

# Cooperation and the Transformation of Society

*Co-op think tank examines mutual benefits*

BY ROSE MARIE KLEE

**W**heatsville Co-op, established in 1976, has become a mainstay of the local business scene in Austin, Texas. Through our first decades, we were initially focused on survival and on cultivating our community of members; and over the past decade, we have grown our relationship with the national food co-op community.

Connecting through CCMA (Consumer Cooperative Management Association) and other learning opportunities has been especially invigorating for the Wheatsville board of directors, providing a context for our place within the broader cooperative movement and a connectedness in spite of our position as the only food co-op in Texas. Getting to know and learn from our many friends across the country has allowed us to deeply appreciate the tremendous potential of our work.

We have been inspired by the words in our bylaws that state, "The purpose of Wheatsville Co-op is to create a self-reliant, self-empowering community of people that will grow and promote the transformation of society toward cooperation, justice, and non-exploitation." Likewise, the challenging question for us has long been, "How can we promote the transformation of society?"

We do know that our co-op makes a difference, every single day, through the means by which we operate: dignified co-op jobs, excellent customer service focused on genuine caring and kindness, careful selection of vendors, and more. Our increasing ability to understand and express our good works, within the framework of cooperative values, has been an essential catalyst for transforming consciousness in the broader community.

Through insights shared by CCMA speakers such as Gar Alperovitz (2005) and David Korten (2008), we have come to recognize



Austin Co-op Think Tank members gathered in August 2011 for a full-day retreat.

the power of: 1) developing a theory for how change/transformation is possible; 2) committing to the sustained and sustainable pursuit of our efforts; and 3) creating dialogue in finding our truth and facilitating the ability of individuals and groups to become empowered to take action.

## The seed is planted

It started with a simple email: "Would you be interested in getting together to discuss the cooperative principles with some of my co-workers?"

In May 2010, a small group of people from A+ Federal Credit Union (A+FCU), Black Star Co-op, and Wheatsville got together for our first conversation. Kelsey Balchaitis of A+FCU had been encouraged at a credit union conference to reach out to other local co-ops, and Wheatsville was the only Austin co-op that came up in her initial search. We quickly realized that we share a lot of the same challenges and that getting together to talk about them was a good

thing. We decided to get together again in June of that year.

It was a wonderful surprise when nearly 20 people from nine different cooperative organizations attended our next discussion, especially since the initial invitation had only been sent to eight people from five organizations. Our group continued to meet and grow over the next several months, getting together every four to six weeks to share our stories and aspirations and to discuss the challenges we face.

Over the course of a year, an amazing group of individuals has coalesced into an organization called the Austin Co-op Think Tank (ACTT). It has been exciting to discover the extent of local cooperative endeavors and to better understand our Austin cooperative heritage. From today's perspective, it is hard to remember the time when we felt like the only, lonely food co-op in Texas.

## Who and why

The think tank is comprised of several organizations and individuals with diverse cooperative backgrounds and a common interest in the role of co-ops in creating the world that we want. The following is not a complete list of our membership, but it illustrates the composition of our group:

**Inter-Cooperative Council**—ICC is a student housing co-op that started in the Depression era and, along with College Houses, has been a seedbed for germinating/cultivating such co-op leaders as Walden Swanson, Jim Jones, and this humble author. ICC General Administrator Brian Donovan has provided significant leadership since the inception of the think tank. He currently serves on the Steering Committee and is chair of the financial committee, which is exploring options for the formation of a non-profit funding vehicle for co-ops. [www.iccaustin.coop](http://www.iccaustin.coop) ▶

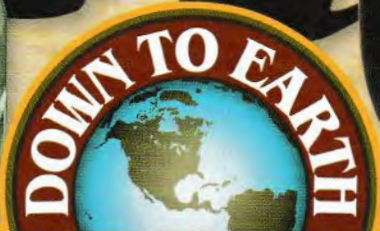


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◀ **College Houses**—College Houses also provides affordable student housing and collaborates with ICC on a multitude of housing and co-op-related issues. College Houses recently built a five-story “Super Co-op” using innovative financing techniques. General Administrator Alan Robinson has been a steadfast participant in the think tank and has brought strength to the organization through staff support and the encouragement of additional participants (such as Steering Committee members Kim Penna and Josh Sabik).  
[www.collegehouses.org](http://www.collegehouses.org)

