# Everyone Welcome?

*Personal narratives about race and food co-ops*

By Jade Barker and Patricia Cumbie
A Project of Columinate

Columinate

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# Table of **Contents**

**Introduction** ..... iii

**Commentary by the Authors** ..... iv

**A Summary of What We Heard** ..... vi

**Participants**

Ann Hoyt ..... 1

Annie Young ..... 4

Bill Gessner ..... 7

David Gutknecht ..... 10

David Thompson ..... 13

Esteban Kelly ..... 16

Gary L. Cunningham ..... 19

Jade Barker ..... 22

Jaimie Markham ..... 25

Jamila Medley ..... 29

Jessica Gordon-Nembhard ..... 32

Karen Zimbelman ..... 35

Malik Yakini ..... 38

Marilyn Scholl ..... 41

Patricia Cumbie ..... 44

**Resources** ..... 47

# **Intro**duction

On a Thursday in early November 2015, in St. Paul, MN, members of Columinate participated in a half-day customized workshop presented by Training for Change. We had wanted to deepen our understanding of social power dynamics, especially racism. The training provided many of us with new insights, both into ourselves and each other; some members of our co-op even say that that workshop changed the way they do their work. The last exercise of the afternoon was an opportunity to brainstorm—what could we do to change the power dynamics we had learned about and experienced?

As a new consultant, I had already had numerous conversations with white cooperators who told me that people of color didn't shop at food co-ops because they couldn't afford the co-ops prices or weren't interested in healthy food. I never refuted these assertions, even though I didn't believe them to be true; I intrinsically understood that these beliefs were part of a larger conglomeration of racial misinformation that I thought was beyond my ability to change. As a person of color, I also felt the sting of "otherness" that these assertions implied; these cooperators clearly believed that skin-color imparted values and characteristics that made people of color "not like us."

That November day, during our afternoon brainstorm, I became curious—what if we could discover what had actually made our food co-ops white? What if people learned that something besides poverty and food preference was at play? Could a better understanding of our racial history help us create co-ops that everyone could feel welcome in, regardless of their race? My colleague, our consulting co-op's manager, Marilyn Scholl, was intrigued by the idea, and quickly formed a team that included me, Patricia Cumbie, and later, Thane Joyal. Together we envisioned this project, initially titled, "How We Became White" (later renamed "Everyone Welcome?," a title Marilyn suggested which we immediately understood was the question we really wanted to explore).

As originally envisioned, the project would consist of personal stories around race and food co-ops. We would interview people who had been influential in founding today's food co-ops, ask them about their co-op history and their personal thoughts about how food co-ops became white, and potential strategies for change.

So, we had an idea, but now we needed funding. We reached out to people and organizations we knew in the co-op sector. We struggled at first to articulate exactly what we were trying to accomplish, but when we explained that our ultimate goal was to move the needle forward on racial diversity and inclusion in food co-ops, organizations were generous with their support. We thank them all (see our Acknowledgments page for a list of contributors.)

The project design identified these outcomes:

- An article, a series of articles or a booklet
- Case studies of individual co-ops exploring their challenges around race and what they have learned
- Educational materials useful for presentations at conferences and workshops.

With funding and design established, we brainstormed names of people we might interview, especially those prominent in the cooperative movement, but also those we thought might have interesting stories to share. We came up with names of more people than we were able to interview, and interviewed more people than we included in the final project, but each person we spoke to advanced our understanding of how food co-ops have been impacted by race. We are grateful for everyone who participated for their courage to engage on this topic.

We did not and do not expect that this project will provide food co-ops with definitive answers about how to resolve our racial issues. But, as the Chinese proverb says, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Can we overcome a historical legacy of racism and racial segregation to create co-ops that fully embrace our cooperative values? In which all people, regardless of race, can feel welcome? We hope so.

# Commentary **by the Authors**

**Jade's Journey**

In hindsight, I embarked on this project quite naively. It would be simple, or so I thought, to interview people about race and food co-ops, eliciting some personal context to craft these interviews into narratives that would read like a conversation you'd have with a friend.

Yet, this project had a way of insinuating itself into my life and consciousness in a way that was quite challenging. I found myself avoiding the project, and more often than not, my stomach hurt when I thought about it. How could I make sense of this experience?

I recalled the first time, as a teenager, I was called a racial epithet. I was walking to school alone in a new town as a car rushed by; one of its occupants shouted at me. I remember my gut clenching with fear, hoping the car wouldn't stop or turnaround to come after me. Add to that visceral episode scores of other negative racial life experiences, shame about my own complicity, and the impossibility of addressing race meaningfully in a racially charged society —in that context, my avoidance made sense.

So, developing a willingness to talk about race and racism has been difficult for me. Yet, as James Baldwin famously said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

So I persevered. The interviews I had with participants in the project were unique and life changing. Possibly for the first time in my life, I was hearing people's stories about race with the goal of listening and understanding. Daily, I noticed my personal pains diminishing, replaced by a deeper understanding of how the chasms created by racism might be bridged.

Originally, Pat and I didn't plan to include our own narratives in the project. But as we progressed in our work, it became clear that asking our participants to publicly share their personal thoughts about race was asking a lot. We felt it necessary that we be willing to do the same.

In the documentary, "Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible," a white woman describes an exchange she had with a woman of color. The woman of color says to her, "When you want to be my friend, you walk across the room and say, 'Hi, my name is…, what's your name?' When people of color decide they will again try to be friends with a white person, we are crawling…on our knees over the broken shards of relationships where we thought we could trust someone." My colleagues, Pat, Marilyn, and Thane, have been consistently trustworthy and supportive. For me, the ability to talk forthrightly with white people about some of my racial experiences, and be understood, has been a profoundly healing experience.

Before working on this project, I thought that I understood the white perspective on racism, but that white people weren't interested in understanding mine. Through this project, I learned that reality is more complex than I had imagined, and that I didn't know all I thought I did. This has given me hope that the wounds racism has created in our society can be healed. I don't think it will be easy, but at least I now think it's possible.

**Pat's Journey**

I have had hundreds of conversations over the years that have resulted in published articles. Yet for all the decades I have been a part of the food co-op movement, I had never had a significant conversation about race until I embarked on this project. I felt honored, humbled, terrified and incredulous.

I grew up in a small city rife with racial tension. I knew a lot of bad things had happened to people of color there and everywhere, and I felt powerless to stop it. That led to decades of complicit silence and avoidance. If there's anything this project has taught me, and it's changed my life in so many ways, is that I found it is possible to more fully understand my role in a system I deplore. Once I started to understand, I could take steps to change how I interacted with it

and thought about people in our world.

Although the idea for this project grew out of a Training for Change workshop, my journey toward greater awareness began in a nonfiction writing class a few years before that also informed my approach to this project. My instructor had started our first session by asking students to write about the first time we encountered the concept of race. What unfolded in that classroom afterward was stunning and unforgettable.

The class was majority white, and the attitudes from the white students ranged from 'I didn't sign up for this class to write about that. This has nothing to do with what I'm writing. This exercise is not a productive use of my time.' The white people struggled to "see" race. On the other hand, the people of color in the class wrote about first encounters that demonstrated to them that they were perceived as the "other," someone exotic, dangerous or untrustworthy. The perceptions about racial identity and social status in the room were so divergent. Not only there, but everywhere. I knew I had to make racial equity a part of my life in ways that I had not before.

As I sought to change my perceptions, this project made it profoundly real and personal. It's not every day that the work I do allows me to confront deep-seated fears and attitudes, and empowers me to do what I thought I couldn't—like having meaningful conversations about race and writing about it.

I was also particularly moved by the willingness of the cooperators to share their experiences. I've always liked that a culture of caring is a big part of our cooperative development community, but listening to people who didn't feel that same level of support, or had a stinging critique, was eye-opening and motivating. I'm hopeful and optimistic that these narratives can be the springboard for the kinds of conversations and personal shifts I had experienced in the course of writing them.

Overall, I'm left with a feeling that transforming the food co-op sector is possible, first, because our movement is guided by values and principles, and second, perhaps most importantly, I know how it has changed me.

# A Summary of **What We Heard**

*"The past is never dead.*
*It's not even past."*

—William Faulkner

Cooperatives are an international movement with voluntary and open membership as a guiding principle, yet in the U.S. food co-op sector, most of the people are white. Even in multi-racial neighborhoods, food co-ops have overwhelmingly white ownership and staff. If everyone is welcome, why do so few people of color participate in food co-ops today?

To find answers, we looked to recent co-op history; many early food co-op activists are still involved today. We reached out to cooperators—both white and people of color—who might have interesting responses to our questions. Not only about how food co-ops became white, but also how they might become more racially inclusive.

The people who participated in our project have a wealth of co-op experience. While no one claimed expertise, they were willing to share their thoughts about race and food co-ops, gleaned from personal experiences and reflections, as a starting point for further discussion and exploration.

Below is a summary of what we have heard. This summary will, by definition, lack the nuance and specificity provided by our participants in their individual narratives. We encourage you to read the narratives themselves, not only for a fuller understanding of participants' perspectives, but also to spark your own conversations about race and its impact on your co-op community.

## How food co-ops became white

Summarizing what we heard during our interviews was complicated; many ideas overlapped, were interrelated, or were even contradictory. Creating precise definitions was not our goal, but rather, an exploration of possible causes regarding why retail food co-ops are primarily white institutions. In order to solve a problem, we think it helpful to consider its cause. Following are some possible causes of racial homogeneity in food co-ops organized into categories based on what we've synthesized from the conversations we've had.

### CULTURAL NORMS

#### Comfort with people like us

Comfort was a concept raised by many participants. Some felt that there was a sense of comfort in racial isolation that keeps white food co-ops from reaching out to other racial communities. Others described the discomfort people of color might feel participating in all white organizations. One participant described food co-ops as white spaces that were welcoming to people of color only if they "want to be here with us like this."

#### Counterculture connections

Many sixties era food co-ops were started by people immersed in a counter-culture that questioned prevailing norms. Many food co-ops have continued to identify with this cultural milieu, attracting people who share these values or self-identification, and potentially off-putting to those who don't.

#### Believing it's enough to say "everyone's welcome"

Saying something is true doesn't necessarily make it so. Some participants felt that a belief that it's enough to say "everyone's welcome" might hinder a co-op's

willingness to examine the possibility that their organizational culture might exclude certain individuals, especially around race.

### Cliques

Paradoxically, given that many cooperators feel that "everyone's welcome" to join their co-ops (see above), some participants described even good co-ops as feeling "cliquish," i.e. exclusive, or like they were excluding or not admitting others.

### Social networks

People belong to food co-ops because people they know belong to them. This perspective posits that co-ops are white because the majority of owners are culturally "white" and not actually welcoming to people who aren't already part of this social network.

### White culture

White culture was also called out as a reason for the racial makeup of today's food co-ops. While a culture might be invisible to those for whom it is "normal," cooperators may not recognize that their organizations may have a racial culture that could be uncomfortable for other races.

## ECONOMIC DISPARITIES

### Access to capital

Typical food co-op start-up costs are in the millions of dollars. Communities of color, divested from through both public policy and "white flight," have fewer resources than white communities. And conventional banks typically won't fund projects that they deem undercapitalized, a challenging catch-22 for poor communities wanting to invest in their own development.

### Assumptions that food co-ops are for the white middle class

White food co-ops are essentially the face of the co-op movement today, leading some people of color to believe that co-ops are solely for the white middle class, the predominant users of this resource. Yet, food co-ops proliferated in black communities prior to the civil rights movement. While most would-be cooperators don't know the breadth of U.S. food co-op history, and that the model is not race or class specific, blacks cooperative efforts have been especially invisible. (Often, their co-ops were necessarily clandestine—many black businesses were torched and participants lynched by whites whose livelihood depended on black economic dependence.)

### Economic status

Some participants see "health food" as a luxury item, accessible only to people in higher income brackets. And that food co-ops, which have frequently developed in college towns, primarily serve the college educated, who overwhelmingly come from the upper and middle classes. Some participants also felt that food co-ops aren't interested in serving people with low incomes, who are disproportionately people of color.

