as Reid wrote in his farewell article to members in the June/July 2004 *Sprout!*, “the only thing that could have pulled me away.”

“I told people I thought I’d probably stay at Seward until I retired,” Reid said. “It was kind of like my dream job; I’d always wanted to manage a store. After I left, I realized how much I missed it.”

With Reid’s departure, board member Sean Doyle stepped in to act as interim general manager during the search for a replacement. Doyle was a natural choice for the position. Not only had he worked for several years at the old store as the

assistant manager under Graham, but he also brought experience in both cooperative development and expansion projects. He had recently left his position as a loan officer at North Country Cooperative Development Fund (NCDF), and prior to that he had been the operations manager at The Wedge, where he oversaw their 1997 expansion project.

Under Doyle’s leadership, the expansion was completed and the rate of sales growth doubled from what it had been prior to the project. The space allowed more room around the checkout area, including the addition of a customer service desk. It also provided a community gathering space for people to eat the great food the deli made. The response was immediately positive. Growth accelerated. It became clear that the co-op’s space, even after the expansion, was not sufficient. After extensive discussion, the board made the decision to instruct Doyle to begin looking for another space to build a new store.

Seward Co-op Scorecard

Initially, the decision to expand again prompted concerns from staff about the challenges of constant growth. Some questioned why the co-op was considering expansion less than a decade after their previous move. Others worried that the co-op was in danger of growing too big and losing its identity. Doyle saw this reaction as an opportunity to examine and shape the identity of Seward Co-op. At the time, he was enrolled in the Master of Management–Cooperatives and Credit Unions online master’s program through St. Mary’s University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. While these concerns were being aired, Doyle had recently learned about social auditing: the concept of tracking not only a business’s financial bottom line, as in a financial

OVER THE YEARS, Seward Co-op has become a second home to many of the East African immigrants in the Seward community. One of the reasons the co-op feels so much like home is the shopping experience itself. The organic food, the large selection of bulk foods, and the friendly staff all remind Seward employees Seble Asefa, Rahel Balcha, Misra Abubaker, and Lubaba Qabeto of what it was like to shop in their home country of Ethiopia. With more Ethiopian and Somali immigrants from the community shopping at the co-op, Seward has responded to requests to add more East African foods to the shelves. But, as Asefa explained, it's not just about the food. It's the people who make all the difference, and that's what keeps everyone coming back.

"There is a human connection here, this great vibe, this great energy," Asefa said. "It's not just a slogan when we say 'Everyone Welcome.' Really, everyone *is* welcome, and everybody tries to make that a reality when customers walk in the store. I think that's what makes us different and what makes us strong and what makes everybody want to become members."

For Abubaker, Seward Co-op has always been a place where she has felt at home. "When I started here, I was in high school. I was single. I got married and have kids now. So, I grew up here," she explains.

Abubaker started working at Seward as a cashier in February 2001, only a year and a few months after moving to Minnesota from Ethiopia. Back then, the co-op was much smaller,

A Place to Call Home



Misra Abubaker



Rahel Balcha

and she quickly got to know all of her co-workers, who were kind, understanding, and helpful as she adjusted to life in a new country and to learning a second language. She loves the job because it makes her feel connected to the community. Now, just as Seward Co-op was a welcoming place for Abubaker to learn English years ago, she—along with Asefa, Qabeto, and Balcha—have become welcoming faces to the East African immigrants who come to Seward Co-op to shop. Those who don't speak fluent English can talk to Abubaker in their native Oromo. "I get to communicate with everyone in the store and be supportive when they need something," said Abubaker.

Balcha's first experience with Seward Co-op was in 2001, when she stopped by to visit a few friends who worked at the 2111 East Franklin location. She immediately liked the feeling of the store, especially its size, the friendly staff, and the strong sense of community it conveyed. Balcha applied for a job as cashier and was hired. Since then, she's been promoted to front-end supervisor. She's amazed by how the co-op has grown since she started working there.

"The business is growing, but the relationships are still important," Balcha said. "It's like a family here. Believe it or not, I have a lot of customers who tell me about their life. It's so nice

"The business is growing, but the relationships are still important. It's like a family here."

—Rahel Balcha



for us to hear what they're doing and about their families. They are very happy customers. And I'll do my best to make sure they leave the store feeling happy."

Qabeto has been working at the co-op since 2003. She takes great pride in her work and in the co-op itself. The co-op, she explained, is like her home. Even when she's at the store, but off the clock, she finds herself cleaning up or straightening shelves. She wouldn't dream of leaving a mess until someone on duty can take care of it. Qabeto's actions ultimately stem from her pride in a sense of ownership.

"The co-op is a good place to work. I'm working for a cooperative, and that makes me really happy," Qabeto



Seble Asefa

explained. “When you work for a community, you are part of it. I love this place.”

It is that sense of community and togetherness that makes Asefa love her job. She started as a cashier in 2004, and after only six months, she was promoted to floor supervisor. In the eight years since, Asefa has worked in customer service, at the deli counter, and as manager on duty.

“It’s not a job; it’s a lifestyle, and you choose it,” Asefa said. “I cannot shop somewhere else. We have wonderful, wonderful staff. Coming to the co-op is like coming home; it’s like coming to your mom’s house. We are big now—we have more than two hundred employees—but I feel like I have two hundred brothers and sisters.”

audit, but also tracking its efforts towards social responsibility. By creating indexes that measure a company’s multiple bottom lines, a social audit helps identify if a business is meeting those goals.

To assist in this effort, Doyle, the management team, and staff worked with GrowthWorks, Inc.—the firm of Brian McDermott and Gerry Sexton, who specialize in helping leaders create and implement strategies for change, improvement, and innovation—to facilitate the process of creating a dynamic social audit that would guide the co-op in future decision-making.

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Allison Meyer helped develop the Scorecard and led “How Teams” that determined how the Scorecard would be measured.



Photo by Kari Cornell

THE TRIP TO Hoch Orchard is nothing short of idyllic. About a mile down a dusty gravel road among green, rolling hills near La Crescent, Minnesota, stands a hand-painted red-and-white sign that reads “Hoch Orchard.” You’ve arrived. Hoch Orchard is home to some of the best locally grown organic apples, apple cider, and homemade applesauce around.

When Harry and Jackie Hoch began managing the orchard in the mid-1980s, organic practices were not in place. For the first few years, the Hochs grew apples using conventional IPM (integrated pest management) methods and sold the fruit to local grocery stores and pack houses. But they found themselves falling further and further behind financially. So they pulled up stakes and decided to move to the Twin Cities, where they both held down jobs to make ends meet. On the weekends, Harry and Jackie poured everything they had into the orchard, spending countless hours planting berry bushes, replacing old trees, and building up the orchard’s infrastructure, all while gradually paying off debt.

In 1989, the Hochs tried an experiment: they established a quarter-acre block of land as organic. Although the disease-resistant apples they grew in this block did well—apples such as Liberty and William’s Pride—the people shopping at area farmers’ markets showed little interest in organic fruit and were leery about buying these relatively unknown varieties. So the Hochs continued to maintain all other blocks using conventional methods.

In the meantime, Harry and Jackie talked to an accreditor

about splitting their operation, growing some apples organically and others conventionally. Organic accreditor Joyce Ford predicted that it wouldn’t be long before the Hochs decided to go all organic.

“It’s a slippery slope,” Ford told Jackie, “You guys are going to see the benefit on your farm, and you’re going to

decide to do the whole thing organic.”

Bit by bit, the Hochs converted more blocks to organically grown apples. Finally, the year came when they would have had organic Honeycrisp, transitional Honeycrisp, and conventional Honeycrisp in the orchard. With the support Seward Co-op and other good markets that were willing to pay the higher premium for organic apples, the Hochs decided the time had come to transition to an all-organic orchard.

In 1991, a friend offered to load up his pickup truck with ten or fifteen bushels of the apples and deliver them to Seward and other co-ops in the Twin Cities. At the time, Red Delicious, Golden Delicious, and Macintosh grown in Washington State dominated co-op produce displays. Edging in on that shelf space wouldn’t happen overnight, but the Hochs were patient. And persistent. In the late 1990s, the Hochs started working with the Food Alliance. At the time, Mississippi Market was helping the Food Alliance gain a toehold in the Midwest. Mississippi Market’s management asked Harry Hoch if he would bring his Food Alliance-certified apples to St. Paul, thus bringing Hoch apples into the metro market again. Harry made several trips to the Twin Cities to talk to the staff at Seward and

Hoch Orchard

A Farmer Success Story

other co-ops about his apples.

“I would come in and talk to produce managers at Seward and explain how I produced my apples,” Harry said. “They appreciated the growing methods, and this gave the co-op an opportunity to focus on local. We produce a lot of different varieties, and Seward was happy to put a lot of selection out there, which then made the volume big enough to merit our driving all the way from La Crescent to the Twin Cities.”

By 2005, making the 140-mile trip to the Twin Cities was well worth it. The Hochs went from making occasional deliveries in that small pickup truck loaded with a dozen bushels to delivering multiple pallets twice a week. Harry Hoch credits Produce Manager Travis Lusk with making this happen.

“Apple sales at the co-op really took off after Travis came on. He was doing some different types of promotions, and he was expanding the size of the displays of our fruit. And I think each time he took over a Washington apple slot, our sales just went up exponentially,” Harry said.

With the strong apple sales through Seward and other

“Apple sales at the co-op really took off after Travis came on. He was doing some different types of promotions, and he was expanding the size of the displays of our fruit. And I think each time he took over a Washington apple slot, our sales just went up exponentially.”

co-ops as the foundation, the Hochs expanded their strawberry and raspberry beds to round out their offerings.

“When I talked with Seward staff and said, ‘I have a full season of fruit that I can supply to you, and I can put together a delivery route, but I need a commitment from you,’ they were one of the first stores to really commit to me and build up the customer base that was looking for our apples,” Harry explained.

It was Seward’s strong commitment to working with this local grower that has made all the difference. In the past couple of years, the Hochs have continued to expand their product line. In addition to more than forty varieties of apples, several blends of Hoch Orchard Cider, applesauce, raspberries, and strawberries can all be found at the Seward Co-op at different times of the year. In 2011, Seward began to carry free-range chickens raised on the Hoch farm and sold some of their orchard pork.

“I think the Seward Co-op sets the standard for other stores,” Harry said. “I hope they continue to work with the community.”