**Cooperation Texas**—Cooperation Texas is an incubator for worker-owned co-ops, including illustrious up-starts like Red Rabbit (vegan donut) Bakery and Dahlia Green Cleaning Services. Program Coordinator Kim Penna leads our “P6 Committee” (Principle 6=cooperation amongst co-ops) and is also the membership coordinator at College Houses. Both Penna and board member Ricardo Guerrero serve on the think tank Steering Committee. Cooperation Texas co-founders Carlos Perez de Alejo and Andi Shively have also been key think tank leaders.  
[www.cooperationtexas.coop](http://www.cooperationtexas.coop), [www.redrabbitbakery.com](http://www.redrabbitbakery.com), and [www.dahlia.coop](http://www.dahlia.coop)

**Amplify Federal Credit Union**—Amplify began as the IBM Texas Employees Federal Credit Union and currently serves over 40,000 members. Business Services Manager Zac Jones provides leadership on the ACTT Steering Committee, and his organization provides access to an online collaboration site that supports leadership work for the think tank. [www.goamplify.com](http://www.goamplify.com)

**Black Star Co-op**—Black Star is the world's first cooperatively owned and worker self-managed brewpub. President Mark Wochner was a leader in the formation of the think tank, and directors Donald Jackson and this author currently provide leadership on the Steering Committee as well as other ACTT project committees. [www.blackstar.coop](http://www.blackstar.coop)

**Corp to Coop**—Led by Steve Macias and driven by the desire that our children have much greater opportunity for the dignified and empowering employment opportunities that co-ops provide, Corp to Coop encourages traditional businesses to be sold to their employees when there is a transfer of ownership.

**Treasure City Thrift**—A self-described “friendly anarchist collective,” this organization is centered on the values of solidarity, not charity, and mutual aid. The TCT worker collective operates a thrift store that generates income to support employees and other mission-driven organizations. Employee Cory Skuldt drives many of our conversations about how the think tank can meet the most practical needs of local cooperatives. [www.treasurecitythrift.com](http://www.treasurecitythrift.com)

**KOOP Radio**—Thor Armbruster (also a Wheatsville employee) and others from this community-owned and community-run station chronicle key ACTT events and seek creative opportunities to promote ACTT members on the radio. [www.koop.org](http://www.koop.org)

There is significant cross-pollination of individual participants among multiple organizations and representing a variety of interests and backgrounds such as non-student affordable housing, foodservice vehicles, screen printing, web development, filmmaking, and marketing. We are united by our interest in cooperative solutions, the desire to promulgate cooperative enterprises within Austin and beyond, and the practical needs we have in common, such as professional service providers who understand the co-op model; mentoring for cooperative startups; vendors/suppliers that are themselves organized as co-ops; information resources specific to co-ops; financing of development projects; and most of all, the need for a community that understands, values, and prefers to patronize co-ops. ▶



## ◀ Nuts and bolts

After a year of informal conversation, the think tank held a full-day retreat in August 2011. We convened at the Austin History Center to discuss what we might do together if we added a bit more structure and planning, while acknowledging that even our informal meetings were valuable in establishing relationships with like-minded people. It was time to decide whether we had the impetus to set something big in motion—something that would require collaboration, prolonged effort, and strategy; something that could transform the Austin economy.

Under the auspices and inspiration of the International Year of Cooperatives 2012 (IYC), the group pondered questions of what work we could possibly undertake that, within one year, would result in tangible and meaningful outcomes. The group began brainstorming, and by the end of the day had settled on four projects:

- Exploration and development of a proposed long-term organizational structure;
- Incubation of new co-ops through mentoring;
- Information clearinghouse to help co-ops find essential knowledge resources;
- Education and outreach through social events and communication from individual cooperative organizations to their members/owners.

A Steering Committee composed of the project chairs and three additional at-large representatives was appointed by ACTT participants at subsequent meetings, with the charge to provide interim leadership, oversee ongoing projects, and develop a proposal for the long-term organizational structure.