### High prices reflecting supply chain injustices

Food co-ops' local, small-store focus frequently results in a higher cost structure than larger grocery competitors. Striving to pay workers and producers fairly frequently results in higher priced goods, making people with low incomes harder to serve. People of color are over-represented in these lower income brackets.

### Lack of resources, survival mode

While food co-ops and their member-owners may have had sympathy for other struggles, they are often barely able to survive themselves.

## EXCLUSIVITY

### Assumptions that people of color aren't interested in healthy food

Some food co-ops may assume that people of color aren't interested in healthy food, and may neglect outreach to people of color based on this false belief.

### Elitism

Co-op marketing often describes products as "the best, handcrafted, lovingly sourced." This can be perceived as "not for everyone" or "elitist and unwelcoming to certain populations."

### Rigidity

Many participants believe that the rigidity with which some food co-ops hold their beliefs about what

people should eat contributes to their racial insularity by excluding those who don't believe as others think they should. These "food rules" make some co-ops unattractive to people who don't want to eat that way or can't afford it.

### Type of food sold

While food co-ops over the years have sold a wide variety of foods, including so-called "conventional" foods, most food co-ops that have remained viable businesses are those that have specialized in organic and natural foods. Some participants see this specialization as a barrier to racial diversity, and that the focus on a particular product line has excluded those who don't eat that way. Additionally, an emphasis on product line "purity" could potentially exclude items that might be popular with people of color.

## RACIAL INSULARITY

### Lack of awareness, interest, effort

Several participants criticized what they saw as food co-ops' lack of interest in racial issues. And, at least one participant commented that while people of color may occasionally find their way into food co-ops, co-ops don't typically make any effort to either attract or retain them.

### Local priority

One participant noted that food co-ops frequently have a distinctly local focus, serving primarily their immediate neighborhoods. As U.S. neighborhoods are generally racially segregated, this focus has contributed to racial insularity.

### Unexamined Racism

Some participants noticed white people being hired over people of color who were otherwise qualified. Also, some participants felt that food co-ops are frequently inadequate in their responses to incidents of racism, making either no effort or insufficient effort to address race issues when they come up.

### Different priorities

Many participants felt that white food co-ops' main interests are healthy food options and a particular lifestyle, while people of color are likely to be concerned with greater social issues like racial oppression.

# How to increase racial diversity in food co-ops

We also heard from our participants about what they thought food co-ops could do to increase diversity. Despite some of the issues inherent to making an organization more inclusive, participants overall felt optimistic about food co-ops accepting the challenges and taking steps to make change. Below is a summary of participants' ideas about how to increase racial diversity in food co-ops:

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

### Listen to and gather feedback from the community

Engage your community in discussions about issues facing your community; promote these discussions in your co-ops. People of color may have a different experience or perception of your co-op than you intend. Listen to their feedback, and make changes based on what you hear. Learn how to be welcoming to people of other races. There is not one size fits all.

### Demonstrate that the co-op has a stake in the community

Show that you are not there to take, but to give back. Build trust by demonstrating your stake in the community. Tell your communities about the benefits of belonging to and supporting food co-ops. Share how co-ops give back to their communities, and have a triple bottom line—people, planet, and profit—that benefits both workers and consumers. Educate the community about what a co-op is and what it stands for.

### Hire staff from the community

Pay attention to racial diversity in your community and hire for what you want your co-op to be. Make sure you include people of color throughout your organization, including in leadership positions. Invest in making this happen.

### Hire an outreach person

Hire someone from the community who already has connections in the community you wish to serve.

### Learn from other co-ops

Look to other co-ops who are making progress; listen to them and learn from their experiences.

### Review marketing materials

Pay attention to race in your outreach materials; reflect people of color and low-income experiences. Focus your outreach efforts on specific audiences that you want to invite (and find ways to make them feel welcome when they arrive).

### Partner with people of color

Collaborate and partner with existing organizations of people of color, as well as food justice organizations. Organize nationally. Cultivate organizational relationships across race.

### Price accessibility

Offer affordable options at your co-op for people who may have low incomes, a category in which people of color are disproportionately represented.

## OVERCOME BIAS

### Question preconceptions

Accept that your co-op may have unconscious biases about people of color. Learn about and address those biases, especially the myth that people of color are not interested in healthy eating, or that they need to be taught how to eat healthfully.

### Accept white discomfort

Accept that there may be some initial discomfort in cross-racial experiences, and understand that people of color are likely already experiencing this discomfort. White cooperators could consider becoming willing to be uncomfortable and expanding their tolerance of difference, as well as being willing to consider, and value, the comfort of others as well as their own.

*—continued on page x*

**Take an anti-oppression stance**
Learn about racism and oppression and take a stand against them. Champion inclusion. Invest in these efforts.

**Commit to personal growth**
Make an effort to learn about and understand people who are different from you, including differences of race and class.

**Take care of people of color already at the co-op**
Be cognizant of the experience of people of color who are already using your store, or participating in your staff and/or leadership. Make sure they are treated equitably and fairly.

**Incorporate equality and equity values**
Offer the same rights, and expect the same responsibilities from everyone. Make equity an ongoing theme in your co-op.

**Offer product variety**
Offer food options for consumers when possible. Let the consumer decide for themselves what they want to eat.

## PROMOTE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

**Co-op principles**
Recognize the commitment to racial justice and equity as embodied by the co-op principles and values. Focus on living those ideals.

**Offer training for customer service and conflict resolution**
Learn how to treat all customers respectfully, regardless of race. Get trainings on how to resolve inevitable conflicts when they arise, and settle conflicts respectfully.

**Learn about effects of racism, hold discussions about race**
Learn about and address societal racism. Discuss racism—deeply and honestly; link these discussions to the cooperative principles and values. Keep having honest and open conversations about race.

**Connect people of color to their cooperative legacy and history**
There have been numerous co-ops started by people of color in communities of color. Tell these stories, too.

# Ann Hoyt

**Ann Hoyt is an internationally known expert on cooperatives. She is an emeritus Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a consumer cooperative specialist. She has served on many national cooperative boards of directors. Ann began her 25-year directorship of the annual Consumer Cooperative Management Association (CCMA) in 1988. Her love of teaching led to work in board education and governance, and the launch of an intensive education program for food cooperative managers, the Cooperative Management Institute (CMI). Ann became a member of the Cooperative Hall of Fame in 2015.**

Ann Hoyt, the middle child in a white family of three children, grew up in middle-class and wealthy suburbs. She has spent most of her life in Wisconsin, but lived her teen and college years in California. Her father worked as a technical editor, and her mother was a social worker before getting married. As a child and an adult, Ann had moved often before settling into her career as a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

An important historical racial event impacted Ann's formative years. Her grandmother and great aunt were long time enthusiastic members of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). In 1939 the DAR refused to allow opera singer Marion Anderson to perform in DAR Constitution Hall because of her race. As a result, Ann's mother announced she would never join the DAR even though it "was expected" of her. Ann remembered her mother's long-standing argument with her mother and aunt (that started before Ann was born) over the issue. "They had many and loud arguments about the values of the Daughters," but it wasn't until much later that Ann understood the deep-seated family conflict was about race. As a young woman, Ann asked her mother about joining the DAR when she heard members could stay at DAR headquarters when visiting Washington, DC. "She told me 'Ann Margaret if you do that I will never speak to you again.'"

When she was growing up, Ann was expected to go to college, and then "do something women do" which would certainly include becoming a wife and mother. "People don't believe this, but I didn't really have any long-term goals when I was young, besides getting married. Later, I expected I'd probably work at something and what I worked at would probably change." Ann pursued a degree in sociology from the University of Minnesota because it was interesting. Yet she didn't think it was "practical." She definitely didn't set out to become a professor. That came later.

*"My motivation was economic justice, which made me an outlier for many years"*

After she returned to California, Ann worked at a community health center in an African American neighborhood in San Francisco. She was the only white person working there. "It was my first visceral experience of what it means to be a minority…It really influenced my understanding of how it must feel for other people, what it feels like to stand out because of your skin color and be the only one."

In 1968, before she encountered cooperatives through her academic work, Ann volunteered to be part of a peace caravan sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee. "We were an interracial group that traveled to Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina to speak out against the Vietnam War. Back then, interracial groups traveling together was not the safest thing to do. On that trip I often ended

up staying with African American families and it taught me a lot about what it meant to be black in the South."

One very hot day the car broke down on a rural road in South Carolina. "We got towed to the nearest gas station in a very small town where we were told that the car couldn't be fixed and that we would be killed if we didn't get out of town before nightfall. Of course, a mixed-race group of outsiders traveling together was something of a sensation in the town. Soon the sheriff arrived, parked across the street, and sauntered over to tell us we were in a lot of trouble and he couldn't guarantee our safety. True to his word, he offered no help and spent the rest of the day laughing and joking with the men who were threatening us…we spent many tense hours in that town trying to find a way to leave. We finally got out of town safely at dusk. None of this would have happened if we had been a group of young whites."

**Discovering Co-ops**

After that summer, Ann married Bill, a high school friend, and they moved to a small town in the foothills east of Sacramento. Eventually, Bill encouraged her to continue her education at the University of California, Davis. She became the first graduate student in the university's consumer economics program. There she took a course that required a paper on a community organization. She discovered a low-income pre-order food co-op (similar to a buying club) and wrote about it.

The small pre-order co-op was part of the Sacramento Consumers Cooperative, a coordinated group of 85 pre-orders. Ann went on to become more involved in the co-op and eventually based her master's thesis on it. She organized many buying groups and noticed that when co-op members met to order food they started talking with each other about other things they could do together, like sharing babysitting and lawn mowing. "It was a good lesson in the adaptability of the model to meet people's needs. My primary motivation was not food, natural food or organics. My motivation was economic justice, which made me an outlier for many years."

When she married Bill, they agreed to an egalitarian marriage, and after their son was born, each took turns working and financially supporting the family for three years while the other pursued other goals, usually getting more education. One year, Bill chose to move to Kansas to study horticulture. To support the family, Ann got a job teaching at Kansas State University. After several years, the department chair made it clear she needed to get a PhD to keep her job. "I became an accidental PhD."

While in Kansas Ann kept her ties to "co-op people." In the early 1980's they encouraged her to run for the board of the National Cooperative Bank (NCB) as a consumer cooperative representative. The food cooperatives mounted a very successful campaign and elected Ann and others to the board in 1981.

*"Not only do food co-ops have to overcome their rigidity about the products they carry, but like all of us, they have to deal with their racism and other baggage."*

The NCB board provided a tremendous education in consumer cooperatives. For example, Ann met many more African Americans in the housing and credit union sectors than in food co-ops. Although those sectors were more integrated than the food co-ops, she wasn't sure why. About the food co-ops, though, she said, "I have thought about it a lot, and at times felt exasperated by my food co-op colleagues," she said. Ann thought that the early rigid adherence to "food rules" unnecessarily made food co-ops unattractive to people who didn't want to change their diet to natural, organic or vegetarian or couldn't afford it.

"Food co-op motives were well intentioned, in focusing on healthy food and how it's raised, but that primarily, but not always, became a luxury of higher income groups and the college educated…The best intentions worked against some laudable goals."

As food co-ops seek to be more inclusive, Ann said, "Not only do food co-ops have to overcome their rigidity about the products they carry, but like all of us, they have to deal with their racism and other baggage," she said.

Based on removing those barriers, Ann thought co-ops should look at how they can serve all kinds of people. She offered some thoughts on how this work could continue.

- Consider the product lines: what products all kinds of people like to eat, how they cook them, and what they can afford.
- Work at recognizing and overcoming biases and invite different cultures into the co-op.
- Hire and train people that represent the diversity in the local community.
- Be conscious of the co-op as a business and provide the same member rights and expect the same member responsibilities of everyone.
- Think differently about governance, in terms of boards learning together and supporting diversity throughout the whole organization.

"This is an especially complex challenge," Ann said. "There's a lot to learn, and learn together. It isn't sufficient to have just one passionate person." She also believes that the competitive pressures of today's grocery industry make it even more challenging. Yet she's optimistic because she's seen co-ops in grocery and other sectors achieve progress. She thinks that people committed to change can start out with divided groups and bring them together in service of their common interests and mutual success.