In the past, GrowthWorks had facilitated the co-op's management team retreats and all-staff meetings. "They helped to shift the conversation at Seward Co-op away from what we might lose in a changing environment to what we want to be as we grow on purpose," Doyle said. "Growing on Purpose" became a guiding phrase the management team adopted during the expansion-planning years of 2006–2008. This phrase also helped direct the creation of the Seward Co-op Scorecard.

In March 2006, representatives from each department at the co-op met to launch the Scorecard concept and process. After receiving feedback from this meeting, Doyle asked Sara-jean Weaver (now Kennar) from the human resources department and Allison Meyer from operations to assume leadership roles in the Scorecard endeavor.

As the work began, several objectives were established. The first was that the Scorecard would be a tool that would bring about co-op-wide alignment—from the member-owners to the board of directors to the staff—by creating greater transparency. In addition, Seward's board was transitioning to the Policy Governance model at this time, and Doyle believed the Scorecard could yield valuable data for the forthcoming Ends Statement-monitoring required under Policy Governance. Once a common set of values was articulated, data points would need to be created in order to aggregate useful information. Finally, it was determined that the Scorecard would be dynamic and reevaluated for revision every few years.

Soon, a group of staff met with GrowthWorks to construct the Scorecard commitment statements. The process was somewhat difficult. There were not many examples of social auditing available. Over a series of meetings that stretched from March



Sara-jean Weaver Kennar helped develop the Scorecard and led “How Teams” that determined how the Scorecard would be measured.

until August 2006, staff discussed how to articulate the purpose of the co-op. Built into this process were feedback loops for both the board and the management team. At the end of August, the Scorecard was set to launch, with text as shown at right.

Weaver and Meyer then led “How Teams” composed of four to six staff who discussed the intent of the high-level statements in more practical terms. These groups determined precisely how the concepts would be measured. The result of this work was three to four measurements and data points for each of the four Scorecard commitments. By identifying these, staff effectively developed a way to make the co-op's multiple bottom lines tangible. The How Teams were composed of staff who

Seward Co-op's First Scorecard

Seward Co-op exemplifies cooperative principles and practices that contribute to the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of the communities we serve. Our communities include the Seward workplace (staff and their families and partners), our neighborhoods (members, customers, and neighbors), local relationships (farmers and vendors in the five-state area), the global community, and other co-ops' employees.



69% of staff transport to work without a car



We measure our success by how well we live up to these priority commitments:

We cultivate a diverse, respectful, and caring workplace.

We operate with intentional respect for the environment.

We commit to financial goals that allow us to maximize our profits in the support of our mission, our values, and our community.

We improve the quality of life in the communities we serve.



86% of all materials recycled

ultimately would be responsible for collecting the data; these included members of the management team (such as the human resources manager on the Workplace How Team or the operations manager on the Environment How Team).

Doyle anticipated the process would boost staff alignment and provide a greater focus on accomplishing the mission of the co-op. "I could sense there was value alignment within the co-op, it just hadn't been articulated yet," Doyle explained. "The Scorecard gave a large number of staff the opportunity to develop meaningful language that defined our success."

To this day, the Scorecard remains an internal compass for the co-op. It is a dynamic statement of purpose used by co-op management and staff when making decisions about their future direction. In 2009, the Scorecard committee reconvened to revisit the original statement and determine if changes were necessary. The meeting was primarily driven by the 2008 board decision to change the Ends Statement of the co-op (see page 88). The staff team evaluated and amended the Scorecard to read:

- We cultivate a diverse, respectful, and caring workplace.
- We reduce waste and conserve our natural resources.
- We commit to financial goals that allow us to maximize our profits in the support of our values and community.
- We build respectful relationships with customers that cultivate trust within our cooperative.

Since its creation, the Scorecard concepts have become embedded in the co-op's culture. It was incorporated into the Annual Report, which provides a summary of various Scorecard data points, along with yearly financial data. The document is

posted in its entirety online at www.seward.coop/scorecard. This page includes quarterly updates, along with comparative data from previous years. All new staff are introduced to the Scorecard in their new-employee orientations with the general manager, as well as in new-hire trainings.

Ends Statement

While the co-op staff worked on creating the Scorecard and defining what “growing on purpose” meant, the board of directors was also working on revising the co-op’s mission statement. In 2005, the board committed to a process of fully reviewing its policies and procedures, adopting the John Carver Policy Governance Model. This model identifies the primary role of the board as one in which they articulate the long-term purpose or “ends” of the co-op and establish clear limitations policies to hold the general manager accountable in accomplishing this purpose or the “means.” As part of this process, the board developed a new Ends Statement.

Over the span of two years, the board talked to hundreds of member-owners at in-store events and at annual meetings; they asked them to discuss what they liked about their co-op and what might be improved. Members responded, providing comments and suggestions that touched on everything from basic product requests to more in-depth ideas on the path the co-op should take over the next twenty years. The board also looked closely at what staff articulated in the Scorecard. In 2008, after considering these themes, the board developed the Seward Co-op Ends Statement. The Ends read:

Seward Co-op will sustain a healthy community that has:

- Equitable economic relationships;
- Positive environmental impacts; and
- Inclusive, socially responsible practices.

David Hoffman-Dachelet, board president at the time, recounted how, in conversations with staff and members about the upcoming move, concerns about “losing something” were reiterated again and again. “This Ends Statement,” Hoffman-Dachelet wrote in the board letter in the December 2008/January 2009 *Sprout!*, “will not only be the goals that we set for our co-op, but also the means by which we hold our business responsible to our members and how we identify the ‘something’ we all think is important.”

In more general terms, the Ends Statement establishes the long-term vision and goals that management is to pursue and achieve. The Ends allow staff the flexibility to interpret the means to accomplish the ends set forth in the statement. According to Doyle, “the new Ends Statement helped the staff see the co-op in a very different way. It moved us from just selling groceries as articulated in our prior Mission Statement to the notion of sustaining our community.” It became the catalyst for many of the new programs that were developed in the new store.

Investing in Something Real

By the end of 2006, thanks to the ongoing work with GrowthWorks and the genesis of the Scorecard, Seward Co-op staff had a much clearer idea of who they were and where they were going. The search continued for a location to expand the co-op. During

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IN THINKING OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS General Manager Sean Doyle has made to the growth and success of Seward Co-op, it's easy to check items off a long list of what's been accomplished under his leadership: finishing the front-end expansion of the store at 2111; building the new store at 2823; and launching programs such as the Seward Community Fund, SEED, and P6, just to name a few.

But his influence extends far beyond what's tangible. In eight years, Doyle has managed to distill the true spirit of cooperation down to its very essence, in the form of the Seward Co-op Scorecard and Ends Statement, and encourage the board and staff to infuse each decision they make about the co-op's future with these guiding principles.

"I see myself as a person who has helped coalesce the co-op towards accomplishing remarkable things," Doyle explained. And that has certainly happened.

In 2007, the co-op pooled resources to the tune of 1.5 million dollars to realize a 10.5 million-dollar relocation. In January 2009, the co-op moved to its Leadership In Energy And Environmental Design (LEED) Gold-rated building that doubled its retail space from 6,500 to 13,000 square feet. Staffing increased from 120 to 170 during the move. In 2009, the co-op project was recognized by the *Minneapolis St. Paul Business Journal* with a Best in Retail Development award. In 2011, the co-op was also recognized as a Top 100 Workplace by the *Star Tribune*, and that same year the co-op was the recipient of the Retail Excellence Award issued by Howard Bowers Fund of the

National Cooperative Business Association.

Also in 2011, Seward Co-op, its members, and shoppers donated \$170,000 to nonprofit organizations in the Twin Cities area. The co-op itself had sales of 24.7 million dollars, with a patronage refund of \$664,545. Twenty percent of this refund was distributed to members in cash, while the remaining eighty percent was reinvested in the co-op. What's more, 1,249 new members joined the co-op that year.

These are amazing numbers—especially considering that this growth happened under the leadership of someone who originally started working at the Seward Co-op to build up his rainy-day fund while he figured out what he wanted to be “when he grew up.”

Doyle remembers the very day he began working at Seward: it was April 1, 1991, and he helped with inventory. Doyle had met Gail Graham through his wife, Patricia Cumbie, who had worked at the co-op since 1989. Doyle had recently quit an unsatisfying job, and he talked to Graham about picking up a few hours to earn a little cash while he did some thinking about his future. He began taking on shifts at the co-op, and just “filling in” eventually morphed into a regular job. Soon, he began to suggest areas where the co-op could make improvements.

Doyle came to the co-op with a lot of food experience. When he was growing up in Wisconsin, he spent many weekends helping his mother, who owned a catering business, and in high school, he worked at a cheese factory. He had a strong work ethic and always had a mind for business. But it wasn't the

Sean Doyle

business piece that motivated Doyle.

“Twenty years ago, when I came into it, the emphasis was really on the business piece. ‘We’re just grocery stores.’ I heard that a lot from leaders in the co-op who were practical and in the business of it,” Doyle said. “I think it was important at the time to be focused on the business side of things, but it wasn’t necessarily the business in and of itself that I found compelling. It was that the co-op is an association of people. What inspired me was the possibility of what we could accomplish together as a community enterprise. I feel that the biggest change that has occurred organizationally since I became GM is that the co-op has reinvigorated its commitment to what it means to be an association while still being focused on being a really successful business. By focusing on the multiple bottom lines of the co-op, we have created a dynamic community-focused cooperative.”

Not too long into his time at Seward in the early 1990s, the cooperative principles began to really gel with Doyle, and it dawned on him that he may have discovered his next career. In the fall of 1991, Doyle accepted a job offer from Dan Foley, who was looking for a cheese buyer at The Wedge. Doyle only worked there for eight months, but he was the first to make a profit selling cheese for The Wedge.

He returned to Seward Co-op in the summer of 1992 when Mary Weber and Liz Liddiard Wozniak urged Graham to hire him as assistant manager to replace Sean Twomey, who was leaving. He stayed at Seward for four years before returning to The Wedge to oversee its 1996 expansion project. Once

the expansion was completed, Doyle stayed on as their operations manager.

In 1999, Doyle accepted a job at the Northcountry Cooperative Development Fund, where he worked as a loan officer. His focus was to underwrite loans for co-op expansions in the upper Midwest. He worked with more than forty different co-ops across an eleven-state region to help them finance their expansions. But by 2004, Doyle had decided that he missed retail, and he began thinking about relocating to Wisconsin to be closer to his family. He was searching for co-op jobs in Wisconsin when Seward’s general manager, Stuart Reid, left. Doyle, who was on the board at the time, agreed to act as interim general manager during the search for Reid’s replacement.

