

THE Greenhouse GROCERY

story by GAIL SNYDER

Once upon a time, food co-ops were truly cooperative. Members owned the co-op together, everyone was required to volunteer a certain number of hours a month to run the daily operations and each member participated in the co-op's decision making. It was grassroots democracy in action, and each member was a part of why it succeeded. With only a few paid staff members in supervisory roles, overhead costs were low, which in turn made high quality food much more affordable to the widest swath of the co-op's neighboring population. What's more, people who've been members of this original style of food co-op invariably rave about how working their shifts resulted in lasting friendships, community solidarity and goodwill amongst people of diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

We don't have that kind of food co-op in Santa Fe. Some still exist elsewhere: in Berkeley, Milwaukee, Austin, Paris and Japan, for instance. The Park Slope Food Co-op in Brooklyn, now in its 40th year, is one of the largest food co-ops in the country, though not by virtue of its footprint—the storefront is intentionally small and packed to the gills. It's their membership that keeps growing.

BJ Pheiffer would like to bring such a co-op to Santa Fe. This five-year City Different resident was herself a member of the Park Slope Co-op for 20 years. "I raised my child in that environment, where everyone is welcome," she says, with people on food stamps and those of modest means working and creating tight-knit community connections with hedge fund managers and movie stars.

No matter who we are, we've all experienced a wobbling of food security in recent years as food costs continue to rise at four to seven percent a year, according to USDA figures. This tips the scales for too many who are already struggling and who certainly can't afford steeper prices; most natural food groceries, including co-ops run by paid staff, compensate in part by sacrificing quality of food.

"What we *don't* need in this town," says BJ, "is another Gucci grocery!" Following the Park Slope model, she's working hard to make her new co-op, the Greenhouse Grocery, a reality. Its board of directors has secured the sponsorship of Del Norte Credit Union; members currently number 207, out of 400 necessary to go forward with plans; and the board has targeted a possible location, a corner lot at Rufina Circle and Rufina Street, off Cerrillos, formerly the home of Santa Fe Greenhouses.

As founder of the Greenhouse Grocery, BJ and the other directors have developed a solid business plan following Park Slope's credo of being "a buying agent for its members rather than a selling agent to any industry." Greenhouse Grocery's board members include renowned local chef and cookbook author Deborah Madison, a longtime locavore, and its list of suppliers includes Matt Romero, one of the biggest names among local growers. BJ scoffs at being thought of as "naïve and simplistic." A savvy businesswoman, she's got solid experience in startup technology businesses, market strategy, the securities trade industry and banking. Looking back, she marvels that all of this experience has inadvertently provided her so solid a foundation for this next step.

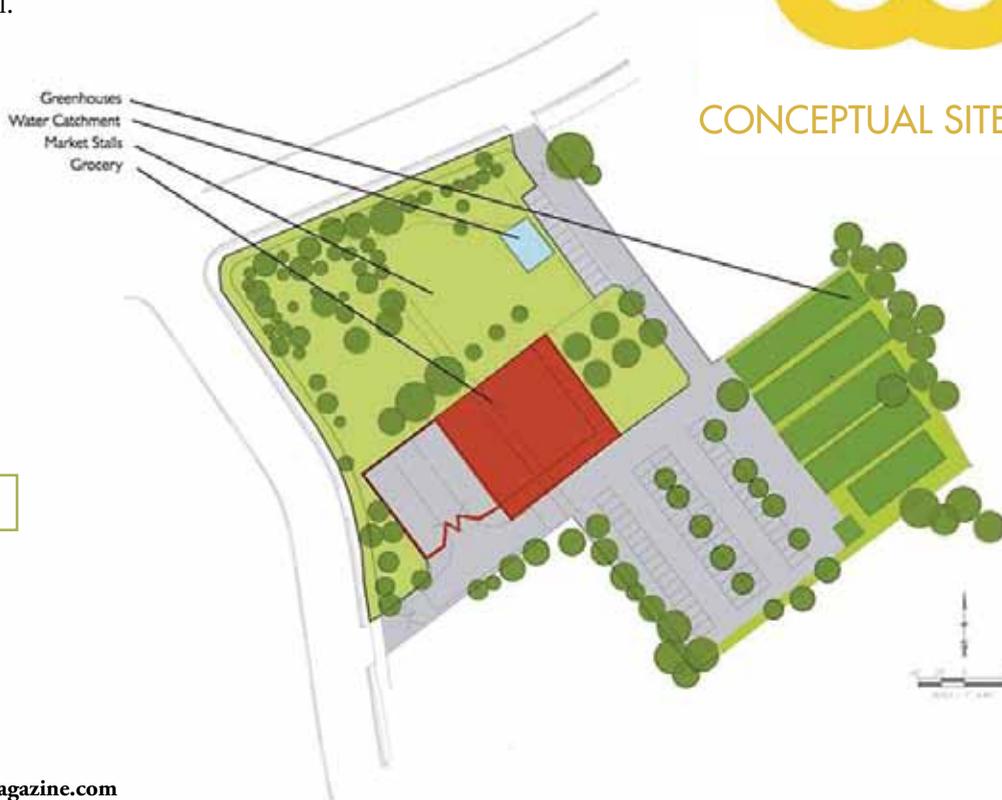
It's a foundation balanced by BJ's longtime passion for what she calls "pristine" food (no chemicals, no GMOs, organically grown, locally sourced). She first discovered the benefits of healthy food as a student living at Oberlin College's longstanding co-op. Later, living in the food desert of Cleveland's inner city, she and her husband would make the trek to the West Side Market, bringing back fresh local produce to distribute in their neighborhood. She is a master gardener, she's started up a community garden, worked as a caterer and graduated from culinary school.