# Annie Young

**Annie Young is a Minneapolis based community organizer, event planner and activist with over 45 years of experience. A locally and nationally known spokesperson who works for peace, environmental protection, ecological building, social justice, and the development of healthy communities, she is also involved in the food co-ops, environment and environmental justice movements. She currently is an elected officeholder in Minneapolis serving 28 years as a citywide Commissioner on the Minneapolis Park Board. She is wrapping up her career with the opening of the Wirth Cooperative Grocery store—a food co-op on the Northside of Minneapolis.**

Annie was born and adopted in 1942 in Los Angeles by a white, well-off Missouri Synod Lutheran couple of German descent. At the time, there were 25,000 "war babies" that had been up for adoption, and she had settled into a rather unusual upbringing of comfort and travel with her parents. "I was not raised in an African American community," she said, and had not considered that she wasn't white.

Annie Young said she never thought much about her racial background when she was growing up, but that changed when she did a DNA test five years ago that revealed a genetic makeup of European and West African ethnicities. "At that point, I accepted that I am biracial," she said.

A few years ago, after learning more about her racial background, she was visiting an uncle and asked why neither he nor her parents ever talked to her about race. "I asked him, 'how come you guys have never ever talked about what color I might be,' and he said, 'well it doesn't make any difference, we just thought you were a bright, smart, young person.' And I think he really honestly believed that. I'm not sure that they saw color." She attributes their denial of her racial difference as generational, that people from the World War II generation didn't like to talk about it.

*"It costs a fortune to start a food co-op."*

The best part of her childhood was the opportunity to travel. Her parents believed that it helped make a person well-rounded and sophisticated. "My parents really believed that travel was as important as books," she said. "I've read every historical marker that's possible," she joked. She grew up in Denver attending Lutheran schools the entire 12 years, and moved back to California in the 1960s to go to college.

Although she admits to "partying" her way through school, she found herself sparked by political and environmental issues. "I hate corporations, cubicles and little boxes."

### Becoming an activist and cooperator

By 1968 she was divorced and on her way to the Chicago Democratic National Convention. It was the beginning of her life as a community organizer and public servant.

In the 1970s when she first became aware of food co-ops, Annie "landed" in Sioux Falls, South Dakota with about 30 other hippies who had moved out there to establish a commune. "[I was] raising organic [food], gardening, learning about canning, learning this and learning that, living with people. The whole routine led me into the co-ops and buying clubs." The commune started a buying club that was supplied by people who would drive from Minneapolis to South Dakota to deliver food. "We'd drive up in station wagons or pickup trucks, anything that would break down along the way, of course, and get our food."

"Food co-ops began because people wanted brown rice and whole wheat flour. And where were you supposed to get them? It is as basic as that," Annie said.

Annie remembers the 1970s as a time with a lot of coordinating fervor for food co-ops. She was one of its leaders, and it turned out she had a talent for start-ups and creating new things. The All Co-op Assembly had formed and she was a part of it. "At the meetings, we had dances and potlucks…I worked with a group of women…and we gathered food facts and wrote the first co-op cookbook."

In 1975, she moved to Minneapolis to work at the alternative new warehouse—DANCe. Annie had been part of resisting the Cooperative Organization's (CO) attempted hostile takeover of the warehouse and food co-ops during a time in Minneapolis food co-op history known as the Co-op Wars.[1] Annie then moved to Winona, Minn., where she was part of the Wiscoy Valley Land Cooperative as well as member and education coordinator at Famine Foods Co-op (now Bluff Country Co-op). She was hired as a collective member at Seward Community Co-op in 1981 in Minneapolis to do member education and board development.

She recollected people in food co-ops got along, but there was a definite "cast of characters." In the food co-op movement, she said, "Everybody was white, unless you were a Black Panther or Angela Davis." In the areas where she lived in South Dakota and Minnesota, there were indigenous groups, but they were not involved very much in food co-ops. She thinks those parts of the country, and the cities, were very Scandinavian and majority white until widespread immigration occurred in different areas in the 1990s.

About her time serving food co-ops, Annie said she enjoyed it. "I met wonderful people. Smoked a lot of pot. Danced. It was all part of being accepted. I didn't have to answer to anyone. Nobody questioned me or who I was or who I am."

Yet it wasn't until she got involved in the Wirth Food Co-op startup, located in a racially and economically diverse area of North Minneapolis, that she began to understand firsthand some of the racial and economic issues impacting both established and startup food co-ops as they seek to serve more people from more areas of society.

"It costs a fortune to start a food co-op," she said. She cited the difficulty in finding startup capital, whether it comes from grants, foundations or banks. For Wirth Co-op, they've had to raise $1.5 million from the community.

*"People need to realize co-ops are about community, ownership and democracy. It's what makes us different."*

"What can we do? We are starting more co-ops in communities of color because we have realized the challenge, but having a horrible time getting the money together. We haven't been having trouble getting members. We have over 700 members now…the most important part of keeping that co-op going will be education."

**Importance of neighborhood food enterprises and education**

Annie thinks that education and outreach are critical for gaining trust and understanding in a community. "People need to realize co-ops are about community, ownership and democracy. It's what makes us different." This in and of itself requires hard work and community organizing to galvanize the necessary support for the idea. "It takes a lot to diversify."

Annie also thinks that partnerships with and by people of color organizing around food can be a powerful pathway to neighborhood and co-op development. She cited Appetite for Change, Sweetie Pie commissary kitchen, and the Breaking Bread Café & Catering located in North Minneapolis as being just as integral as the Wirth Food Co-op for bringing more equity and social justice into the local economy. "All kinds of things are happening in the movement, and when you look at the revitalization of North Minneapolis, that core is around food…it's showing people really do want this food…when I think about

[1] *Storefront Revolution: Food Co-ops and the Counterculture*, by Craig Cox, Rutgers University Press, 1994.

greater access, I think we need to have more stores in those communities," Annie said.

She also knows that there's a discomfort some people of color have just walking into a food co-op. That's why she thinks hiring from the community and having mentoring and leadership opportunities for staff is so important to the movement. "It's not enough to be a dishwasher or bagger."

Annie currently lives in an apartment near a Minneapolis light rail stop. From her 6th floor apartment she has a view of both downtown and the institute. Her 28 years as a commissioner for the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board has given her a broad understanding of racial equity within Minneapolis and its various neighborhoods and enclaves of various groups of people.

"I'm 75 years old. I see things in circles." After the DNA test, she gained a different perspective. She believes people have much more varied backgrounds than what initial impressions might lead them to believe. "I didn't realize how much I looked African American because I'd never considered it. We have become global in our knowledge of the world. Therefore one's race is identified like art is, that of the beholder—what a person sees."

# Bill Gessner

**Bill Gessner is a consultant with Columinate with over 30 years of experience assisting over 250 co-op expansion projects. His primary focus is assisting food co-ops in the planning and implementation of expansion, relocation, and new store projects. Bill was the recipient of the NCB Honored Cooperator award in 1997, and the CCMA Cooperative Service award in 2002. In May 2012, he was inducted into the Cooperative Development Foundation (CDF) Cooperative Hall of Fame.**

Born in Fargo, ND, Bill Gessner grew up an only child to middle-class parents in Minot, a town of about 25,000 in north central North Dakota. His father was branch manager of a paint and glass company; his mother sold magazine subscriptions from home, but also worked in a women's clothing store. His family attended the Presbyterian Church regularly, largely through the influence of Bill's deeply religious mother.

It was through his father that Bill got his exposure to business. The Minot branch of Fargo Glass and Paint was a combination of a retail business, a wholesale paint distributorship, and a glazing glass installation company, which installed glass in commercial developments. "I went to work there in 9th grade cleaning toilets. By the time I left at the end of high school I was the number three person, and somehow absorbed a lot and learned a lot about basic business." Bill's father put Bill in charge of a new picture framing division, which became quite successful.

When Bill was growing up, there weren't many people of color in Minot, though there were several nearby Indian reservations, the most well known being Standing Rock. Bill recalls being exposed to what he calls "myths" about Native Americans; that they were kept in reservations to protect others from their "savage and brutish" ways. He credits his gradual awakening to the tenor of the times, and to his college experiences in the 60's in Grand Forks, ND. There was an air force base just outside of Minot, and it was through the base that he had his first encounters with blacks. He was a student manager of his high school basketball team, and two black kids whose families lived at the airbase were on the team.

One pivotal interaction with a black person strongly impacted Bill's life. One day, during his junior high school years, he and a friend were walking through a neighborhood park when a black man asked them if they wanted to play tennis. "I yelled out, 'Yes, I want to play!'" The man, named Cornelius, was stationed at the airbase. "He taught my friend and I how to play…I was always someone who loved sports but never felt I could do anything…I took to it. And I've always been very, very grateful for that. Whenever I step out on a tennis court, I always think of Cornelius."

After graduating high school, Bill moved away from Minot to attend college in Grand Forks, ND. Opportunities for interaction with non-white people remained rare. Bill recalls, "I didn't have much exposure to multiculturalism."

Bill later moved to Cincinnati, OH to do graduate work in philosophy, but eventually tired of the academic world and left school. Organic food and farming had been an ongoing interest, so he decided to learn farming; two or three years of farming experience began with an internship at a horse, raspberry and asparagus farm in West Virginia. He also worked on small grain and dairy farms in southeastern Minnesota. While there, he tried to get started in the maple syrup business, but his efforts were interrupted by a major health issue. That experience increased

his interest in natural and organic foods.

Regaining his health, and returning to Grand Forks, ND, Bill noticed how food co-ops had been evolving in the upper Midwest, and was fascinated by what he saw. He became coordinator of a food co-op effort fueled by volunteer labor, eventually becoming its manager. A few years later, he moved to Minneapolis to become part of a worker-owned co-op produce wholesaler. Over time, the workers grew frustrated with collective management and shifted to a general manager structure; as no one else wanted the general manager job, Bill took it on, a job he kept for three years. At some point during his management tenure, he was asked to speak to the board of a retail co-op that had signed a lease for a new space, agreeing to take possession in six weeks, but hadn't done any planning or fundraising. By the end of that evening, Bill had agreed to be the project manager, and they were able to take possession as scheduled and successfully open the co-op six weeks later. It was a big adrenaline rush, and Bill was hooked; he went from that project to more consulting and project management, often working with 25 to 30 co-ops at a time across the country.

In Minneapolis, before that time, the cooperative movement had been sharply divided politically, culminating in what is now known as the "Co-op Wars," which were presumably about whether co-ops should sell "food to the people" (conventional food) or sell food that some activists considered elitist. At times, the movement had turned violent. While the wars were essentially over by the time Bill returned to Minneapolis, some of the tensions were still there.

Getting involved in farm work and food co-ops to Minnesota, he noticed that he was again in a white middle-class monoculture. At the time, Bill was very aware of the whiteness of the cooperative movement, but he never thought it was something he could change. He recalls, from post-college years spent in racially diverse environments, being "intrigued and fascinated. I loved the ethnicity and the multiculturalism and the range of income levels and all that."

**Passionate about the Co-op Model**

Why does he find multi-racial co-ops exciting? "To see the cooperative model brought to more people and not just a narrow group…is what excites me most about co-ops. I was drawn in originally by the food, then became more passionate about the model itself. And being able to see efforts in other parts of the country that were doing much better at diversity than co-ops in the upper Midwest."

Bill met people of color very infrequently in his cooperative work, though he remembers Jaimie Markham (of the now defunct West Bank Food Co-op) as a leader and a visionary. Bill recalls being asked, in the mid-90's, to help open a grocery store in Wilmington, NC, in primarily a low-income African-American community, "but in the end they weren't able to make it happen." When Bill started consulting with Brooklyn's Flatbush Food Co-op in 1997, he was astonished by the racial diversity. "Flatbush, when I first stepped into it—was the most poorly merchandised store I'd ever seen. Dirty, customers yelling at staff, and staff yelling at customers, 17 languages being spoken…yet it was very exciting. Now they are one of the most financially successful co-ops in the country and have the most diversity in its membership. It's a growing organization…they've done a great job."