It quickly became clear to Doyle, though, that Seward Co-op was where he wanted to stay. As a long-term Seward resident, taking the Seward general manager position felt like coming home. He applied for the job and was hired permanently.

“This was a great opportunity,” Doyle explained. “I’ve always had a lot of ideas, but to be able to take those ideas and have the opportunity to realize them is exciting. When you work as an assistant to someone else, you support their lead, their leadership.”

As the dust settles following the most dynamic period of growth in Seward Co-op’s history, Doyle and the board are looking ahead to what might be next. A second Seward Co-op store or the launch of another cooperative business of some sort, perhaps? Stay tuned. It seems that with the board’s vision and Doyle’s leadership at the forefront, anything is possible.

this time, the site of the former Riverside Market, at 2823 East Franklin Avenue—just eight blocks east of 2111—went up for sale. The property was ideally situated at the busy intersection of East Franklin and Riverside avenues, just blocks from West River Road.

Before building could commence, however, financing had to be secured. Coming up with the capital for any big construction project is never simple. This project in particular was very difficult because of the cost of the real estate. Total project costs were initially estimated to be \$9.2 million. The co-op relied on Doyle's earlier experience as a loan officer with NCDF during this process. The location's proximity to a low-income neighborhood made the co-op eligible for financing through the New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) program, but securing it required some organizational gymnastics. To meet the requirements of the NMTC, the co-op created two limited liability companies (LLCs). The co-op worked very closely with Midwest Minnesota Community Development Corporation (MMCDC) in Detroit Lakes and neighborhood nonprofit developer Redesign (formerly Seward Redesign). This team put together a complex financing team that included three loan funds (Local Enterprise Assistance Fund [LEAF], NCDF, and MMCDC), the city of Minneapolis, Wells Fargo Bank, and Wells Fargo CDC.

In the end, the total project costs amounted to \$10.5 million. The NMTC program required a tax credit investor. Wells Fargo CDC played that role by investing \$2.87 million in the project. When the NMTC structure terminates in 2015, it is estimated that the co-op will see approximately \$2.4 million of this indebtedness forgiven. Additionally, Wells Fargo Bank invested \$5.5 million, while NCDF, LEAF, MMCDC, and the city of Minne-



A community art project covered the Riverside Market storefront prior to its renovation by the co-op.

hired to coordinate the campaign, meeting with potential investors and keeping members up to date with news on the expansion's progress. Through the efforts of Bauers and the board of directors, the co-op raised \$1.2 million, followed by another \$300,000 in a second push—for a total of \$1.5 million dollars. Of this, about \$250,000 was in C stock. Simultaneously, between November 1, 2006, and June 30, 2008, co-op membership grew from 3,500 to 4,800.

Members who made loans or bought C stock viewed an investment in their neighborhood co-op as a socially responsible choice, particularly in light of the recent economic collapse on Wall Street. When board member Dan Nordley told Philipp and Laura Muessig about the opportunity to invest in the co-op's expansion project, they were immediately interested.

"I thought: 'Why wouldn't I invest?'" Philipp said in an

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DAN NORDLEY HAS DEDICATED his career to advancing the growth and development of cooperatives, and he has put his values and skills to work for the benefit of a great many individuals and organizations both inside and outside of the web of “co-op.” His special dedication to helping co-ops educate consumers and tell the co-op story has helped them to thrive.

From those early years as a truck driver for DANCe, to the many media platforms he’s now developed for promoting co-ops, he’s motivated to spread the word and bring people and ideas together. “It’s always been a world-changing agenda for me, and co-ops have always been my best hope for demonstrating we can do business differently and compassionately, with more stakeholders receiving the benefits,” he said.

He is the “chief park ranger” for Triangle Park Creative, a design firm located in the Seward neighborhood, and currently serves as a board member at Seward Co-op. (He was also board president from 2001 to 2006.) As board president, his leadership laid the groundwork for the 2009 expansion. “We’ve had audacious good fortune from all directions to build this store. It really proves the best qualities of what the co-op community can create,” Nordley said.

Triangle Park Creative published the *Seward Profile* and *The Bridge* neighborhood newspapers from 1989 to 2009. Nordley is the general manager of a national food co-op trade organization, Cooperative Grocer Information Network, which publishes *Cooperative Grocer* magazine. Nordley’s firm also provides design services for *The Mix*. In 2009, he received the

Cooperative Service Award from the Consumer Co-op Managers Association for his dedication to supporting food co-ops.

Nordley was prescient and proactive when he helped develop the Twin Cities Media Alliance and the *Daily Planet*, a successful citizen-based journalism venture that rivals major print and online media. Triangle Park is also the publisher of two

very well-received books: *The Compassionate Rebel* by Burt F. Berlowe, Rebecca Janke, and Julie Penshorn, and *West Bank Boogie* by

Cyn Collins, which was nominated for a Minnesota Book Award. Both books highlight extraordinary people contributing to the common good, history, and cultural life of our country.

On January 8, 2009, Nordley gave a speech to a crowd of hundreds of people eager to enter the door of the new, big, green co-op on 28th and Franklin avenues. On that exhilarating subzero day, the co-op had come full circle. Nordley recognized a new generation that is now focused on the same values of good food, ecological balance, and community sustainability as the originators of the cooperative movement.

“What bugs me is that there’s all this discussion about our national debt and how it leaves our young people in an unsustainable position. It’s this co-op that is leaving another generation something that’s more sustainable that they can build on... people that have been involved in Seward Co-op can hold their head high and say that they did their best to leave the next generation with more than we had.”

For those who come next, Nordley has a message: “Don’t stand still. Dream big.”

Dan Nordley





Phil and Laura Muessig saw an investment in the co-op as an investment in the Seward community.

October/November 2007 *Sprout!* interview. “It felt like the best alternative for investing our money. We felt it was much safer to invest in Seward than in the stock market. Now we see it as part of our retirement fund.”

Philipp and Laura also saw the co-op as a model of re-localized economic and social activity. “It shows that a business can be owned by, buy from, employ, and serve local people,” Philipp said. “The co-op is a local, socially responsible investment. Community development is a passion of mine, and the co-op is a beautiful example of it. When you invest, you’re investing in something real: bricks and mortar and people’s jobs.”

The response from the Muessigs—and many others—was

a testimony to the level of the support Seward Co-op’s membership felt for their cooperative...and the faith they had in the expansion project.

In addition to raising owner investments, the co-op also needed to sell its building at 2111 East Franklin Avenue. Working with Redesign, the co-op found a buyer for 2111 in Shega Bakery, which made injera, an Ethiopian flatbread made with teff. Shega’s owner, Worku Mindaye, agreed to a purchase agreement contingent upon the co-op getting all of its financing in order. Mindaye also agreed to lease 2111 back to the co-op, for up to eighteen months, while the new building was under construction.

Breaking Ground

With funding secured, Doyle and the board turned their attention to the design of the new building. The co-op reassembled the team that built 2111. This included hiring Gar Hargens of Close Associates as the architect and Watson Forsberg as the general contractor. At the center of this effort was Redesign. Executive Director Brian Miller and Development Project Manager Katya Pilling, along with the rest of the Redesign staff, assisted with the project financing and helped with construction oversight. Becky Landon, a Redesign subconsultant from Ponterre Group, was also instrumental in helping the co-op navigate the intricacies of the project’s financing.

Seward Co-op was interested in incorporating as many “green” elements into the new building as possible. Revitalizing the old Riverside Market site provided a great springboard for including more sustainable practices into the design. The site

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ANYONE WHO REGULARLY shopped at Seward Co-op's 2111 East Franklin Avenue location knows David Hoffman-Dachelet—maybe not by name, but they'd definitely recognize his face. For a long time, he was one of the friendly, engaging guys stationed at the end of the checkout lanes, offering customers coffee and chocolate along with a bit of information about plans to expand the co-op.

He may have asked members how they

felt about the expansion or waxed poetic about the benefits of co-op membership. No matter what he said, it was clear that Hoffman-Dachelet was passionate about Seward Co-op and its valuable place in the community.

Hoffman-Dachelet likes to say that he “married into” the Seward neighborhood—his wife is the daughter of Charlie Hoffman of Hoffman Guitars, a neighborhood institution since 1971. The couple moved to the neighborhood in 1992 and began shopping at Seward Co-op. They were immediately attracted to the friendly energy of the co-op, and when it came time to support the capital campaign for the first expansion project, the Hoffman-Dachelet family decided to invest. Shortly thereafter, Hoffman-Dachelet felt compelled to join the board.

He became a board member in 2003, a pivotal time in the co-op's history. Having just moved to the new store at 2111 East Franklin Avenue five years earlier, the co-op had experienced so much growth that they were already at work on the small, front-end expansion. Within the first year of Hoffman-Dachelet's tenure, Sean Doyle and the Seward Co-op board made the

David Hoffman-Dachelet



decision to undergo a much bigger expansion on the corner of Riverside and Franklin avenues. In 2006, Hoffman-Dachelet became board president.

It quickly became clear to the board that some members had concerns about plans to build another store only eight years after moving to the 2111 East Franklin location. Hoffman-Dachelet, along with the rest of the board, volunteered to spend time in the store talking to members and shoppers about the upcoming expansion. Essentially, the two became ambassadors for the co-op, answering questions and explaining why another expansion was necessary.

“My role was to stand in the store and talk to people about what was going on,” Hoffman-Dachelet explained. “There was a whole lot of anxiety among co-op members about what growth was and worry that growth would wreck something that’s precious in the co-op...so I spent a lot of time in the store responding to that worry and getting comfortable with it myself.”

Hoffman-Dachelet and fellow board member Dan Nordley relished the opportunity to have one-on-one discussions with co-op members and shoppers about the future of the Seward Co-op and the cooperative movement in general. Ultimately, the goal was to find those members who were willing to invest in the capital campaign for the new store. In the end, though, Hoffman-Dachelet and Nordley accomplished more than that by

“The thing I don’t think people immediately get about co-ops is the cooperative investment business piece of it—that it’s our business, that we own the damn thing. It is not to concentrate wealth; it is not to make people wealthy. It is to deliver something people need.”

convincing many shoppers to become members. In Hoffman-Dachelet’s eyes, this is more important than finding a handful of investors.