ACTT holds monthly meetings, which include “get to know you” presentations from co-op businesses, updates on project progress, topical discussion sessions, and social events. We communicate through an email group (ACTT Google Group), via Facebook ([www.facebook.com/ThinkTank.coop](http://www.facebook.com/ThinkTank.coop)), and with our website (<http://www.thinktank.coop/>). To date,

all of the project teams have made significant progress, and a fifth committee was recently added to focus on developing a financial institution that can provide lending resources.

In celebration of IYC, our first year of work will culminate in a conference (Oct. 26–27) including kick-off reception, a full day of multi-track workshop sessions, and a party that will feature the world premiere of *Many Hands*, a documentary film produced by Jim Jones and his son Erik, on the history of co-ops in Austin ([www.kickstarter.com/projects/2051138934/many-hands-building-a-cooperative-future](http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/2051138934/many-hands-building-a-cooperative-future)).

### The potential and a theory of change

We have been delighted, surprised and grateful to find each other somehow in this cooperative sweet spot, with a sincere eagerness and belief that together we can make a difference. One source of inspiration is Wheatsville General Manager Dan Gilotte, who recounts the story of the Austin Independent Business Alliance (AIBA) ([www.ibuyaustin.com/](http://www.ibuyaustin.com/)).

As an AIBA founder and current member of their board of directors, Gilotte was part of a small group of people who came together as Austin’s rapid growth began to draw an increasing number of chain retailers. Their group quickly grew to 20 and eventually to over 200. In addition to the power of their collaboration as a network of members, the Alliance leveraged a study based on two of their members most beloved by the community (Bookpeople and Waterloo Records) to demonstrate the tangible value of local businesses ([www.liveablecity.org/lcfullreport.pdf](http://www.liveablecity.org/lcfullreport.pdf)). Those of us who lived in Austin at that time remember the impact of that study in affecting economic development patterns, and we are hopeful for the example that this sets for the power of collaborative action by the cooperative business sector.

The think tank aspires, through our collaborative and strategic efforts, to be a force in transforming the Austin economy over the next five years to one in which there is a distinct cooperative presence and a mainstream cultural

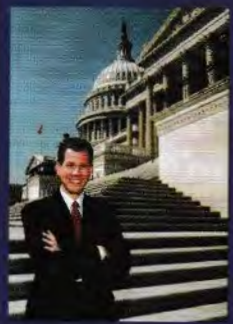
awareness of the value of cooperative enterprises. We see our advantage in the diversity of our think tank participants and the predisposition of Austin culture to embrace bootstrapping. We also know that there are many more co-ops for us to bring into the fold, such as our regional neighbor and largest rural electric co-op in the country, Pedernales Electric Co-op, and the All Austin Cooperative Nursery School, founded way back in 1953.

As an organization, Wheatsville sees the strategic value of the think tank in accomplishing our Ends (“Wheatsville will be at the forefront of a transformed society that has... a robust cooperative economy.”). In addition to the support Wheatsville provides the think tank, such as meeting space, food donations, and participation by our directors and staff, Wheatsville’s board has a committee that provides a formal direct link between our two organizations. Kate Vickery, as the committee chair, keeps the Wheatsville board apprised of think tank events and has provided essential leadership to the think tank as a meeting facilitator and member of the Steering Committee.

Contact between Wheatsville and the think tank stimulates practical conversation about mutually beneficial solutions that revolve around Principle 6. Wheatsville provides a model for vibrant and successful enterprise to the local community as well as information resources to startup co-ops, and likewise hopes that we can grow a range of cooperative vendors to become a bigger part of our supply chain. We also look forward to collaborating with the think tank, in using the forthcoming NCGA study on the value of co-ops in our economy, and to conduct outreach with our local politicians, city departments, and chambers of commerce—the next frontier in evolution of our board’s work.

We have no doubt that our small group of thoughtful, committed cooperators can transform society toward cooperation, justice, and non-exploitation. In fact, we think that in many ways, we already have! ■

## Imagine the global influence of a cooperative economics focused on human need and not just on wealth creation.



“The Imagine 2012 conference provides an unparalleled chance for co-operators to gather, step back from daily operations, and consider the deeper meaning behind our work building a cooperative economy.”

Paul Hazen, former CEO, NCBA



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[www.imagine2012.coop](http://www.imagine2012.coop)