*"To see the cooperative model brought to more people and not just a narrow group …is what excites me most about co-ops."*

Yet, nationally, food co-ops have remained overwhelmingly white. "Ten years ago there was starting to be data showing how the natural food consumer was not just white anymore…there was really getting to be a high level of African-American and other races and cultures—but our food co-ops have not contributed to that." Why does Bill think this is so? "It is hard for people to step over the threshold into these 'clubs'. Where you might think that you have to be a member, you have to work there, you have to do or be or eat good food or do something. So it's hard for anybody; it's hard for people who haven't stepped over to step over. When on-site in my work with food co-op managers I often invite them to join with me in doing an assessment of how welcoming their co-op store is to everyone in their community, starting from

approaching from the outside, and stepping over that threshold. How could this co-op be more welcoming? We usually find some quick ideas that could readily make the co-op more welcoming and inviting. And that is just a beginning step."

**Commitment and Learning**

What would it take for today's food co-ops to become more racially diverse? "Commitment and learning…I think if we really wanted to do it, 'we' being the food co-op system, we could probably make some progress with it. We'd need to learn a lot about it and about the barriers we create."

What would it take for food co-op's to have that type of commitment? "I would go back to the co-op principles and say, are we committed to these principles and do we understand what they are and how can they guide us? Is there a framework within the principles that would help us examine how we got into this, how it evolved to this point and give us the basis for trying to change it? Are we truly compliant with the co-op principles? Can't we do better with principles like 'open membership,' 'education,' and 'concern for community'?"

"I always think of co-ops and co-op development as a dualistic nature, a duality of the business and the cooperative; you need to be strong as a business and strong as a cooperative…If there is a commitment to continuous improvement and increasing strength both as a business and as a cooperative wouldn't it make sense to try to really dig in and examine this and try to make some progress with it?" While Bill knows that food co-ops have a lot of competing interests, he encourages them to be forward thinking, "Let's not put racial equity on the back burner for another 20 years."

*"Let's not put racial equity on the back burner for another 20 years."*

# David Gutknecht

**Dave Gutknecht grew up in a small-town, farm co-op economy, and he has been active in food co-ops since 1971. Through year 1973 he was a leader in Minnesota of the nationwide resistance to the war in Southeast Asia. After winning a U.S. Supreme Court case, he was retried for draft refusal, convicted and sentenced in federal court, and served most of two years behind bars. His bent toward writing and advocacy journalism then shifted to the co-op movement. During the 1970s Dave volunteered in the collective publishing the *Scoop*, a regional co-op publication; he was editor of food co-ops' first national trade magazine, Moving Food (1979-1985); and he has been editor since 1985 of *Cooperative Grocer*.**

Dave grew up in the 1950's, the youngest of four children, in a proud working class family in Winthrop, a small farm town in southern Minnesota. He remembers his childhood fondly, with an extended family that provided a positive social network. Dave's father was a veteran of WWII who held a variety of jobs, such as school-bus driver, bartender, and the like; Dave's mother was the head of the household but also held a job in the local cooperative creamery.

Both of his parents had grown up in farm families, and like many in their generation, moved from the farm into town. Though Dave's family never had a lot of money, they didn't feel shame about their financial circumstances; he grew up with a kind of class outlook that never took for granted what he had. He was raised to value hard work and with a strong sense of personal responsibility. Life was not without its hardships, however, Dave's father, traumatized by his war experiences, drank and smoked himself to death by the early age of 55.

Dave recalls Winthrop as a very white town; his school was entirely white except for one well-liked Mexican-American family. He had limited exposure to non-white townspeople. Television was how a lot of people in Winthrop learned about people of color; Dave's family didn't own a TV until he was a teenager.

When reflecting on what he learned about race growing up, Dave responds, "Fairly little, at first. I was a victim of white privilege and surrounded by white people—though I did like listening to Louis Armstrong, Harry Belafonte, and Ella Fitzgerald." However, being a voracious reader with a strong social outlook and interest in politics, Dave learned more about issues of race through the nascent civil rights movement. And though Dave knew very few people of color directly, he was inspired by seeing black and white people working for social justice together: so much so that as an early teen he gave a class presentation about the civil rights movement.

*"There was concern about racism and sympathy to other struggles, but I don't think much ability or efforts to reach across that divide."*

"I saw courageous examples from afar— people getting fire-hosed and attacked by dogs, Walter Collins and family in New Orleans, the 'Hell no, we won't go' campaign of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee)" and the "tremendous example of Mohammed Ali." Dave also admired A. Phillip Randolph and Bayard Rustin. "World War II and post-World War II era draft resisters were key to breaking down the segregation of federal prisons." Unlike some of his peers, Dave never felt threatened by the demands of the civil rights movement; all of

this fit into the larger picture of social justice that was his passion.

### A War Resistance Community

Dave's co-op connection came primarily through his involvement in the anti-war movement. He recalls that for many years, in Minnesota and Wisconsin, "We called it a war resistance community…In the early '70s I would go from an anti-war meeting to an early food co-op meeting…and half were the same people, a mostly homogenous, young white set. We wanted to do something more positive and sustaining." They recognized some real problems in the food system, especially that the food supply was of poor quality and increasingly out of local control.

Food co-ops were only one example of a larger solidarity economy he described. "We had women's health clinics, collective this, that, and other things, housing, other enterprises, book shops, hardware stores, etc.…Food co-ops became an area I focused on because it had strong interest up here [in Minneapolis]."

Simultaneously, Dave's anti-war resistance actions had reached all the way to the Supreme Court in *United States vs. Gutknecht*. Though the court's ruling in Dave's favor had a major impact on the draft resistance movement, it didn't prevent him from being drafted a second time. Dave refused to serve, was arrested, convicted and served two years of a three-year sentence, briefly interrupting his co-op career.

Reflecting on the racial makeup of the early 1970's co-ops he was involved in, Dave describes them as mostly white; at that time, Minneapolis was an overwhelmingly white town. Dave adds, "People looked in terms of their own neighborhood mostly. Which is why the relationship with Northside Minneapolis [a majority black neighborhood] was mostly arm's length…We were trying to organize a small, local store." At that time, Dave's neighborhood had, he recalls, the highest urban Native American population in the country, yet they weren't involved in Mill City Foods, Dave believes, possibly because "we probably couldn't offer them much in the way of the groceries they wanted, given our limited resources." And on the rare occasions of Native Americans or black Americans came by the co-op, "I don't think we made any significant efforts to keep them involved."

On today's mostly white food co-ops, Dave thinks their homogeneity could have resulted from a narrow outlook in their origins. "I think it had to do with lack of resources and racial insularity, here as well as most places. There was concern about racism and sympathy to other struggles, but I don't think much ability or efforts to reach across that divide. Of course, as small co-op businesses we were barely able to survive ourselves."

*"The problems of injustice in the food system are so deep that we'll have to ally with others to really have a major impact..."*

Also, Dave notes that co-ops are bent on "producing social justice for farmers and farmworkers, and that means higher-priced goods," making people in lower economic strata harder to serve. Dave sees food co-ops as in the crosshairs of some deep issues. "Our whole food system is based on abuse of labor, including underpaid labor whether documented or not. If we are going to solve the immigration issue," which is partly a racial issue, "we're going to have to pay more for our avocado."

### A Problem for all Americans

Talking about issue of race today, Dave mentions the recent documentary, "I Am Not Your Negro," based on James Baldwin's unfinished manuscript *Remember This House*. "I like his point, and I could say it again and again that racism is a problem for all Americans. It's a problem for white America. It's the American problem." Dave recommends Osha Gray Davidson's *The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South* as a moving example of racial reconciliation. He also recommends Nancy Isenburg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. "So-called 'white trash' were encouraged to think they were better than 'negroes,' which kept everyone in their place…It reinforces my belief that we have to have more recognition of class as a fundamental issue in our country."

That said, Dave is much encouraged by recent

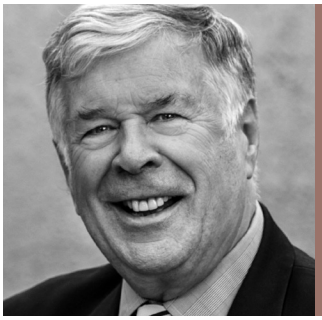
changes in the food co-op movement and what's been accomplished; he mentions current efforts to build food co-ops in black communities. And, conversations about race going on in the co-op world, are, "in themselves, a big improvement." Seward Community Co-op's racially integrated Friendship store is now Dave's home co-op. And he notes that Seward currently has a Board that's very racially diverse. Reflecting on this positive change, Dave says that "I don't think those of us in the [co-op] movement leadership ever forgot our social justice concerns. We never forgot that this is a racially divided and racially oppressive country." And while he hasn't seen much progress in eliminating racial oppression, he views the increased conversation and awareness as a necessary step.

Dave believes it's important to hire diverse staff as a one way to move food co-ops forward. "Reflection of diversity needs to be seen in staff, so that when people of color go in there they see people that look like them. It is basic, but it's actually very important to the whole effort to be more welcoming. This requires a conscious effort by the co-op to move in that direction."

Also, co-ops need to understand the communities they are trying to serve. "Talk to them; be more inclusive of them."

Returning to the issue of prices, Dave supports "basic food programs with lower margins, SNAP recipient support, food policy funding support for getting more fresh foods into people's diets. Willy Street Co-op in Madison has some great examples currently." Yet, attempting to combat high prices, while keeping a focus on social justice, requires a more concerted, national effort.

"The problems of injustice in the food system are so deep that we'll have to ally with others to really have a major impact…Co-ops, besides just trying to survive and thrive as local businesses, should reach out to other organizations around racial justice and agricultural labor justice and things like that. There is a lot of educating to be done."



# David Thompson

**David Thompson is the author of *Weavers of Dreams*, co-author of *Cooperation Works* and *Cooperative Business in the USA* and President of Twin Pines Cooperative Foundation. He is also a member of the Cooperative Hall of Fame. David is writing a book about the role of cooperatives in the anti-slavery and civil rights movements.**

David Thompson said that for as long as he can remember, he has been a person who sought to think about himself and his white identity within the context of the larger world.

He believes this was because he was born in June 1942 in England with Hitler's armies 18 miles away on the other side of the English Channel. It was a pivotal time in world history as well as his own story. England's post-war struggles informed his childhood experiences. He would spend his adult life striving for peace.

David's earliest years were spent in Blackpool, the largest seaside resort in Britain. "Everyone in the north of England and the industrial working class would go there on holiday. My parents were part of entertaining the millions that came," he said. "That camaraderie of community was also built into my DNA." By the time he was eleven, his parents had moved to Boston, England and ran a pub there.

Boston, England was where the group later known as the Pilgrim Fathers had been imprisoned for their beliefs. An important Puritan school had been founded there in 1556; it is where he went to school, and a number of future governors of the new colony of Massachusetts had been students there. David described Boston, England as a very conservative white town, lower middle class, agricultural, with a Puritan holdover vibe, different from Blackpool, which was more liberal, carefree and diverse.

The move to Boston would provide David the foundation for unique life experiences that informed his perspective on race. In 1953, England leased a nearby airbase to the United States Air Force. On weekends, a bus would come to Boston to drop off airmen for R&R. "When they got off the bus, all of the white airmen went one way, and the black airmen went another," David noticed.

He remembered the arrival of the black U.S. airmen caused great consternation in the town. Black airmen had trouble renting off-base housing from locals, and hotels, restaurants and bars would not serve them.

*"Our food co-ops don't seem to be a crossroads."*

The black airmen came to his parents' pub because it was the only pub in town that would serve them. "Publicans in town had gotten together and decided that they were going to ban black airmen from being customers at the local pubs," David said. "My mother and father were the only ones who refused to honor the landlords' pact." Their stance was a point of contention with local townspeople, and his family paid a price by being boycotted by them.

Yet the black American servicemen brought a whole new world to David's doorstep, redolent with soft voices and southern accents. David and his younger brother would play the black servicemen's records over the pub's loudspeaker and learn of another style of music.

His family befriended a handsome young black man named Wes who was very generous to David's family, bringing them rationed goods from the base store. Wes fell in love with a local white woman, and their romance, considered forbidden at the time, flourished under the family's roof. "We had a wonder-

ful reputation among the black airmen, but a terrible one amongst the local people."

### A Young Radical Leaves Home

Despite his parents' more worldly and liberal attitudes, David felt it was imperative that he leave home, and at 15 years old he left home to live in London. Wes gave him a goodbye present—the iconic American Bulova watch—a treasured gift.