“People were amazingly receptive,” Hoffman-Dachelet said. “There is an interesting perception of the co-op that it is a not-for-profit social justice institution, which is not true. More people wanted to donate than invest.

They wanted to donate twenty bucks

or something. I would just tell those people, ‘You know, the best thing you can do is shop here. If you like it, become a member.’ I was really more interested in having members than in getting people to invest. Membership shows a stronger co-op than the few of us who are able to invest.”

During the capital campaign which ran from November 1, 2007, through June 30, 2008, co-op membership grew from 3,500 to 4,800, and \$1.5 million dollars were raised for the expansion project. Many contributed to the success of these efforts. Staff, board members, and the community all played important parts. According to Doyle, “if it weren’t for the countless hours Dave spent explaining to members the importance of what we were doing, I am not sure if we would have made our goals. Dave was at the center of our efforts to promote community ownership of both the project and the co-op itself.” The big green building at 2823 East Franklin Avenue is proof that when we work together, we can accomplish great things.



Ground-breaking at 2823 East Franklin Avenue, December 2007.

was considered a “brownfield” (previously used land that was environmentally degraded but had the potential to be reused once refurbished), and the co-op’s reclaiming the space and making it “green” would be a significant improvement for East Franklin Avenue and the surrounding neighborhood.

In order to receive city zoning approval, the co-op needed the neighborhood’s endorsement for its plans. To assist in this, the Seward Neighborhood Group (SNG) formed the Riverside

Market Task Force. The task force, led by co-op member Dave Mann, included many neighborhood residents, particularly those who lived near the Riverside Market site. The primary role of the task force was to vet any project that developed on the Riverside Market site and make recommendations to the SNG and the city. This group met regularly from May of 2006 until November 2007.

Additionally, the task force provided the co-op with valu-



Staff in front of the new store shortly before its opening.

able design input from the neighborhood for its new home. While many of the individuals involved were co-op members, others weren't. The process gave the co-op the opportunity to demonstrate to residents how it operated. Many people joined the co-op after seeing how transparent it was about the project and how open it was to neighborhood input.

To build support for the move, communication with staff, members, and the general public was essential from the co-op's perspective. The co-op created an online forum that residents could use to voice their comments and suggestions, and the co-op could post updates on the progress of the project. Details regarding the expansion were also shared at the co-op's annual member-owner meeting in October, where attendees

had the opportunity to ask the board and management questions regarding the new store.

On December 4, 2007, a group of members, investors, staff, and community leaders gathered at the corners of Franklin and Riverside avenues to break ground on the site for the new store. As snow flurries flew, the mood was one of excitement mixed with trepidation. While the co-op was embarking on the most expensive and ambitious construction project in its history, the national economy had entered a free fall. Every day, headlines exclaimed foreclosures, layoffs, and plummeting stock prices. As the shovels struck the frozen dirt of the site of the future Seward Co-op, the question on many minds was, "Is this the best time to be building a new store?"

Despite the dire economic climate, however, the mood around the co-op remained optimistic. The support of the membership and Seward community, along with the board and staff's commitment to the project, provided the inspiration to move forward with purpose. As it would turn out, the new store would be not just a building, but an representation of many of the co-op's values.

Making It Green

The co-op decided that the new building must be Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified. Members had made it clear that sustainability was important, not just in the design of the store itself, but also in its immediate surroundings. LEED certification seemed to be the best course to demonstrate the co-op's commitment to environmental sustainability.



In 2010, the co-op installed a thirty-two-kilowatt solar panel system on its roof, consisting of 140 panels.

LEED certification is a rating system through which a project earns points for each sustainable feature or practice incorporated into the design and construction of the finished building and site. To achieve LEED certification, Seward Co-op redeveloped the existing brownfield site where the Riverside Market had once stood. Site improvements included a large rain garden and landscaping the site to absorb and make use of at least ninety percent of rain water, thereby diverting runoff that would otherwise make its way to the nearby river. The co-op also increased the amount of green space around the building (by twenty-five percent more than that required by standard zoning laws).

Eric Hatting, Seward Co-op's project manager during the construction, worked closely with the city, contractors, and the LEED-certification-review panel. "At the time, the certifica-

tion rating system was still quite new," he said. "We were very excited about participating in a program that would help us to design, build, and operate our new home in a manner consistent with our values."

Green building features included a white roof to reflect sunlight, thereby minimizing heat island effects and reducing cooling costs in the long term. Twelve percent of the building materials contain recycled materials and only four percent of the Riverside Market demolition materials ended up in a landfill. Staff and customer comfort and health were taken into consideration. Inside the building, low-VOC (volatile organic compound-emitting) paints, floor coverings, sealants, and adhesives were used throughout. The new building also features plenty of sunlight, which permeates seventy-seven percent of the store

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IN THE MID-1970s, Philipp Muessig moved to the Uptown neighborhood of Minneapolis, where he lived in a co-op household with five others. Having graduated with a degree in geology from Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, Muessig spent a couple of years working in the minerals-exploration industry in the Upper Midwest. But he didn't like the work and soon began to look for a career better suited to him. He was interested in bringing about changes in society through community building on the most basic level.

To this end, Muessig was drawn to the new-age cooperative movement that was quickly taking hold in the Twin Cities area at the time. There were food co-ops, housing co-ops, auto co-ops, bicycle co-ops—an entire social structure built on the co-op model. Volunteer-based cooperatives for food and housing, wherein everyone had a voice, were at the very heart of building better communities. In those early years, Muessig found his way to his local food co-op, The Wedge, where he began to volunteer.

"I was one of those classic super-volunteers," Muessig said. "I just loved the co-op world, the movement, the people. I was learning so much and felt like I was contributing to something so real. At the same time, I was personally trying to figure out how I was going to earn money in this world."

From 1977 through 1982, Muessig was able to live very sparsely on the money he had saved while working in minerals exploration. Necessities were "amazingly cheap." He ate the food from co-ops paid for with his discount, lived for next-to-

nothing in co-op housing, and relied on his bike to get around town. He had the luxury to volunteer at several local co-ops, serve on the board at Seward, and basically immerse himself in the co-op movement and hippie lifestyle.

He has fond memories of camping trips to Mesaba Co-op Park near Hibbing, Minnesota—a park founded as a gathering place by early Finnish cooperators in 1929.

Muessig and friends from the Twin Cities co-op movement met and exchanged ideas with the Finns involved in Minnesota's first

cooperatives, which were dying out by the late 1970s. The Finns were thankful for the help these new-wave cooperators provided but leery of their all-night gatherings and skinny-dipping sessions. Recreating together, Muessig said with a laugh, was all part of the movement.

"We were so ahead of our time," Muessig explained. "Maybe that's the biggest story of the early years. We exuded this sort of hippie culture, talking about cooking beans, and mass culture was saying, 'Why would you want to cook beans? Just buy a can of beans for God's sake!' And we were saying, 'No, there are spiritual, cultural, and ecological benefits to cooking your own beans.'"

In 1979, Muessig got involved with the Seward neighborhood and joined the Seward Co-op board. He remembers devoting a great deal of time to the board, which met for several hours a couple of times per month. During this time of tremendous transition, the board and the collective grappled with big issues: the co-op's dire financial situation, its incoherent

Philipp Muessig



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vision for the future, and the challenges of running a volunteer-based co-op. In late 1980, Muessig had become frustrated over the inability of the board and collective to resolve these problems and move forward. He left the co-op to serve as ombudsman for the Distributing Alliance of the Northcountry Cooperatives (DANCe) for a few years before becoming director of the Seward Neighborhood Group in 1985. Since 1993, Muessig has worked in sustainable community development for the state of Minnesota.

Through the years, however, he has remained a loyal co-op shopper and investor in Seward Co-op's expansion projects. It's no surprise that Muessig, who has devoted his career to building better communities, is thrilled with what Seward Co-op has been able to accomplish for the neighborhood and beyond.

"Where Seward has gone is amazing," he said. "When I walk into Seward and see the cumulative [SEED] dollars we've raised by rounding up the bill, with thousands and thousands of dollars going each month to other community organizations... that's what I've always imagined."

"When I walk into the co-op and see the cumulative [SEED] dollars we've raised by rounding up the bill, with thousands and thousands of dollars going each month to other community organizations... that's what I've always imagined."

space, and utilizes automated lighting controls to dim lights when a space is not in use.

Hatting noted that being an early adopter of LEED was not without challenges. "Only a couple of our designers and contractors had experience with the program, so navigating the process was labor intensive and lengthy at times," he said. "But in the end, the LEED program's design guidelines helped build a sustainable structure. What's more, the transparent rating system also provides us with continual opportunities to share our experience and encourage other new development projects to use and improve upon our example."

When construction was completed, Seward Co-op's new building earned forty LEED points, becoming just the second grocery store—and the first co-op—in the Twin Cities area to attain LEED gold certification. Over the next few years, the co-op would go on to make additional energy-saving improvements to the building, using the Scorecard as a guide to become even more efficient in reducing everyday waste.

Everyone Welcome

By late 2008, construction crews were putting the finishing touches on the new store. The new building was 25,600 square feet, of which 13,000 square feet was retail space. The co-op had ample room to expand all the departments, adding a meat and seafood department and a significantly larger dining area. Apart from the sales floor, the co-op was able to add more fea-



Abdi Ali, of the co-op's front-end department, rings up a customer's purchase.

tures, including an upstairs office and a classroom equipped with a kitchen. The new building's bright-green, cheerful exterior (a collaborative idea between co-op staff and Spunk Design Machine, a local design firm that had helped the co-op with several of its marketing elements) announced the co-op's commitment to operating sustainably. If the color of the building didn't exclaim it clearly enough, the words "Everyone Welcome" in bold white letters on the front of the building left little doubt. After closing for a day and a half to make the move (this time the co-op planned the move down to the last detail and used a professional moving service), Seward Co-op opened at 2823 East Franklin Avenue on January 8, 2009.

At 10 a.m. that morning, Seward Co-op opened the doors of its new home, the culmination of more than three years of planning and work. An eager crowd filling the parking lot braved the frigid temperatures to be on hand for the ribbon-cutting ceremony, which involved leaders from the community, those who worked on the project, politicians who supported the expansion, investors, member-owners, and co-op staff. Following the ceremony, hundreds of people entered the new building, seeing for the first time the expanded departments and product selection, the community dining area, and the new kitchen classroom.