CONCEPTUAL SITE PLAN



| BJ Pheiffer



BJ is equally adamant on the issue of everyone having the right to healthy food. “To me, the Park Slope Food Co-op is more of a church than a grocery store,” she says. “A church for food and food equity.” Its general manager, Joe Holtz, is currently mentoring the Greenhouse Grocery board. One way he’s managed to keep Park Slope solvent even in times of financial upheaval is by increasing the volume of food in the same tiny storefront space. “They have more volume than even our local Whole Foods,” says BJ, “in a quarter of the space. And because so many people from the Park Slope neighborhood walk, bike or take the subway there, they tend to shop in small quantities several times a week. The produce is mostly gone by the end of the day!” And the food is better, she says, than what you find at a typical natural food grocery. “Whole Foods’ produce is about 26 percent organic,” she says, “versus 85 percent organic at Park Slope.” In what amounts to a radical decision, especially at the time, the co-op voted 30 years ago to offer only grass-fed meat. Park Slope’s board meetings, often centered on various ethical concerns, are actively engaging, sometimes even downright rowdy, as in the recent discussion over whether to boycott Israeli products to protest the country’s treatment of Palestinians. In fact, says BJ, if the board feels that not all the factions of the general membership are being represented in the decision-making process, they go out to encourage others to participate.

BJ says that, realistically, it will probably be another year before the Greenhouse Grocery has the resources needed to open. A one-time membership pledge fee is \$100 per member, which can be paid in installments. The store will be available only to members. And, members receive annual checks of 20 percent back on their portion of the profits each year. “The more people who choose to participate,” says BJ, “the better quality our food will be and the more affordable.” The essence of the business plan, she explains, is this: “Let’s say a heritage tomato costs \$3 a pound. A natural food store will sell it for \$5.99 a pound. We’ll sell it for \$3.90 a pound. Our mark-up is 29 percent, as opposed to anywhere from 45 to 100 percent mark-up elsewhere.”

As a Park Slope member, BJ “did some of everything—I cut cheese, I chopped, I stocked shelves, I cleaned refrigerator cases”—in other words, all the many unglamorous necessities of keeping a grocery store running, “and,” she adds with a laugh, addressing Greenhouse Grocery’s potential members, “you’ll be doing those same things, too!” She gets that same look of fond, wistful reverie that others get, reliving the work aspect of co-op membership. “Working the check-out line, I met so many wonderful people, people I would’ve never met otherwise, young artists from Red Hook...” Her voice trails off. “The other cashiers on my shift and I all became friends. We’d have fun seeing who could take in the most cash during our shift. Lines at Park Slope are very long, so everyone finds ways to pass the time, swapping recipes, getting to know each other—that’s why their newsletter is called *The Line Waiters’ Gazette!*”

You can see various slice-of-life videos at the Park Slope Co-op’s website, from customer interviews to street parades to cooking classes and the like, produced by, shot, edited and starring Park Slope Co-op members. The one that stands out, for me, as testament to the potential that a working co-op has to truly connect people is a memorial service, held in a neighborhood church, for a co-op member who had died unexpectedly. The church is filled to the brim with the family members, friends and fellow co-op shift workers of Donald Billy Alexis. They’re people of every color, from every walk of life. Many get up to speak, telling stories about who he was. Many shift workers describe Alexis, as most refer to him, as a Zorba the Greek figure, a trickster and a prankster, a man, as one says, “who was comfortable in his skin,” who tended to greet people—and life—with a wide, open-armed stance, which several fondly imitate. “He embodied the sense of community here,” marvels one soft-spoken young woman. “He was the first person to recognize me on the street, beyond the shift.” Another man tells the crowd, “He treated me, and I’m sure others, like the person I want to be. And you know what? That helped me to do that.”

“I’m very grateful,” says BJ, for the opportunity to create a community resource with such an atmosphere in Santa Fe. “We have the unique potential here that defines a destiny. We as a community can make this commitment. Nobody’s going to do this for us, but *we* can do it. Join us.”

If you are interested in more information on how to become a part of the future of the Greenhouse Grocery and see what they are doing right now, visit their website at greenhousegrocery.coop.

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