In London, David worked at the Grosvenor House hotel as a "tea boy" and he was the only white person who did "washing up" for extra money in the banquet room that served 1,500 people. He learned a lot about the politics of the Caribbean, Nigeria and Ghana from his co-workers and gained an important understanding of the dynamics of European colonialism.

David began to become politically active, gravitating toward anti-war, anti-apartheid and the anti-nuclear movements. "I'm one of the few living people (fifteen at the time of the Ban the Bomb demonstration) who was the first to see the Peace sign unveiled in Trafalgar Square on April 4, 1958," he said. "It looked strange at the time. Now I see it everywhere."

Throughout his life and childhood, David was also connected to the co-op movement. His parents had worked for and were members of the Blackpool Industrial Cooperative Society. "Everything we bought came from the co-op. The coal that came to the back door came from the co-op; the milk that came to the front door came from the co-op…all the money we had was in the co-op bank. Everything had a co-op tint…it was a permanent part of life." When he moved to London, his mother cashed in all her co-op dividend to buy him a suit—his first—that they purchased at the local co-op.

The London Cooperative Society was also present for that April 1958 peace demonstration in Trafalgar Square. The Co-op vans delivered all the sound equipment for the speakers and the Co-op printed the leaflets. "I was aware, oh, the Co-op does this too; it is a supporter of social action. That really made a lifetime impression upon me."

David left England in 1962 to live and work in America. As the union shop steward in a New York restaurant in 1964, he helped break the color bar as the restaurant previously would not hire black waiters. He moved to California in 1967.

### Committing to Cooperation

David found an old wave food co-op in Santa Monica. "I was staring at everything, and someone came up and asked, 'can I help you?' and I said 'maybe, is this like a co-op in England?' and the person said, 'oh yes, we were descended from Rochdale.' I said, 'oh, I lived near Rochdale' and he said to me 'you should be on the board'…I didn't realize I had a birthright!" His cooperative fate was sealed on the spot.

*"The food co-op movement found its strongest adherents in college towns, which themselves tend to be white middle class, within a set of white middle class enclaves."*

Concurrent with his new co-op involvement, David was a college student active in the Democratic Party and was a bodyguard for Robert Kennedy when Kennedy was campaigning in LA, though he was not with Kennedy on the night of the assassination.

To honor Kennedy's memory, he decided to become involved with the United Farm Workers (UFW) and worked with Cesar Chavez (including as his body guard) who asked for David's assistance to engage in picketing and fundraising for UFW and help start a food co-op for farm workers in Dinuba, Calif. David later worked as Western Regional Director for the National Co-op Bank to facilitate financing four Chicano farmworker co-ops which regretfully eventually closed, and three housing cooperatives for Chicano farmworkers—which still exist today.

David was also a co-founder of the natural food co-op Co-Opportunity in Santa Monica, and was a longtime board member of the Davis Food Co-op, in Davis, Calif. where he currently lives.

### Co-ops + Colleges = White

Although David himself has long worked with diverse groups outside of the food co-ops, the food co-ops he was involved with, at least initially, attracted primarily

white patrons. Today, both Davis and Santa Monica communities serve growing Asian and Latino populations, who patronize the co-ops to varying degrees.

David's supposition around why food co-ops tend to be majority white was that natural food co-ops had a strong adherence in college towns, and when food co-ops started to grow, they were developed in locations with favorable income and education demographics.

"The main part of the food co-op movement was a kind of a social imperative built by people like myself…who were in the antiwar movement and were in the civil rights movement, were into back to the land, were into getting the poisons out of our agriculture, and for the most part, except for civil rights, was a very white middle-class movement that found its strongest adherents in college towns, which themselves tend to be white middle-class, within a set of white middle-class enclaves."

He said he is troubled that "there are folks we ought to be crossing paths with, but except for a few co-ops our food co-ops don't seem to be a crossroads."

Throughout his cooperative career, David has written about cooperatives in many sectors. He is also the President of the Twin Pines Cooperative Foundation. He has a strong understanding of co-op financing, "It's a question of infrastructure," and he offered these thoughts: Funding co-op aspirations requires support for the idea and pathways for success—and not many conventional banks are willing to fund co-ops—especially those they deem undercapitalized, systemically putting capital out of reach.

He also said things have changed dramatically in the last 40 years of the new wave food co-ops, where competition is intense and capital scarce. From his perspective, it's important for existing food co-ops to actively seek ways to address inclusivity, and he thinks that it's important to ask and hear directly from communities of color about their priorities.

# Esteban Kelly

**Esteban Kelly is the Executive Director for the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives (USFWC), and is a founder and core trainer with AORTA (Anti-Oppression Resource & Training Alliance), a worker co-op whose consulting supports organizations fighting for social justice and a solidarity economy. He has served on numerous boards including the USFWC, the US Solidarity Economy Network, and the National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA-CLUSA). He was a co-founder and first board President of the cross-sector Philadelphia Area Cooperative Alliance (PACA). During his eight years as a worker-owner at Mariposa Food Co-op, Esteban served on its first board of directors as a staff delegate and co-founded Mariposa's Food Justice and Anti-Racism working group.**

Esteban's story is essentially an immigrant story. Part of a large extended family, Esteban's mother, a hematologist, and father, a small-businessman, immigrated to the United States from Jamaica shortly before Esteban was born. They settled in the fairly affluent Jewish enclave of Melville in Long Island, where they straddled class lines. Esteban explains, they "landed there, leveraged debt and raised us in a community with…a different [higher] class background." He recalls his mother as usually having two or three jobs, "and that really hasn't changed."

Growing up, Esteban developed a nuanced awareness of race and ethnicity; "I literally have been thinking about this since before kindergarten." Esteban's grandmother was Chinese, part of a Jamaican blended family; his father, he explains, "was read as Chinese in Jamaica, and black in the U.S." Esteban, who was born in the U.S., is frequently presumed to be African-American and finds himself frequently correcting folks about his ethnicity. "With certain exceptions, Americans aren't culturally competent. They never spend a moment pondering, maybe that guy is West Indian, [or] Caribbean."

Esteban's elementary school was overwhelmingly Jewish; his high school was somewhat more diverse; there were black students, as well as Southeast Asians, Muslim, Arab, and Caribbean immigrant families—families with new wealth. Like his peers, Esteban had typical middle-class aspirations; "there were times when I wanted to be a doctor or plastic surgeon, or study business or German.…Yet none of these things match my values whatsoever."

*"You're telling us you should be the solution, but aren't accessible to us."*

Esteban first became exposed to cooperative practices as a teenager. He was involved in the suburban youth culture music scene, joining a grassroots collective that used consensus-based processes for decision-making, providing Esteban with a foundation in governance, decision-making, education and training. When he arrived at UC Berkeley and started living in student-owned cooperative housing, he experienced co-ops as familiar. "I think I was able to thrive because I already had a fair amount of exposure to cooperative processes."

Esteban's first co-op experiences were multiracial. "Growing up in [mostly white] suburbs, it felt like a relief to be in co-ops where there was always diverse leadership even if it the membership was still majority white…My exposure to militant critique from people of color came from campus organizing and from being in co-ops."

Esteban saw that co-op's values aligned with his;

he attributes his involvement in cross-sector organizing to his Berkeley student co-op experience. "Within our housing co-op, we had a worker co-op in that we were doing labor together. We had a food co-op in that we ran an industrial kitchen; we cooked and served 2 or 3 meals a day to hundreds of students."

Eventually, Esteban became Director of Education & Training and Board President of North American Students for Cooperation (NASCO), a membership organization of youth in the US and Canada. During his tenure, NASCO's Board became increasingly "gender non-conforming and queer" as well as significantly more multiracial.

After 10 years at NASCO, Esteban took a position at Mariposa Food Co-op in West Philadelphia. Though the Mariposa job offered a considerable cut in pay, Esteban was enamored with West Philly, "a multi-racial and multi-generational community with significant political richness and depth." And he felt that Mariposa both needed and appreciated him.

**A West Philly Solidarity Economy**

Esteban describes Mariposa as part of a solidarity economy ecosystem started in the 70s and early 80s by the Movement for a New Society. The land trust/housing co-op that Esteban lives in today was an outgrowth of that effort, as was Training for Change, a West Philly-based organization offering trainings to groups engaged in social change. At Mariposa, Esteban institutionalized workplace democracy with a Mariposa Staff Collective embedded in the store's management. He also partnered with consumer members to create a food justice and anti-racism working group that organized both within co-op membership and in the broader community.

Reflecting on the whiteness of contemporary food co-ops, Esteban cites social networks as "the reason that people are members of co-ops…More so than a co-op's stated values; people join because someone says, 'hey, I'm part of this thing, let me tell you about it.'" This homogeneity, he believes, is also a product of culture.

"If an organization is owned and run by its members, then that organization will express the culture of its members. Food co-ops…are overwhelmingly white because they are culturally white." And they stay white because, "their very dominance makes it difficult to see what's happening…It wasn't until other social movements started really calling out white culture and the function of power within that" that food co-ops start examining themselves. "There was a sort of outrage from food justice movements. You're telling us you should be the solution, but aren't accessible to us."

What does Esteban think about recent efforts to open food co-ops in areas with limited food access? "The co-op model offers solutions to racial justice and food access…but when we were working to expand Mariposa, and when black folks in Greensboro were organizing their start-up food co-op, we learned that food co-op development professionals had some essentially racist feasibility studies that included criteria like how many white people lived in the area." And when communities of color seek professional help from existing co-op professionals "they are met with a team of white dudes who aren't comfortable with code switching." Esteban also notes that, we need to "restore and repair the damages from decades of white flight from urban communities.…Indeed, communities of color need more investment because they have been redlined and divested from." Opening grocery stores in these areas "calls for going above and beyond."

*"The change that needs to happen begins with white people growing aware of their relative comfort—and being willing to be uncomfortable."*

What about achieving racial diversity in existing food co-ops? "In some ways that's the wrong goal," says Esteban. "Why do they want to become more diverse? To feel good about themselves?…If pursuit of diversity without a power critique is what you are still striving to do, it is an outdated framework…Our goal cannot be about looking diverse."

So what does Esteban suggest for food co-ops that want to change? "If you are white, work to build empathy for people, particularly people who don't take up most of the space of your social world."

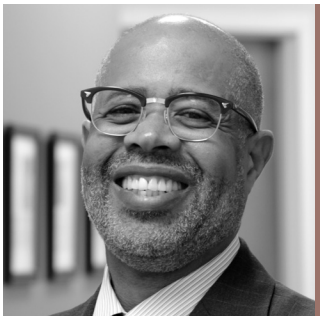
Esteban suggests reaching across class boundaries even within your own racial group. "If they can't become comfortable with other white people who are poor and working class, they won't be effective working with people who are indigenous, black, brown, poor and working class."

Esteban also advises food co-ops to get back to their core values. "If you care about food politics, want to live sustainably, reduce your carbon footprint, support local…those are all reasons to build relationships with people of color…as long as the primacy of white culture and comfort doesn't eclipse everything else. There are many ways that the culture of food coops could be reorganized to be relevant and to support a just food system. Right now that is not their purpose. The market of organic foods is for the health of its white consumers or the ideas of an educated class about the environmental impact of pesticides."

**Collaborate with People of Color**

Esteban also encourages co-ops to collaborate with organized groups. "Who is organized, who are the people of color in our area? Talk to refugee rights groups; talk to food justice organizers. What is the best way for us to put our money where our mouths are and start being accountable in a way that matters and helps other groups?…Food co-ops can also "invite [these] local organizations to membership meetings so that they can have a platform to speak to co-op members about community issues that matter to them."

Does Esteban have any final words for food co-ops? "The change that needs to happen begins with white people growing aware of their relative comfort —and being willing to be uncomfortable…That's the root of change. Some of the earnestness and impatience around diversity that I've seen are the wrong things to pour emotional energy into.…Equity isn't about splitting up this pie differently. How can we grow the pie? How can we help people get the resources to make their own pie? Let's move out of a scarcity mindset."