Prior to doors opening, Dan Nordley addressed the gathering, acknowledging the collective endeavors that went into building the new co-op. "All I can say is this: I hope you all have a chance to hang around a community for a couple of generations and be part of something as brilliant as the growth of this cooperative," he said. "This place is a gift of love from thousands of people. It is the child this village has raised."

As with the last move, Seward Co-op experienced tremendous growth after settling into its new space. Unlike the last time, however, the co-op's success was coming amidst the worst national economic decline in decades. The recession was accentuated by increases in oil and food prices, as well as sharp declines in stock and housing prices. Many large financial institutions were suffering massive losses and bankruptcy. Yet, in the midst of all of this, Seward Co-op experienced unprecedented exponential growth and success.

On opening day, the co-op had sales of \$65,000, and the Saturday after opening sales hit \$74,000. By comparison, average daily sales prior to the move were roughly \$35,000. After the initial sales spike in the first few weeks, growth evened out to about fifty percent over the preceding year (the initial forecast was for only twenty-five percent growth). The market study generated for the relocation indicated that it would take the co-op five years to achieve annual sales of \$20 million. A year and a half after opening, in fiscal year 2010 (which ran July 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010) the co-op reported \$21.3 million in sales and returned to profitability. This was two years ahead of plan. By fiscal year 2012, sales reached \$27.9 million.

Just as important was that membership continued to grow at a rapid pace. In the first thirty days in the new store, the co-op saw more than 300 new members join. In fiscal year 2009 alone, 1,337 families became new members of Seward Co-op. The co-op continued to see more members join at the rate of about 100 new members a month. In June 2012, the co-op reported nearly 10,000 members belonging to the co-op. Prior to the move, the co-op had 3,500 members.

Since the expansion, the co-op has nearly doubled the

number of people it employs. To realize the move, staffing went from ninety-seven employees in July 2008 to 141 on opening day, adding jobs to the neighborhood while many U.S. businesses were laying off workers. By the spring of 2012, more than 220 employees were working for the co-op.

Seward Co-op also was striving to ensure its employees were well compensated. The co-op used a living-wage model (calculated each year using the city of Minneapolis' Livable-Wage Model) to determine employee compensation. The co-op set a goal, articulated in its Scorecard (see page 81), that full-time employees having worked 2,000 hours at the co-op would earn a living wage. This commitment has made it possible for co-op employees to make significant purchases, such as homes, and establish roots in the neighborhoods around the co-op.

On the weekend of April 25–26, 2009, the co-op celebrated the opening of the 2823 East Franklin location with its eighth annual CSA Fair and grand opening. Over the span of two days, local farmers, vendors, and musicians set up in the co-op's parking lot as thousands of members and Seward residents stopped by to buy shares in farms, offer their congratulations, and celebrate the success of the co-op.

Seward Co-op's growth and the positive economic impact it was having on its community, in the midst of one of worst recessions in generations, was beginning to attract attention. In August 2009, Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, in his annual budget speech, heralded Seward Co-op as a "success story." The mayor's reference exemplified the co-op's dynamic changes and accomplishments. As Seward Co-op continued to grow, it was able to realize many of its goals beyond the financial ones. The co-op now had the resources to contribute even more to educa-

tional, environmental, and community causes, while continuing to advocate for small, local cooperative food producers.

Concern for the Environment

On August 11, 2009, Seward Co-op's newly constructed grocery store was awarded Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) gold-level certification. Seward Co-op received forty points on the "new construction" rating scale to earn gold-level certification. In many ways, the certification was the capstone of the expansion project, which demonstrated the co-op's commitment to environmental stewardship and social responsibility. On June 17, 2010, the co-op celebrated the installation of a thirty-two-kilowatt solar panel system, consisting of 140 solar panels leased through a Seward neighborhood-based company Abengoa Solar (formerly Solarflow Energy). The project—funded using stimulus money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and a grant from Xcel Energy's Renew-

able Development Fund—allowed the co-op to realize its vision of using solar energy to defray energy costs.

Since the move, the co-op has taken the lead in promoting sustainable transportation as well. The co-op is a sponsor of both HOURCAR and Nice Ride Minnesota. HOURCAR is a local nonprofit car-sharing program. The Honda Insight that the co-op sponsors is a hybrid energy-efficient vehicle. The Twin Cities Bike Share Project launched Nice Ride in 2010. For a small fee, members can rent bikes all across Minneapolis and St. Paul. During the mild-weather months, a Nice Ride station is located adjacent to the store on Franklin Avenue. Both programs provide members and neighborhood residents a "green" transportation alternative. To further encourage bicyclists, the co-op also provides sixty-five bike racks (including vertical racks under its awning), as well as a unique bike-repair station, complete with bike wrenches, screwdrivers, and an air pump.

Inside the store, the co-op also developed new strategies to better manage its waste. Working with local nonprofit Eureka!

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Getting Zapped

In 2011, Dero Bike Rack Company installed a solar-powered "ZAP" station near the co-op's front entrance. Using radio frequencies, the station detects bikes that pass within a twenty-foot radius that have ZAP tags attached to their spokes. Each time a bicycle is "ZAPPED," the station registers the trip.

At the end of every month, all members with at least one ZAP are entered into a drawing for a \$100 Seward Co-op gift voucher. It's just one more way the co-op aims to get members excited about reducing carbon emissions and conserving energy.



LIZ WOZNIAK HAS ALWAYS ASSERTED that making a pot of soup is a spiritual activity and cooking is “everyday alchemy” wherein basic ingredients become satisfying meals. She said she gets a lot of her ideas while in the kitchen. Wozniak was drawn to Seward Co-op as a shopper in the early 1990s when she was raising a family, because she liked shopping at a “warm and welcoming neighborhood store.” When she was hired at the co-op in 1991 as a deli cook, she said she liked having a job where she could be herself.

For three years Wozniak made soups and salads for the co-op, and her good food and vivacious personality drew in a crowd of regulars for lunch. She said she likes going in to the Welna II hardware store where the old Seward Co-op used to be because there’s still that kitchen feel in the back of the store (where paint is now shaken and stirred). People congregate there and chat with their neighbors, just as they have for decades.

Wozniak came back to the co-op in 1999 as the human resources manager and still holds that position today. “I was able to create human resources at the co-op as we grew,” she said. During her tenure, the co-op went from fifty staff members to more than 200 employees served by a professional human resources department.

Her experiences in the deli long ago taught her a lot of the fundamentals of her job today: the value of conviviality in the

workplace, how good food brings people together, and that cooperation is a business model from which everyone gains. “From the producers to everyone in the store, we’re all part of a tapestry with many threads. Every thread is important to the whole. You can spend your whole day stocking apples and contribute value in the larger sense,” she said.

Liz Wozniak

“Remember opening day of the new store and how it was so freakin’ cold outside? And do you remember that crowd that came out? I don’t know how many hundreds of people were there.

The parking lot was packed with people listening to speeches and everybody could not wait to get into that store and shop it... the outpouring of support from the community that day shows what community ownership looks like.”

Wozniak remembers a visioning meeting long ago in which someone speculated that “we’d all be riding around on jet packs” by now. That hasn’t happened, but she said that the co-op has always had “changing the world” as its goal. Now that the co-op has grown, so has its positive influence, which is something the co-op’s founders and leaders always strove for. “I think it’s important that we’ve been able to contribute to organizations in the community [through] the different programs we have. It’s what Seward does really well. You can experience and see what the cooperative business model does,” she said.

“Remember opening day of the new store and how it was so freakin’ cold outside?”

“The best part is to look at who we are and what we wanted to do—treat people fairly and equitably—it’s embedded in our culture.”





The kitchen classroom at 2823 East Franklin enables the co-op to offer classes on cooking and food issues.

Recycling, the co-op established a process to compost and recycle as much waste as it could. Signage in the co-op's dining area makes it simple for diners to determine how to separate compostable and recyclable materials from waste. Tracking the rate of recycling is one of the measures for the Seward Scorecard. In the fall of 2008, the Seward Co-op Scorecard Environmental staff "How Team," focused on teaching and promoting resource conservation, recommended that the co-op eliminate plastic bags at the registers and reenergized efforts to promote using reusable bags.

"All the options we consider involve maintaining recycling or composting rates around ninety percent," Seward Co-op Operations Manager Leo Sanders said of the co-op's operational

strategies. "We're always thinking about planning and evaluating new research and concepts."

Education, Training, and Information

With the move to the new location, Seward Co-op was finally able to offer classes on-site. The new classroom, complete with a training kitchen, has become a place for education on topics that support the co-op's Ends, including nutrition, green living, and the cooperative movement. In late 2008, current employee Claudia Rhodes was hired to be education and events coordinator to develop and facilitate the class schedule. The Fifth International Cooperative Principle is

education, training, and information, and the new store now enables the co-op to more fully engage in furthering this principle. By having a dedicated employee and space to focus on education, the co-op is now better able to inform members about food, food systems, and the cooperative business model.

In a 2006 survey conducted by the co-op, members had indicated that one of the highest priorities for a new store should be a kitchen classroom. Rhodes recalled her excitement when she learned that the new store was to include a classroom in which the co-op would offer food- and wellness-related classes to the public. "That classroom request, coupled with the Fifth International Cooperative Principle, led to the Seward Co-op classroom's inclusion in the project," Rhodes said.

Although the classroom initially was planned to be a venue predominantly for cooking classes, the offerings soon expanded to include a multitude of wellness topics, home- and garden-improvement classes, assorted environmental sustainability classes, as well as a wide array of food preparation courses. One of the most popular classes has been "How to Shop the Co-op on a Budget," which the co-op offers free of charge. Rhodes conducts a tour of the store as she divulges tips on how to stretch one's dollar while still eating healthful foods. The co-op also started hosting movie nights in the classroom.

"It's been fun to have a hand in getting the education program going," Rhodes said. "We've shown people how to ferment raw ingredients with the help of Sandor Katz, cutting-edge author of *Wild Fermentation*; and Seward Co-op member and local author Robin Asbell offers snappy vegetarian and vegan cooking classes. We've hosted worm-composting classes, mushroom-growing classes, shown folks how to install a home solar

power system, and more." Rhodes predicted that the classroom program will continue to evolve as the co-op works to bolster it.

Sustaining the Community

From early on in its history, Seward Co-op has made it a priority to give back to the community. One of the Seward Co-op's Scorecard commitments reads: "We measure our success by how well we commit to financial goals that allow us to maximize our profits in the support of our values and community." The financial success of the new store has enabled the co-op to share its success with the greater community. In 2011 alone, the co-op, its members, and shoppers gave nearly \$170,000 to various causes and area nonprofits through a combination of donations, sponsorships, grants, and contributions to the newly launched SEED program.

Over the years, the co-op has developed various giving methods. The Seward Co-op donation program, for instance, provides funds in the form of Seward Co-op gift vouchers to dozens of community nonprofits, enabling them to purchase food for fundraising or volunteer events for their organizations. Donation recipients have included In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre; Empty Bowls (which promotes community projects that support food banks and soup kitchens); the Powderhorn Arts Fair; and area events at Seward Montessori, Dowling School, Lake Country Montessori, Augsburg College, and many other organizations and causes. Donations are typically in small amounts (in the fifty-dollar range), but they add up; since 2009, the co-op has contributed \$54,000 through these donations, helping make many of the events in and around the



Seward Community Fund recipients include (left to right) Bedlam Theater, Seward Child Care Center, and the Minnesota Food Association.



Seward neighborhood possible.

In addition to community donations, the co-op also provides monetary sponsorships for area events and nonprofits. These sponsorships have supported a wide range of organizations and causes. They've helped bring films from around the world to the spring Minneapolis/St. Paul International Film Festival. They've contributed to events for students at neighboring Augsburg College and a series of performances at the Playwrights' Center. The co-op has donated funds to the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) conference and provided food for the Land Stewardship Project's "Breakfast at the Capitol" in St. Paul. Since the move to the new store, Seward Co-op has given more than \$75,000 in sponsorship of local organizations.

One way the co-op furthers its advocacy of local food and education about healthful eating is through its ongoing support of the Midwest Food Connection (MFC). Founded in 1993,

Midwest Food Connection is an educational nonprofit that seeks to empower elementary school children to make healthy and responsible food choices. Educators present lessons about seasonal produce, whole grains, and the farmland that grows them. Seward, along with other Minnesota co-ops, has supported MFC since 2004. Seward Co-op's funding—more than \$100,000 in the last five years—has made it possible for MFC teachers to visit schools in the Seward, Longfellow, and adjoining neighborhoods, delivering hundreds of lessons to thousands of children.

In 2005, the establishment of the Seward Community Fund (SCF)—an endowment to provide annual grants to local organizations working to develop a sense of community, improve the environment, create sustainable agriculture programs, or promote cooperative-related activities—enabled the co-op to begin making more sizable contributions (several thousand dollars in some cases) to a handful of organizations every year. Applications are reviewed by a volunteer committee composed of co-op

staff, and recipients are announced at the annual member-owner meeting in October. The co-op's success has enabled it to give considerably more sizable grants in recent years, growing from a total of \$2,500 in SCF grants in 2008 to \$40,000 in 2012. Since its inception, the SCF has provided essential funding to numerous organizations dedicated to building a stronger community. SCF grants have contributed to the creation of space for sustainable urban gardening; funding for cooperatively owned, nurturing childcare; and the promotion of social services for at-risk teens, in addition to many other worthy causes.

The SCF continues to grow, too. Anyone may contribute to the fund, which is managed by Twin Pines Cooperative Foundation, and Seward Co-op members are encouraged to donate their annual patronage refund to the endowment. Seward Co-op added another avenue through which members and customers could contribute to the SCF with the introduction of the Seward Co-op Visa credit card in 2010. Every time a card holder uses the card—which is offered through SPIRE Credit Union—a percentage of the transaction is donated to the SCF.

As the co-op has grown, it has been able to share in its success with the surrounding community. Since 2008, Seward Co-op has donated more than half a million dollars to organizations and causes that share its values and vision.

Planting a SEED

In 2011, Seward Co-op moved to the next level of community giving, this time tapping into the generous spirit of its members and customers. On April 1, the co-op launched SEED, a fundraising program that allows shoppers to “round up” their grocery bill totals at the register to easily donate money to



Brian Coyle Food Shelf, which provides thousands of residents of the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood with food and household necessities, has been a frequent SEED recipient.

worthwhile community organizations. Seward Co-op's SEED donation program is proof that a community working together can make big impact.

The idea for the donation program took root in recent years, when the co-op would periodically raise funds for food shelf donations, as part of the annual Minnesota FoodShare campaign, or for disaster relief. To contribute, shoppers simply added a donation to their final grocery bill while at the register. Typically, these individual donations amounted to less than a dollar, but by the end of the month, employees, members, and shoppers were amazed by the totals they were able to raise

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WHEN MADELINE KASTLER and her husband, Peter, moved into their first house in the Longfellow neighborhood of Minneapolis in 2002, Peter bought a membership to the Seward Co-op as a housewarming gift. They began shopping at the co-op as many members do: First, only on occasion to pick up an item or two; then stopping by the co-op once a week to supplement the regular shopping trip with a few key items, and finally taking the plunge, doing virtually all of their shopping at the co-op.

In 2005, Madeline was reading an issue of *Sprout!* when an article calling for people to run for the board caught her eye. She didn't necessarily know much about the cooperative business model, but she liked what the co-op stood for and thought it would be a fun place to volunteer her time.

Although the learning curve was steep, she has found her experience on the board to be very rewarding. Learning more about what the Seward Co-op is able to do for the community was exciting, but it has been discovering what's possible within the framework of the cooperative business model that's really energized her.

Coming from the world of government agencies and non-profits, where how much one is able to accomplish is directly linked to the funds available from sources that aren't consistently reliable, Madeline finds the co-op way of doing business especially compelling.

"It's a way for a business to be self-reliant and also meet their stated community needs without having to rely on the

government, foundations, or grants for money," she explained. "We're doing it ourselves; we have a solid business plan; and we can take that, give back to our member-owners, and also work on those goals that everyone has come together and agreed upon. That's what's been exciting to me."

The energy she derives from her work with the Seward

Co-op led her to throw her hat in the ring for president of the board in 2010. As she enters her third year in this role, her biggest challenge has been balancing the excitement she and the other

board members have about the co-op's incredible potential to make a difference in the community with the pragmatic day-to-day tasks of the board.

"Now that we've really settled into the new store, we actually have the brain space to begin tackling those bigger questions," Madeline explains. "We are having these really cool, broader cooperative conversations right now that are about what the cooperative business model can do to further strengthen our local economy and community."

It is an exciting time for the Seward Co-op. The success that Seward has experienced after this most recent expansion gives the co-op the ability to think creatively about what is next. No matter what that may be, Madeline and the rest of the board are committed to examining all options and hearing from member-owners.

She explained, "We want to capitalize on the opportunity we have right now to really teach people about what some of the co-op possibilities are."

Madeline Kastler



together. These fundraisers were so successful that employees and customers suggested the co-op extend the program to run throughout the entire year, donating the proceeds to a different organization or cause each month.

The commitment to SEED by the co-op's front-end department, particularly the cashiers, has been vital to the program's success.

"Cashiers are the engine behind the program," said Valerie Poyer, Seward Co-op's front-end manager. "From participating in the selection of the organizations to obtaining clarification of the organizations' purpose and how the funds will be used so that they can share that information with customers to asking nearly 3,000 customers they serve every day if they would like to round up—they are huge contributors to the enormous success of this SEED program."

Local organizations that share the co-op's values and goals may apply to become the recipient of the SEED donations for a given month. A committee of staff members decides on a periodic basis who will be SEED recipients. Organizations that have benefited from the SEED program in the past include CommonBond, Open Arms of Minnesota, Minnesota Food Association, Midtown Greenway Coalition, Women's Environmental Institute, Land Stewardship Project, Friends of the Mississippi River, and the Seward Community Fund. It's not uncommon for recipients to earn upwards of \$12,000 in a month.

Because the SEED program has demonstrated the Seward community's ability to raise funds very quickly, donations to chosen SEED recipients are occasionally preempted in order for the co-op to raise funds for the victims of disasters. In May 2011, for example, SEED money was donated to Minnesota

Helps, the recovery fund established to help the victims of a tornado that struck North Minneapolis. SEED donations also have helped with famine relief in the Horn of Africa, contributed to efforts to rebuild following the 2011 tsunami in Japan, and provided much-needed aid to victims of the severe storms that rolled through the southern United States in the spring of 2011.

"The combination of the cashiers' enthusiasm and the trust built over time by the co-op's relationship with local, mission-driven organizations has fueled the program," Poyer said. "Customers have shown their support though stellar participation. On any given day, between thirty-five and fifty percent of customers contribute to SEED."

In its first twelve months, SEED raised a total of nearly \$150,000 from more than 305,000 donations. Based on this level of success, SEED figures to be another important component in the co-op's ongoing support of the local community.

P6: The Cooperative Trade Movement

The first meeting held in the new conference room at 2823 East Franklin Avenue, prior to the store opening, was between staff members of Seward Co-op and Equal Exchange, a Massachusetts-based worker-owned cooperative. The discussion focused on the possibility of creating an initiative that would leverage the power of cooperatives to build a sustainable, alternative economy in alignment with their shared values. The focus of this discussion was how to better support small family farms and co-ops both locally and internationally. This meeting laid the foundation for the creation of Principle Six: the Cooperative



Clockwise: Scott Patterson of Equal Exchange donned a P6 banana suit for the P6 launch in October 2010. Shelly Paul and Hannah Glusenkamp in the cheese department with P6 chalk art; P6 shelf signs; a Spunk-designed P6 mural in the deli.

WHEN KHAITI FRENCH first set foot in Seward Co-op in 1998, she had no idea it would change her life. As a nineteen-year-old vegan who frequented the Seward Café, French would often stop at the co-op to shop and think, “I would love to work here!” So when a position opened, she applied and was hired in the deli. After about a year, she was promoted to co-manager of the deli, before moving on to eventually manage the grocery department. When she started, the co-op was just beginning to experience tremendous growth, and she loved it.

When she had an opportunity to buy her own small farm near Osceola, Wisconsin, in 2003, she jumped at the chance. French grew up in rural South Dakota, where her mother raised goats, made cheese, and harvested veggies from a huge garden. She missed the simple rhythm of life in the country and was happy to return to it. But she still kept her day job at Seward.

After about a year and a half of the long commute to the co-op, French decided she wanted to devote more time to running Living the Dream (LTD) Farm. She continued to work at other local food co-ops, eventually settling in at the much-closer-to-her-farm River Market in Stillwater. She raised turkeys, goats, and heritage ducks. French tells the story of returning to the Seward Co-op to try to sell her goat’s milk soap only six months after leaving.