# Gary L. Cunningham

**For more than 20 years, Gary L. Cunningham has served as the top leader of philanthropic, health care, public policy, and educational organizations, joining the Metropolitan Economic Development Association (Meda) as president and CEO in August 2014. Meda's proven market-based solutions address racial economic inequities by fostering minority business development in Minnesota. Gary has been locally and nationally recognized throughout his career for his commitment to civil rights, education and public policy. Gary has a bachelor's degree in Public Policy from Metropolitan State University and earned a master's degree in Public Administration from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government as a Bush Leadership Fellow.**

Gary L. Cunningham believes that being involved in a food co-op as a very young man changed the course of his life.

Gary's co-op experience was decades ago. Nevertheless, his work today is "still from that frame of making a better community for everyone." He's married to Betsy Hodges, the mayor of Minneapolis, and their two children are dedicated to making a difference for their community. His son is a Minneapolis firefighter and his daughter is chef and manager of Breaking Bread Café & Catering, a social enterprise that addresses issues of food security in North Minneapolis.

Gary is an African American man who grew up in Minneapolis, and lived on both the north and south sides in predominately black communities. Gary attended Bryant Junior High School, with the legendary musician Prince, across the street from the Seward Community Co-op's current Friendship store location. He described his family's economic situation as poor, and that they moved a lot. Gary was 10 years old in 1967 when there were riots in North Minneapolis as a response to widespread social injustice regarding housing, jobs and mistreatment of black people by police.

*"This idea of building to scale, and this idea of equity and racial integration, is going to be critical for future success."*

For over a week, National Guardsman were stationed in the black community around Plymouth and Penn avenues, where Gary lived at the time.[2] This affected him deeply. "When I came into consciousness there was a whole movement around social justice, and I grew up in a time of the civil rights movement," and his awareness of social movements grew. "That really shaped my thinking. There was a whole feeling in the community that something different needed to happen, for people of color, particularly African Americans."

When he was 12-years-old, he ran away from home and lived on the streets of the West Bank of Minneapolis for almost a year. "Then my uncle, who was very much into social change movements, and who got me involved in co-ops, took me in and really helped shape my identity as a young man." His uncle was none other than Mo Burton, the legendary African American cooperator who was instrumental in founding the Bryant-Central Food Co-op (now defunct) and uniting a historically black neighborhood

[2] "Minneapolis Calls Guard to End Riots, Troops Patrol Area of Racial Violence," Chicago Tribune, from Tribune wire services, Saturday, July 22, 1967, Page 6 section 1
http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1967/07/22/page/22/article/minneapolis-calls-guard-to-end-riots

in south Minneapolis.

Gary described his uncle as a "socialist revolutionary" and his involvement in the Socialist Workers Party, Black Panthers, cooperation and anti-Vietnam war movements showed Gary yet another way of viewing the world. "We went around the country visiting co-ops and communes in New Mexico, California, Oakland, Berkeley, and then came back and lived on a commune in Wisconsin. It very much shaped my world."

**Cooperative Empowerment in the Black Community**

Gary remembered that there were several empty blocks in the historically African American neighborhood in south Minneapolis because buildings in the early 1970s had been torn down for urban renewal, and then never rebuilt.

Mo Burton had started a community garden at 4th Ave between 32nd to 34th Streets. "It was two large blocks to feed low-income people. Hundreds of people were participating in growing food and being part of the community, and I think that's what co-op's do, too…in this case it was a community-building city project that was about taking control of their community and having a say, no matter who they were. It was powerful." In 1975, the Bryant-Central Food Co-op was founded as an outgrowth of the community garden effort.

"I got involved in the effort to change the community and work on something bigger than me… when we work together we make a difference," Gary said. Mo assembled a group of about 15 young black people to work with him to open the co-op. His uncle encouraged him and the others involved in the co-op to read, write, and speak up. Gary believed the future for many young black men in his situation was prison or poverty. Instead, Mo encouraged their involvement, including them in organizing and committee meetings. "It was transformative because many of the young people working in the co-op went on to have remarkable careers."

Gary was also involved in Bryant-Central during the rise of the Cooperative Organization in 1975-76, known colloquially as the CO, a Marxist group focused on taking over Twin Cities food co-ops to fulfill their political agenda. This precipitated what's known as the Co-op Wars, when violent actions were utilized by the CO in their attempts to takeover food co-ops in the Twin Cities. [3]

*"Other community issues were discussed and had a place in the co-op. I've not necessarily seen that kind of integration… including the full voice of the community that you're in."*

While he did not agree with the CO's tactics, and the Bryant-Central Food Co-op ceased to work with them, Gary did think that one legitimate thing the CO did was raise the question of why food co-ops didn't adequately serve the needs of the working class and people of color. "They had many negative aspects, but they asked the question."

At Bryant-Central, Gary estimates about 90 percent of the people involved were African American, the rest mostly white. In the Twin Cities, he didn't see many people of color involved in the food co-op movement outside of Bryant-Central. He thought the people working at the local natural food warehouse DANCe were good people, but "They had limited interaction with people of color, nor was that their main interest." He thinks food co-ops were and are white because their leaders and members held different lifestyle and political priorities than their black counterparts. "Their main interest was about healthy food options and a particular lifestyle," Gary said. "They were not going to address greater social issues like race. They were perfectly happy maintaining their segregation."

The Bryant-Central Food Co-op closed in 1978 after an unsuccessful attempt to launch a major expansion when the co-op couldn't secure the capital it needed. In the 1990s, Mo tried again to resurrect the co-op, but that effort couldn't be sustained either. In 2015, Seward Community Co-op opened its second location at 38th and Clinton, about four

[3] *Storefront Revolution: Food Co-ops and the Counterculture*, by Craig Cox, Rutgers University Press, 1994.

blocks from the former Bryant-Central co-op location.

**Challenge to Food Co-ops: Inclusion**

Gary thinks that except for food co-ops like the Seward Community Co-op's Friendship store, which have made a commitment to racial inclusion, he doesn't see a lot of current momentum toward integrating food co-ops. He also believes that there is a lot more work for Seward Community Co-op to do in the years to come.

He recollected that the Bryant-Central Food Co-op was fully part of the African American community economically and socially. "Other community issues were discussed and had a place in the co-op. I've not necessarily seen that kind of integration, where they're that deep into community transformation… including the full voice of the community that you're in. Bryant-Central was special that way."

He thinks the challenge for co-ops seeking to be more inclusive is changing a social, economic and racial dynamic that maintains separation from others, and questioning one's own internalized racism. "On race, you need to have deeper conversations to break the cycle."

Gary suggested a book called the *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, by Peter Senge, about how organizations either create pathways for positive change or support "balancing loops" that support the status quo. "The co-ops have these invisible balancing loops because they say one thing about what they want, but on an unconscious level there are other agendas happening that maintain what it is. [They] need to do some assessment."

He thinks people of color also need to feel like food co-ops have a real stake in their communities to build trust. "Co-ops don't exist to serve a small population. They actually exist to build themselves into membership organizations that actually serve larger populations." He believes that is the key to remaining relevant and having a broad impact. "This idea of building to scale, and this idea of equity and racial integration, is going to be critical for their future success."

# Jade Barker

**Jade Barker is a member of Columinate working primarily with food co-op boards of directors to improve their governance. She currently lives in Western Massachusetts, and has served on the board of her local food co-op, River Valley Co-op, for 12 years, three as Board president. In 2014 she received a Howard Bowers award for Cooperative Board Leadership. Jade is a former Co-director of the Mediation & Training Collaborative in Greenfield, MA, and has been a mediator and trainer for almost 20 years.**

Jade was born in Sacramento, Calif., to parents who had grown up and met in Houston, Texas during the years of Jim Crow law (legalized racial segregation); her mother was 15 and father 21 when they married. "They were anxious to leave the south to find better opportunities."

Her maternal grandfather had been a Pullman Porter with the Southern Pacific Railroad, a source of pride. "It was one of the best jobs open to blacks." Her father joined the Air Force to get the GI Bill, and was stationed in California. As soon as possible, he left the military to attend medical school.

However, California didn't turn out as her parents had hoped. They divorced when Jade was five, and she, her older sister and younger brother were raised by their mother, who was single for most of Jade's childhood. "There was a lot of moving. I changed schools close to a dozen times." She described her family's economic position as very poor and "pretty unsettling." Jade's mother had only a ninth grade education. "She didn't have a lot of skills or ability to support us." Yet Jade's mother firmly believed that education could improve her children's situation. "She wanted us to have more opportunities …When it was time to go to middle school, she drove my sister and me across town to an all-white school in a middle-class neighborhood." She did this for six years, "until we graduated from high school."

### Outside Looking In

Jade recalls, "Growing up, I often felt like an outsider…when my parents bought their first house, we were the first black family on our block and our neighbors had passed around a petition asking us to leave. In hindsight, that was probably why we were never invited into any of their homes."

*"I could no longer ignore the effects race was having on my life"*

Because of these experiences she said, "I was aware that being black was not a good thing." Race especially became an issue in middle school. "My sister and I were the only non-white kids in our school. I wanted to fit in but kept having people tell me 'you're my first black friend' or 'I've never seen a black person in person before." It was an intimidating environment, which made her become even more introverted.

It was also during her middle school years that Jade's maternal grandfather was murdered. "It split my mom's family apart for some time. My aunt's boyfriend was convicted of the crime." Jade's paternal grandfather had been murdered when she was four. "My parents really never talked about it, so I didn't either. I only recently learned that blacks consistently account for almost half of homicide victims in the U.S."

There was a schism between Jade's personal experiences and what she was learning about race in school. "I was taught that things were better now than they were in the past." The message Jade

absorbed was that 'racism was over.' And though she knew things were not the same for her as they were for her white peers, "I still believed on some level that race wasn't going to be a big deal in my life. In hindsight, it was a weird denial…I was a head-in-the-sand about race person for a long time."

Because of her parents' emphasis on education, Jade knew she wanted to attend college. Her college choice was influenced by news coverage of the anti-war movement. "When I was 10, I saw UC Berkeley anti-war protesters on TV. It was one of the first things I'd seen in my life that made sense—people standing up for what they believed. It was a formative moment."

During her Berkeley years, most of Jade's friends were white and race was rarely a topic of conversation. "Most of them thought either that racism wasn't an issue or that affirmative action gave people of color jobs that should have gone to white people…I was never successful at communicating my perspective…so I stopped trying."

At the same time, she saw her younger brother and three male cousins sent to prison, repeatedly, for minor, non-violent drug offenses. "This was a shock to me, I had always thought that prisons were for dangerous people." Many of her white friends had also used drugs, but were never arrested.

### Passion for Cooperation

Jade's first co-op experience was living in cooperative housing when she became part of the University Students Cooperative Association in Berkeley. Afterward, she went to graduate school briefly in Cambridge, Mass. "My very first day in Cambridge, a new housemate took me to the Cambridge Food Co-op. I instantly fell in love—it was in a basement, disorderly—and joined on the spot." For eight years she shopped there almost daily. However, she left the co-op when she returned to Sacramento to deal with some family issues.

When she moved back to Massachusetts a decade later, her passion for cooperatives was reignited. "I was shocked to discover there was no food co-op in the area, but my partner at the time knew about a co-op startup effort. I joined immediately, spending four years on the outreach committee before running for the board." Jade has spent sixteen years volunteering with the startup River Valley Co-op in Northampton, MA, which opened in 2008. She served as the co-op's board president from 2010 to 2013.

### "Invisibility" of Race in Food Co-ops

Yet the move to Western Mass was jarring. "I'd never lived any place that was so white." She would go for days without seeing a single person of color. "It brought up that feeling of being an outsider again… every day I woke up thinking 'I'm going to have to go out there and be black again today.'" It took many years for her anxiety about that to dissipate.

Most of River Valley Co-op's board was white, and when she became board president, there was a difficult leadership transition. Jade described it as a high level of tension and antagonism.

"It was awful. When people got hostile and raised their voices, especially white males, I found myself becoming deeply terrified. The situation evoked pictures of lynch mobs I had seen as a child. Being the object of white rage was extremely disturbing. I became aware that I could no longer ignore the effects race was having on my life."