“When I first went to Seward to sell to them, I went to health and body care with my goat’s milk soap, and they were so excited that I had something they could sell. That was my first product, and they still sell it,” French said.

Living the Dream Farm

A lot has changed since then, but the support she’s received from Seward Co-op has remained strong. Khaiti feels she owes a lot to Seward Co-op. In fact, she met her husband, Andrew French, while working at the store. When she was the co-manager of the deli, she hired Andrew to wash dishes. Before long, he was cooking and creating many of the recipes that are still being served in the deli today. Eventually, Andrew left the co-op to cook at the Birchwood Café and then the Signature Café, before deciding to run his own landscaping business.

In 2010, Andrew and Khaiti bought a 39-acre farm in Barron County, Wisconsin. Within the year, they were married under a big, old oak tree on their farm and the rest is history... well, history in the making, anyway. In spring 2011, Khaiti left her job at River Market. Now both she and Andrew work on the farm full-time, and although there are grueling days, and they are still getting their feet wet learning about farming, they couldn’t be happier.

“It’s really something to go from being an employee to being a producer. But we wouldn’t be doing that if it weren’t for Seward. We’re really grateful to Seward,” Khaiti said.

The Frenches have embraced many permaculture practices on their farm, such as allowing the pigs to naturally root up the soil in one area before moving them to another. Having the pigs dig up the soil saves them the work of using a rototiller... and the pigs provide fertilizer, too. The Frenches continue to raise chickens, goats, and heritage ducks for eggs.



For the past three years, LTD Farm has offered community-supported agriculture (CSA) shares and participated in Seward Co-op's annual CSA Fair in April. The co-op provides space for them to leave their CSA boxes, which include duck eggs, goat's-milk soap, vegetables, and fruits. When they drop off their shares, the Frenches make a point of shopping at the co-op. They find it offers the best prices on organic food, and, of course, they love to visit former coworkers.

"A lot of the same people are working there. We have co-op employees who are share holders, and they have come out to harvest pigs. It's almost like we're growing Seward into this farm," explained Khaiti.

One of the most rewarding parts of running a CSA farm has been the people they meet along the way. Andrew loves to teach, so having the farm has given him an opportunity to pass skills along to their community of share holders. That's empowering, and it makes a difference in people's lives.

"One couple, for instance, wanted to do the chicken share because they wanted to experience the harvesting and see if they could handle it," Khaiti said. "Someday they want to have their own chickens. We're teaching people how to grow their own food, which is more important than providing it for them, actually."

And it was Seward Co-op that provided the business background the Frenches now use every day on the farm.

Andrew explained, "Co-ops are sort of like training grounds for people to go on to different aspects of the whole scene. I would say eighty percent of what I learned business-wise came from Seward. To watch a successful business grow showed you how it needed to be done. Don't skimp on the stuff that's needed, and constantly grow."

Trade Movement, or "P6."

In fall 2010, Seward became one of six consumer co-ops in the country to form P6. Taking its name for the Sixth Cooperative Principle—Cooperation among Cooperatives, the primary goal of P6 is to support and promote products that meet at least two of the following criteria:

- Locally grown or produced
- Small-scale production
- Cooperatively owned or nonprofit

P6 was a response to customer and member requests for greater transparency about who owns the companies that produce our food. In the years since the co-op's founding, sales of organic, local, and fair-trade products saw tremendous growth. Many of the manufacturers of natural products started out as small businesses but grew into significant companies. Because of this growth, significant consolidation occurred in the marketplace that has obscured the ownership of food production. Additionally, some of the founding values of the fair-trade movement have eroded with the certification of other products besides coffee and chocolate. The creation of a simple label lets consumers know if a product comes from a small or cooperative producer.

P6 embodies the long history of leadership the co-ops have had on social and food issues. The organic and natural foods movements were spearheaded by food cooperatives. Fair trade was built through the dedication and commitment of farmer co-ops in the Global South and food co-op members in the North. More recently,

food co-ops have championed the Buy Local movement, once again elevating the importance of the environment and local economic control.

Nick Seeberger, Seward Co-op's store manager, helped launch P6 at Seward and was instrumental in creating staff enthusiasm for the program, which he said struck a personal chord with him.

"I have two young children, and I'm inspired by the vision of P6 and to see it grow so the world they inherit is more just than the one they were born in to," Seeberger said. "P6 represents our values, the shared values of cooperatives in the natural foods supply chain, and allows us to continue to bring transparency and accountability to the food system. Cooperators have been working to realize this vision since their inception. P6 has the potential to become the symbol of these values, recognizable across the nation, as we grow our purpose."

After conversation and agreement among the co-op's management team to join the P6 movement, a committee of staff was formed to assist in preparing for and launching the program at Seward Co-op. A turning point in organization alignment around the P6 movement occurred when staff committee members stood up at Seward's all-staff meeting and shared touching stories of what P6 meant to them. The stories ranged from personal experience working



Seward Co-op's tenth annual Community-Supported Agriculture Fair in 2011 drew hundreds of visitors and representatives from more than thirty farms.

on small farms locally and internationally, to time spent volunteering at local nonprofits actively engaged in food-system politics. Primed by values and stories, staff left the meeting eager to bring the P6 movement to Seward Co-op members.

On Saturday, October 2, 2010, Seward Co-op became the first consumer co-op to launch P6 to its customers and the larger community. Momentum had been building for weeks as Seward began introducing P6 with signage, advertisements, and newsletter articles. Seward's staff, wearing P6 T-shirts and buttons, was ready to go. For months they had been receiving information, trainings, and welcome kits complete with FAQ booklets to help them effectively engage consumers in this new initiative. The preparation and hard work paid off. The launch was a success, with vendors and staff interacting with customers to explain the P6 concept, answer questions, and promote the values that inspired many of them to seek work within the co-op movement.

Not only does the P6 program provide a leg up to small, local businesses that are doing their part to put into action the very principles upon which Seward Co-op was founded, it also helps consumers shop with a conscience. The eye-catching P6 shelf tags throughout the store identify items that meet the P6 criteria—about thirty-four percent of the co-op's offerings—making it easier for shoppers to spend their dollars in support of these small, local, cooperatively owned companies. The P6 program is one of the many ways Seward Co-op connects its members and customers in the Seward community with the small farm or business just a few miles down the road.

"P6 is only the beginning," Seeberger said. "From the explosion in urban farms and farmers' markets to the proliferation of



natural foods co-ops across the country, the values of P6—small, local, and cooperatively owned—are inspiring people across the country to bring positive change to their communities. As the membership in P6 grows, the P6 label will become a recognized symbol of the food system transformation taking place."

Seward Community Co-op Celebrates Forty Years!

In June 2011, Seward Co-op received recognition for its years of hard work, success, and support of the cooperative business model. At the annual Consumer Cooperative Management Association (CCMA) gathering in San Diego, Seward Co-op was awarded the 2011 Cooperative Excellence Award, which recognizes "a retail cooperative that has made significant progress in meeting the needs of members through growth in net

sales and earnings, initiation of new and innovative programs, and expansion of member services.”

The co-op’s nomination was supported by thirteen different letters from neighborhood organizations, including the Seward Civic and Commerce Association, Seward Redesign, and the Seward Neighborhood Group; Council Member Cam Gordon and Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak; general managers from other cooperatives; and local farmer Jack Hedin of Featherstone Farm. The award, and the support of those who wrote nominations, evidenced Seward Co-op’s positive impact on the lives of so many people. It was also testimony to how the co-op had remained faithful to the ideals of its past while it continued to grow and evolve.

Throughout the past several years of dynamic growth, Seward Co-op’s board, management team, and staff have held fast to the principles and goals articulated in the Scorecard and Ends Statement. With those guides at the forefront, the co-op was not only able to make a smooth transition to a new home, but also to find new ways to support its community and articulate its values.

On August 4, 2012, Seward Co-op celebrated its fortieth anniversary. Way back in 1972, when the co-op took organic shape in the minds and hearts of a handful of Seward neighborhood residents, few people could have imagined it would grow to be the thriving community center and source of healthful food it is today. From a few working volunteer members, Seward Co-op membership rolls have grown to nearly 10,000. Seward Community Co-op has experienced amazing growth in its forty years of existence, and that’s definitely something in which all staff, board, and member-owners can take great pride.



Music and family fun were the focus of the fortieth anniversary celebration in August 2012.

But what’s most important is that amid great success and profitability, the co-op has remained true to its mission, never losing site of its commitment to its members and the greater community. In its lifetime, Seward Co-op has directed its energy toward solving the issues of the day, added a dash of luck and pluck, and created a vision of great food, sustainability, and cooperation. In this day and age, that says everything.

Afterword

Since 1972, when the “Cooop” opened its doors, we have gone through many changes and challenges. It is a testimony to our community that at so many critical junctures we made decisions to ensure that the cooperative would survive and prosper. We know the accounts captured in this book tell only a part of our story. We hope that you will indulge us in our efforts to tell this story and forgive us for any omissions.

As I read the profiles of the many cooperators in this book and the narrative timeline of our cooperative, I frequently found myself seeing this quest for commonwealth expressed by many of our leaders over time. Often it has been expressed in the desire to create an alternative economic system or a stronger community. The importance of being a financially strong business in order to serve the mission also reflects this idea. I saw it in how many of us see the importance of food and nutrition, of helping our local farmers and producers thrive with us. As I reflect on my own cooperative career over the past twenty years, I am struck not by the changes, which have been many, but by what has remained the same. Throughout its history, our co-op has held fast to the idea that when we work toward a common purpose we make the world a better place. The story of

Seward Co-op is the story of growing with purpose.

As a thriving cooperative, our story continues. Reaching a milestone of forty years is an opportunity to reflect on our story and take stock of our accomplishments. It is also an opportu-



All four of Seward Co-op’s general managers gathered on opening day in January 2009 (left to right): P.J. Hoffman (1983–1986), Sean Doyle (2004–present), Gail Graham (1986–1999), and Stuart Reid (1999–2004).

nity to look into the future and dream of what is yet to come. We have matured into a vital, thriving cooperative. We now have the resources and capacity to do much more than we could when we started. We are optimistic that the next forty years will be as vital and purposeful as the first forty have been. In the coming years, we see building on our success by opening additional businesses and supporting other co-ops and the local economy.

Our co-op is about more than just providing us with healthful food. It is a vehicle through which we meet our common aspirations. When we participate in our co-op, we are taking small steps towards creating an economic order that is not about short-term gain, but instead is building the foundation for a long-term equitable economic system. The phrase I like to use is “we are building commonwealth.” Although today this often is used for political entities, its roots are more about the commonweal, or the well-being of all.

The core purpose of our cooperative is to meet human need by being a vital business. In this work, we find ourselves looking beyond I, me, and mine to the idea of we, us, and our. As I reflect on who we are, it is clear to me that the foundation of all of this is built on people like you and me. It is our willingness over the past forty years to make the necessary investments of time and resources in our co-op so it could succeed and prosper. It is our decision to buy our food from other people in our community. It is our continued commitment and support of the idea that we are stronger together and that our purpose is to sustain a healthy community.

—Sean Doyle, Seward Co-op general manager



Co-op members gathered to enjoy a meal prepared by the co-op's deli at the 2010 annual member-owner meeting.

My Reflections on the Seward “Cooop”

Seward Co-op at forty years old

My connection with the Seward Co-op began at a job fair at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio, in 1970. When I passed the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) table at a job fair, I picked up an informational pamphlet and stuck it in my pile of potential employers.

Shortly after that, the tragic Kent State killings occurred, and as I went into work the next day, the common consensus was that the guardsmen should have killed more students. I then realized I was in the wrong place. I went home, dug out the information on VISTA, filled out some forms, and, long story short, after a two-week training session in Chicago, ended up in South Minneapolis in the fall of 1970.

I was assigned to work in housing and tenants’ rights. My supervisor had lived in Seward and was aware of a proposed Seward West Urban Renewal Program that had the residents of Seward up in arms. He suggested I look into the situation. Another long story short, an incredible mosaic of residents—students, working class, longtime residents, and elderly—bonded together, determined to stop or at least alter the urban renewal program that was slated to demolish seventy percent of the neighborhood. The results are apparent; the effort was successful.

During that time, Mike & Peg’s Superette at 22nd and Franklin went out of business. There was already this well-organized group of residents working on redeveloping Seward West, so a natural progression was to open up our own food co-op.



The exterior at 2201 East Franklin Avenue, c. 1972.

Cedar-Riverside had the North Country Co-op, and some felt that there wasn’t room for two food co-ops so close together, but we proceeded anyway.

I don’t remember where we came up with the seed money, but we signed a lease with then-owner of the building Pete Ivanow, a Russian immigrant, ripped up the old asbestos flooring, acquired several thirty-gallon garbage cans and filled them with rice, flour, beans, etc., stocked the cooler with eggs and milk, and opened for business.

We were set up as an all-volunteer operation. There were three or four coordinators who worked twenty hours a week for a five-dollar-per-week food allowance (five bucks actually went

a long way when whole wheat flour was five cents a pound). I was the frozen foods coordinator. As I was filling out the order one week, I saw lutefisk on the list. I had heard it mentioned often since I moved to the area, so I assumed it was a popular staple in Minnesotans' diets, and I proceeded to order a case. Well, it remained in the cooler until we either gave it or threw it away. I can't recall if I even tried it myself, but if I did, I have never had it since.

The office was in the basement, and a crevice in the rafters served as our safe until the day's proceeds could be deposited the next day. It apparently was not a good place to keep the money, however, since it disappeared one night. I have no idea how we survived such a loss, but we did.

Policy for the store was decided at biweekly Sunday evening potlucks. Decisions were made by consensus, not by majority rule. This made for some very long meetings. One memorable meeting was one in which we discussed whether or not to carry white flour. It was looking fairly grim for the white-flour advocates until an unlikely supporter took the floor. He seemed out of place in his preppy attire, amongst the blue jeans, plaid shirts, and beards. He proceeded to give a passionate speech about baking, arguing that cooking must not only be nutritious, but that it should also be fun; that it was impossible to create a Danish pastry with whole wheat flour. White flour won.

The reason that the original sign for the store said Seward "Cooop" was that we were not legally a co-op, therefore the hyphen was replaced with an "o."

I have often wondered why so many good things sprouted



The co-op's sales floor, c. 1974.

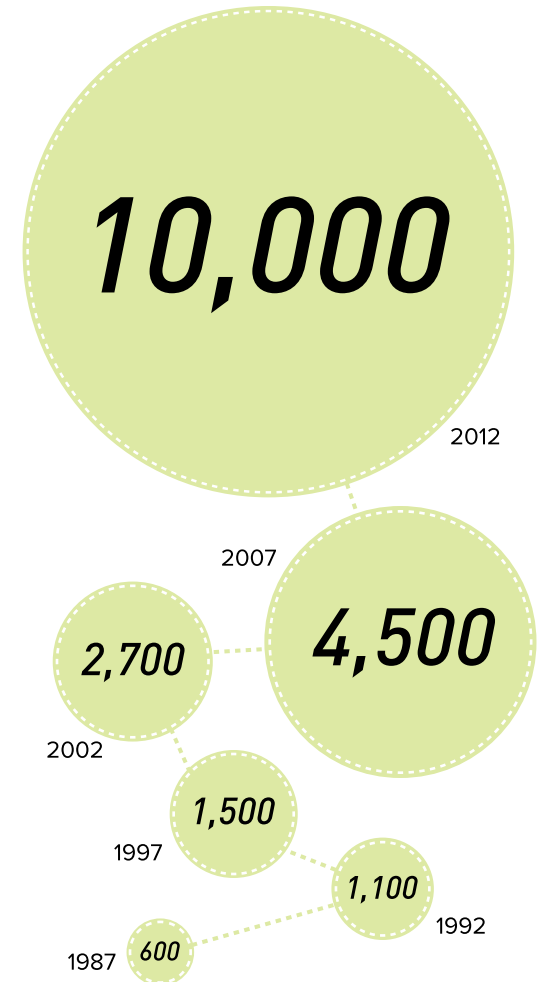
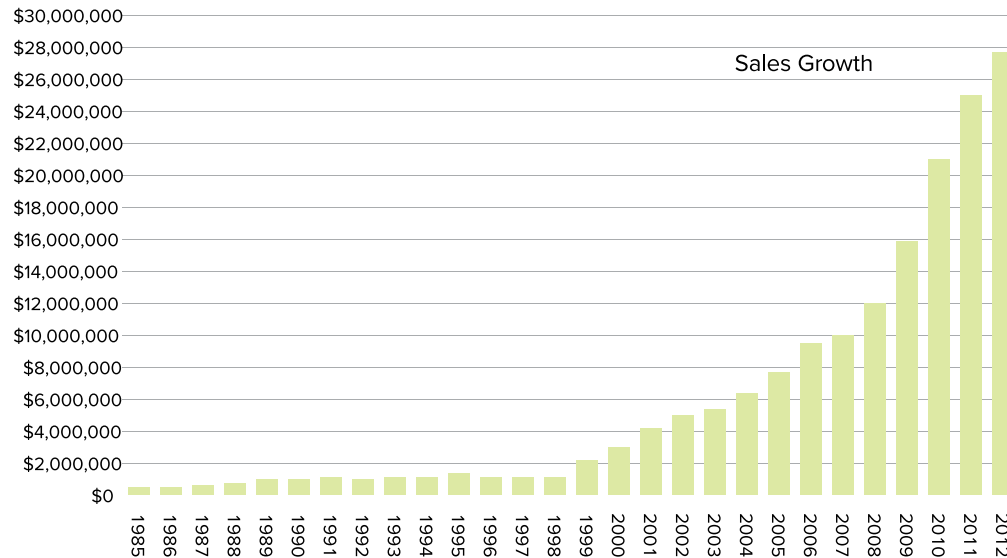
during the early 1970s, food co-ops, community healthcare facilities, tenants' unions, and child care co-ops. I think these all took root out of the frustration over the endless Vietnam war. People were growing weary of our soldiers being sent home in body bags, the deforestation of the jungles of Cambodia, and the senseless killings of the Vietnamese people. I think that generation finally realized that maybe we couldn't control world events, but we could indeed control the sources and distribution of our food, our health care, and our housing.

Forty years have passed since we opened the doors of Seward Co-op. Although the store has grown in leaps and bounds, it remains true to the original goals. And although I am no longer actively involved in the store, I am proud to be a member of the Seward Co-op. —Don Barton, Seward resident



Growing with Purpose

Seward Co-op's growth over the past forty years has been remarkable, in many ways. Here are just a few examples of how the co-op has grown since its founding.



Member growth from 1987 through 2012

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About the Authors and Photographer



Kari Cornell is a freelance writer and editor who lives in South Minneapolis with her husband and two young boys. Cornell is the editor of a number of books published by Voyageur Press, as well as countless knitting titles. She is the author of several cookbooks for children published by Lerner Publishing Group and is currently at work on a few new cookbooks for Millbrook Press. Cornell is a proud member of Seward Co-op and feels honored to have had the opportunity to coauthor this book.



Patricia Cumbie is a writer living in the Seward neighborhood of Minneapolis. Before becoming a freelancer in 2004, she worked in the food co-op sector as a member services and marketing director, which included a stint at Seward Co-op from 1989–1994. For many years she was also the editor of the Twin Cities food co-op newspaper the *Mix*. She is proud to say she lives a full-on co-op lifestyle, enjoying ownership in a wide variety of co-ops, and she has devoted her career to writing about the cooperative movement.



Chris Bohnhoff is a location food lifestyle photographer living and working in the Seward neighborhood. The stories Bohnhoff tells have taken him from corporate board rooms to rural Africa, but the subject of food is nearest and dearest to his heart. Bohnhoff's images have appeared in regional and national magazines, cookbooks, advertising, and corporate communications. See more of his work at chrisbohnhoff.com.

The text of this book is set in Kandal Book with sidebars and display type in Proxima Nova.

Both fonts are designed by Mark Simonson, a Seward Co-op member.



GROWING WITH PURPOSE

In 2012, Seward Community Cooperative celebrates its fortieth birthday. In recognition of this milestone, this commemorative book chronicles the co-op's history.

From the early days as a small storefront operation to the new green store that opened in 2009, the story of Seward Co-op—and the Twin Cities cooperative movement of the 1970s—unfolds in this comprehensive narrative.

Researched and written by local authors Patricia Cumbie and Kari Cornell, *Growing with Purpose* features interviews with many of the people who played a part in the co-op's four decades in the Seward neighborhood. From founders and farmers to current staff and members, they tell their stories alongside original photographs by local photographer Chris Bohnhoff.

Growing with Purpose is a resource for Seward Co-op members, new and old, and anyone interested in the cooperative natural food movement.

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