*"It's not easy to see ways that we might be replicating what we claim to hate."*

Some time later, after things had calmed down, Jade attended an Undoing Racism workshop on behalf of her co-op. "I went home and I couldn't stop crying… the trainer told me this frequently happens to people of color who take their workshop. I learned there was a lot going on for me under the surface."

The most difficult aspect of racism for Jade has been white incredulity. "It's one thing for people not to care about racism, but to be told again and again that it's not happening—that's been crazy making." But then she adds, "If I hadn't experienced it, I wouldn't want to believe it either."

As an owner and board leadership development consultant with Columinate, Jade travels the country, working with a lot of co-op boards and groups, most of them white. "I love co-ops, and I'm excited about

co-op work and helping people, but being black adds an extra level of stress not experienced by most of my colleagues."

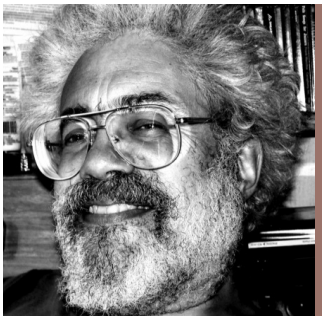
### Addressing Racial Dynamics

As for why food co-ops are so white, she thinks one reason was the prevalent alternative counter-culture of hippies, with which she has closely identified. In her experience, with a southern black mother, hippie culture was frowned upon. "My mother considered uncombed hair and beat-up clothes disrespectful."

Also, Jade thinks that people of color may have written off food co-ops because, while they say they accept everyone, they don't often acknowledge or deal with racism. "When we think that what we're doing is righteous and good, it's not easy to see ways that we might be replicating what we claim to hate."

Jade admits to some mixed feelings around addressing racial dynamics in food co-ops. To do this work, she has actively sought support from people both within and outside the food co-op sector. The workshops she's led at the Consumer Cooperative Management Association (CCMA) conference the past two years, specifically for people of color, have provided an opportunity to talk about the stress and isolation of being non-white in a white food co-op movement. The workshops have been "life changing" she said. And despite some very rough experiences, she's optimistic. "So far, it's going better than I expected."

Jade thinks that having honest and open discussions can help racial healing, and that examining organizational practices is important to enhancing inclusion at food co-ops. She also hopes co-ops will commit to undoing racism. "I don't think that getting more people of color on the board will solve our racial problems if we don't, at the same time, learn about how racism affects us." Jade thinks this can be achieved through education, openness, and a willingness to listen.



# Jaimie Markham

**Jaimie Markham was actively involved in cooperatives from 1973 through 1995 as a member organizer at Cambridge Food Co-op, Cambridge, Mass., co-manager of West Bank Co-op, Minneapolis, Minn., and co-op loan fund manager for Campaign for Human Development and a consultant and trainer working nationwide.**

Jaimie grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "As a kid I lived in most parts of Cambridge. Back in the 1950s and 1960s we lived around Inman Square and Central Square which were both very racially and ethnically mixed." Jaimie remembers his childhood as a remarkable cultural experience, raised by a single mother in a neighborhood of African Americans, Irish, Jews, Puerto Ricans, Greeks, Italians, Armenians plus refugees from Central and Eastern Europe who came during World War II and the Cold War. There were always smells from food of different cuisines and people from diverse cultures serving the community.

When Jaimie was growing up, Cambridge was home to working class people and immigrants, a struggling middle class, and students and university faculty. It was then and still is the hub of some of the world's most prestigious universities, including Harvard and MIT. In the 1980s, Boston and Cambridge were also home to many hot tech startups, fostering a boom in the economy. Today, Cambridge is one of the more expensive places to the live in the U.S., making it a challenge for people who grew up there to afford to remain.

Jaimie is "mélange"—an identification he coined to indicate the child of two or more races. His mother is white, and his father is African American. "People mistake me for all kinds of racial identities," Jaimie said. "As a young teenager I began identifying myself as mélange rather than the racial identities other people sought to impose on me, which rarely fit my social experiences."

He said that being mélange also influenced how he perceived different dynamics when he got involved in the food co-op movement. "So much of how America deals with gender, race and sexual preference is about how we're trying to identify other people and insisting our definition is correct, rather than taking the time to listen to how you see yourself."

*"The myth that people of color are not interested in healthy eating, or that they need to be taught how, needs to be bashed once and for all."*

Jaimie currently lives with his wife and son in a small town in Wisconsin. "I've lived in very diverse and different communities throughout my life. As a teenager I hopped freight trains, lived in New Mexico, California, Washington, DC and Minnesota; I've lived in a Colorado commune and on a farm in Canada. I've traveled extensively around the U.S. and Canada," he said. Living in small-town Wisconsin isn't for everyone, he said, but he noted that intolerance or prejudice isn't a geographically-based behavior. "It's important to be seen as yourself. You can go anywhere and find people who are bigoted as well as people who strive for human equality."

Jaimie was raised by his mother to believe "everybody's human." From Jaimie's point of view, she was an enlightened person, limited to some degree in her cultural understanding by her age, social history and race but working diligently for human rights. They attended a Baptist church with both white and black

congregants, some of whom went on voter registration drives in the South. "I grew up around people who thought racial equality was an important thing to work toward."

These were people that strove not be prejudiced, he said, but also subscribed to the idea of "colorblindness," that everyone is equal, and good white people don't "see color" or racial differences. "[There's a belief that] by not having prejudiced thoughts everything will be ok. I don't agree with that. Colorblindness is a fantasy," Jaimie said, because society still obviously delineates status based on race. "The desire for colorblindness gets in the way of actually seeing how race remains a very potent weapon."

All of these formative experiences informed his personal comprehension of race and relationships, understanding that not everyone is at the same place in their awareness or thinking on the issue. "There are people who harbor preconceptions versus virulent racists," Jaimie said. He finds the label "racist" completely useless in helping people understand racism. "The way that label is used it too often lacks nuances about degree, intentions and the potential for change."

**Crawling in Through an Open Window**

As a young man of the 1970s Jaimie was driven by some of the same idealism that drove many people to become involved in the food co-ops. The Cambridge Food Co-op (now Harvest Co-op) was getting started in Central Square in 1972 and he decided to get involved. Jaimie went to attend an early meeting at David Dunbar's house that was packed with people. "Someone opened a window and I crawled through," he said. It turned out to be a metaphor for his relationship with food co-ops.

He believed the co-op would be a great way to provide the majority low-income area where he grew up with a grocery store. The co-op got a Model Cities Program grant on the premise that it would serve the surrounding low-income community and a CETA grant to do community organizing in the surrounding area around Central Square, which was largely low income. It started as a volunteer effort led by both neighborhood people and Harvard students.

"Harvard student organizers very quickly decided they couldn't do the organizing in the community to actually bring enough permanent community residents into the co-op…[it] very explicitly changed from trying to serve the existing population of the neighborhood to getting as many members as possible from their friends. That was the subject of some horrific meetings." Jaimie recollected a friend broke a finger trying to hammer home the point that the co-op was excluding the long-term residents.

After the Cambridge Food Co-op opened, Jaimie continued substantial volunteer work for the co-op as coordinator and trainer of cashiers. Since all cashiers were member volunteers, like most other workers in the co-op, this coordination required many hours from Jaimie and his co-coordinator.

However, when it was time for the co-op to hire a cashier coordinator, neither Jaimie nor the other cashier coordinator, a gay, black man without a college degree were asked to apply. Instead, a Harvard friend of the managers, a straight white male without cashier experience, was hired. "It felt entirely wrong on too many different levels, and to me was emblematic of attitudes in food co-ops," he said. "It was an early and bitter taste of discrimination," he said, but he had not given up on the co-op idea.

That there was a time when the races worked together in food co-ops is something Jaimie believes is a fallacy. "There were people on co-op staffs who were pushing for more progressive, racially diverse, economically diverse, class diverse policies, and there were others, leaders and organizers, who were totally focused in very narrow ways on 'how do we make this work financially' and seemed to think 'so what if we don't serve low income.'"

In 1977, Jaimie moved to Minneapolis, and soon got involved in another food co-op. He became the first operating manager at the West Bank Co-op (now defunct). The co-op was located on the West Bank in Minneapolis, a racially-diverse countercultural nexus of low-income families, community activists, senior citizens and people with disabilities. Roughly 30 percent of residents were African American with a small portion of Asian and Indigenous populations.

To serve this varied community West Bank Co-op

was a full line supermarket providing meat, canned goods, fresh produce and other groceries, with only a small organic and whole foods section. Less than a mile away was the North Country Co-op (now defunct) which was staffed and served primarily white hippies under 30 years old plus somewhat older customers from the suburbs. "There was some overlap with customers, but not a lot," Jaimie said.

Shortly after hiring Jaimie, West Bank Co-op added Stan Silverman, a former owner of Great Northern Grocery Store as co-manager. The co-op also had a collective, but the board never formally sorted out those different management structures. There was conflict; another recipe for frustration and dissatisfaction. He believed it was the "beginning of the end" of his time in food co-ops.

Jaimie was also a board member of the food co-op warehouse DANCe from 1982-1986, which was later acquired by and merged into Blooming Prairie Warehouse (now defunct).

"It became obvious to me that those that had the bulk of the co-op's voice were completely disinterested in serving low income or communities of color in the Twin Cities," he said. At one point, Jaimie wanted to attend a conference of black cooperators at Howard University and asked the warehouse to send him, which is something they did for white people going to other conferences. The board said no, and when he raised a "shit fit" they agreed to pay for half. "I felt unsupported," he said.

As he reflected on those dynamics, Jaimie believed that women's rights were much more likely to be addressed in food co-ops than issues of race. By contrast, nobody spoke about the importance of working with communities of color, or if Jaimie attempted to bring it up, it wasn't well received. "A lot of times when I tried to talk to people in the co-ops about racism and discrimination, being a person of color in co-ops, I'd get a very defensive reaction."

"To me I think there's a natural fit for co-ops to work in low income and communities of color …people who are eager and willing to confront issues of inequality and injustice with regard to race are very few and far between in co-ops. That's had a big impact on whether or not people of color participate in co-ops."

Jaimie left the food co-op movement entirely in the early 1990s and focused instead on consulting to community-based development organizations serving low-income people.

**Change is Possible**

Despite his concerns that food co-ops' economic justice mission was ignored, Jaimie was open to talking about these issues, and hopeful for change. He offered many insights for food cooperators going forward.

*"The desire for color-blindness gets in the way of actually seeing how race remains a very potent weapon."*

"One of the obstacles for involving more low income people, regardless of race is that co-op processes look like a clique," he said. He said that depending on the co-op, the democratic process looks "extreme" from the outside, and that people perceive that being connected to the co-op means excessive or unproductive involvement.

His thinking about this was influenced by Jim Crowfoot, a professor emeritus, who was one of Jaimie's trainers at the New School for Democratic Management. Organizations need a strong process for making good decisions on minor issues, not "mass democracy," which he thinks leads to conflict and failure.

Jaimie also believes that an "obsessive" focus on natural foods is also limiting the food co-ops. "I think it's time to let go of co-op equals organic food," he said, and to instead focus on some of the principles developed by the Rochdale Pioneers. "The product line doesn't have to be so limited, particularly because natural and organic food remains higher priced, and it skews toward a certain class of people."

He also thinks that the myth that people of color are not interested in healthy eating, or that they need to be taught how, needs to be bashed once and for all. "Combined with the unwelcoming attitudes of individuals in food co-ops, it makes it tough to expand to other markets."

Jaimie understands that co-ops have a common

set of values, but that how they are put into practice is inconsistent. "A lot has changed," he said about past racial dynamics and food co-ops, "But not solved." Around the question of why food co-ops tend to be predominately white institutions he thinks there are a number of reasons:

- Inadequate commitment to diversity and inclusion.
- Food co-ops are not interested in developing in communities of color, or have too limited interactions with them to do so effectively.
- Decision making processes that exclude people or fail to share power.

Dealing with these problems is long overdue, but not by "beating yourselves up," he said. "There has to be some greater grappling with what's going on."

# Jamila Medley

**Jamila is executive director of the Philadelphia Area Cooperative Alliance (PACA), a cooperative of Philadelphia area co-ops. PACA is also a 501(c)3 nonprofit dedicated to growing the cooperative economy. Previously, Jamila was membership & marketing manager and organizational development coordinator at Mariposa Food Co-op. For 20 years, Jamila has worked to strengthen organizations by helping their stakeholders gain knowledge and skills that enable them to participate fully in their roles as staff, board members, and volunteers. Her career has been devoted to supporting mission-based organizations in the nonprofit and cooperative sectors that serve diverse constituencies.**

Jamila grew up in a middle-class family in Brooklyn, NY, in the 80's and 90's in a neighborhood made up of predominately working class black people, where there was also a lot of poverty. Though she grew up during the height of the crack cocaine epidemic, she didn't realize that her neighborhood was considered the ghetto. She experienced her childhood as very affirming, particularly around race and gender identify. And though her parents separated when she was five, her mother's and father's families lived across the street from each other and she retained a strong connection with both sides of her family.

Jamila's maternal grandfather was a partner in the real estate development and property management company where her mother worked. Jamila's father worked a variety of jobs: janitorial for a while, then security at a homeless shelter, and eventually a campus safety officer at a local college.

Jamila's school and neighborhood were "pretty much all black," and, besides a white aunt and uncle, she didn't know any white people growing up. Though she understood that black people and white people were all human beings, she also learned that "we were not all equal in the eyes of some."

Jamila jokes that at her private elementary school, run by her black Baptist church, it was "black history month every day." Her teachers were black women from the Caribbean and Ghana. Students learned about black scientists and politicians, and studied poetry from black poets. Jamila understood that black folks had achieved greatness, and that greatness would be expected of her, too.

*"I definitely saw food co-ops as a white space that was welcoming to people of color if you want to be here with us like this."*

Jamila's exposure to other cultures began when she started attending a private Quaker school for 7th grade. This was her first multiracial, multiclass, multi-religious experience. As it was a small school—her graduating high school class had only 25 people—she had opportunities to become good friends with people from many walks of life.

Having established a career in the nonprofit sector, Jamila's exposure to the food co-op movement came through Mariposa Food Co-op. Two years after she moved to Philadelphia in 2010, she joined the staff as Mariposa's membership coordinator. She recalls being intrigued by Mariposa's efforts to democratize work and to have participatory management, something she became deeply interested in, as well as food justice and worker justice. Four or five months after she started at the co-op, she got involved with the Philadelphia Area Cooperative

Alliance to learn more about the co-op sector.

When Jamila first arrived at Mariposa, there were 19 staff, four or five of them black. Despite the presence of other blacks, Jamila found Mariposa to be very different culturally than what she was accustomed to. Mariposa was still deeply rooted in the radical activist food co-op movement of the '70s. Specifically, consensus-based decision-making was new to her, especially the ability of one person to block decisions. Even the modes of dress were surprising, "People were very informal in how they dressed to come to work."

Within the first year post-expansion, the staff grew, from 19 people in June to 30 by December. "That was big jump…particularly from a management perspective…Lots of the things transferred from the old store weren't sufficient to handle the new store." Specifically, "there were gaps in personnel policies" and "as more people were becoming employed as front line workers and manual workers, many of us observed a tenuous upstairs/downstairs dynamic emerging." Though the organization continued striving to ensure that everyone had a voice, Jamila felt there wasn't a framework to create that reality, so "pains started to surface more quickly."

As growth continued, most of the people being hired were white. "There were five black people when I started in June, and by the end of that year, we had lost two or three of those folks; it seemed quite awhile longer before we started seeing black people come in as employees, and their tenure didn't last long…Especially in that first year." The way she saw it, people were being hiring to fit the store's culture and identity—mostly white people who identified with radical politics.

### Increased Diversity Brought Increased Challenges

Though more people of color were hired over time, with increased diversity came increased challenges. Racial dynamics impacted the workplace, but staff often didn't have the tools to deal with issues when they came up. Jamila recounted an incident in which a white staff person unwittingly said something a number of staff considered racially offensive. The co-management team struggled with how to address the situation, while still respecting the staff person's privacy. "It festered as a wound among the staff for quite some time."

Eventually, though, the change in hiring strategy was successful. "We started to see more black folks coming into the store, and more black folks not necessarily culturally similarly to white folks already in the store."

### You are Welcome to Be Like Us

Reflecting on the whiteness of food co-ops more broadly, Jamila says, "I definitely saw food co-ops as a white space that was welcoming to people of color if you want to be here with us like this. We have a clearly established set of ideals, values and beliefs; you are welcome to be here if you are willing to be with the program we have constructed. In my mind, over time, this became challenging: if food co-ops are supposed to be for the people who live in the community, why do the people have to do so much work to be okay with shopping here?" When Jamila's role shifted to membership and marketing coordinator, this became a big question for her as she tried to market the co-op to new potential shoppers and members.

*"Perhaps you always have people of color in leadership, but how do you qualify what those experiences have been like for those people?"*

"Mariposa said it wants to be inviting and open, but struggled to identify how to make internal shifts to be inclusive." Part of the challenge, she recalls, was figuring out how to live these espoused values, while also "being a microcosm of some of the discrimination and bias that plays out in broader society." The co-op's board supported the food justice and anti-racism committee (FJAR) as an avenue for observing and obstructing the creation of practices and policies within the co-op that could be oppressive.

When asked her opinion about how food co-ops became white, Jamila says, "I'm no history expert, but looking at the history of food co-ops in my city, those co-ops were started primarily by white people"

and, perhaps, "in some ways racial segregation plays a hand."

An article Jamila read recently referred to the neighborhood surrounding Mariposa, saying that "when a neighborhood becomes more racially diverse, if you go block by block, it is often still segregated…even when it looks like we are living together."

And segregation influences where we want to shop. "One of the demographic things we looked into at Mariposa was around family composition. Black folks had a lot of people in their family. A lot of younger white folks might be poor, but they are only taking care of themselves; poor black folks are taking care of multiple people. It is a dynamic that contributes to how people shop."

**It's about Relationship Building**

For food co-ops to become more racially diverse, Jamila believes it will definitely take more than a marketing plan. "It really is about relationship building." She thinks that co-ops need to invest resources into figuring out who, specifically, you want to reach out to, then, "do the work to cultivate relationships with those people in the places that they already are."

She also suggests hiring from the community you seek to attract. "At Mariposa we saw more success with outreach strategies when we had an outreach person who was already connected to the black neighbors around the co-op. The previous outreach staff didn't have those strong connections."

Jamila thinks it's also important to look at your leadership, both Board and management. "Pay attention to what has been established, the norms around how people are engaged and included or excluded and look at patterns about how that has played out over time." And don't just look for quantity, but also the quality of experiences. "Perhaps you always have people of color in leadership, but how do you qualify what those experiences have been like for those people?" At Mariposa she noticed that "Black people didn't last long there in positions of leadership…I know that a number of black women have experienced getting monikered the 'angry black woman.' When you've expressed a need or concern that doesn't get addressed, and then you express some emotion about it, white people get upset; I saw it happen three or four times, which affected how I chose to perform. That was definitely a thing."

# Jessica Gordon-Nembhard

**Author of *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* and 2016 inductee into the U.S. Cooperative Hall of Fame (www.heroes.coop), Jessica Gordon-Nembhard, Ph.D., is a political economist and Professor of Community Justice and Social Economic Development (in the Africana Studies Department at John Jay College, City University of NY). She is also an affiliate scholar with the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives (University of Saskatchewan, Canada). Dr. Gordon-Nembhard has numerous publications on cooperative economics, community economic development, credit unions, wealth inequality, community wealth, and black political economy. Gordon-Nembhard is a former board member of the National Economic Association (past President and past Treasurer), and a co-founder of the Democracy Collaborative.**

Jessica grew up in an intentional community just outside of New York City. Founded in the 1940s, Skyview Acres was founded to be an interracial, interreligious, antinuclear and antiwar community. Jessica's parents moved there in the 50's, lived there throughout her childhood, raising Jessica and her three siblings there, and still live there today.

Though this close-knit community of 44 families was multi-racial (there were four black families), no other people of color lived in her immediate block, and none of the children in the other 3 black families were her age, so Jessica was often the only black child in her playgroups. Elementary school was somewhat the same; she recalls a "99% white" elementary school where she developed "a very early understanding about tokenism and institutional racism, even though I didn't have the words in those days."

Jessica's parents were academics and social activists. Issues such as integration, economic justice, women's rights and civil rights in general were common topics at the dinner table. Her Southern Pennsylvania-born mother was a Pediatrician and professor of pediatrics. Her North Carolina-born father is a Psychologist and an emeritus professor of psychology. He is the son of a doctor and a schoolteacher from North Carolina who valued education very highly. Relatively unique, several generations of Jessica's family on both sides had earned college degrees or higher.

### "Walking the Talk"

Her family was involved in the movement to desegregate schools, and in the antinuclear and antiwar movements. Much of their activism was focused on racial justice issues, women's rights, child advocacy, and economic and health justice. Jessica participated with her family in demonstrations and marches throughout the 1960s and 70s. Both her parents taught her the importance of "walking the talk," and using one's advantages to make change and improve the lives of others. From a young age, Jessica had a nuanced understanding of politics and social justice issues, and aspired to be a changemaker like her parents.

Growing up, Jessica learned that oppression and exploitation were real and serious issues, and that a certain group and class of people did most of it, meaning European-Americans and particularly, rich capitalists. While her family didn't specifically use the phrase "white privilege," they learned about it and understood it in their own way. Jessica learned that all white people had challenges with racism, even liberal whites, as she experienced racism even in

her community, and the white liberal schools she attended.

She learned that racism was insidious; and that while people need to be educated about racism in order to do better, they also need to advocate and agitate—"to protest, speak truth to power and force power to concede." Jessica believes that racism will not be eliminated by education alone, but also requires that those in power relinquish control, and those oppressed demand and take control.

Though her intentional community was a cooperative, Jessica didn't become acquainted with food co-ops until she went away to college where she joined a food co-op in New Haven, CT. When she later moved to Washington D.C., she joined the Tacoma Park Silver Spring Food Co-op (TPSS), and she is still a member.

### Food Co-ops are the Face of the Co-op Movement

Though Jessica doesn't remember the racial makeup of the food co-op in New Haven, she remembers that TPSS leadership in the 1990s was mostly white. Not having as many black people frequenting the food co-op didn't originally concern her, but Jessica says that, "in the last 10-15 years, when I've been much more involved in what racial justice looks like in the co-op movement, I've become much more concerned about food co-ops." For many people of color, food co-ops are the only co-ops they know about; they are "the face of the co-op movement." And that movement's face is white and middle class. This can make it difficult for people of color to consider the cooperative model when addressing their own concerns. Some actually say, "'Oh, only hippies do that'…They don't think about housing co-ops or credit unions, or other kinds of co-ops, but food co-ops. And they don't see them in black communities or owned by blacks."

Also, in some communities, food co-ops are considered gentrifiers that disrupt and displace black lower-class communities, and make it comfortable for whites to move in. "When a primarily white food co-op moves into a black neighborhood, people want to know, 'what is the co-op's relationship to the community?'"

Jessica thinks that the predominantly white racial makeup of today's food co-ops could be partly related to class. She says, "Somehow access to healthy organic food became a class issue because of the expense…and class is so connected to race." Also, the fact that many of today's co-ops were started by so-called hippies, could be a reason that negative class correlations linger; many blacks who lived in poverty viewed hippies as a privileged elite, a group that not everyone could afford to join.

*"When a primarily white food co-op moves into a black neighborhood, people want to know, 'what is the co-op's relationship to the community?'"*

Also, Jessica wonders if there might be specific challenges inherent in opening food co-ops in black communities. During conferences, and when she's travelling to promote her book about black cooperatives, she hears people questioning, "What's the model, and does it fit well in the black community? What do we do about assumptions that food co-ops can only work if there's a middle-class white population who is going to buy from them; is there a different model?"

### How to Be More Accessible

While many efforts to open food co-ops in majority black communities are currently underway, most are in nascent stages. In the meantime, what can primarily white food co-ops do to be more accessible to people of color? Jessica has a list of suggestions:

"First, reconnect black people and people of color to their co-op legacies and histories. [Cooperation] is not an alien movement; this is what we've always done throughout our lives and the lives of our race. …And economic cooperation didn't start in 1844 [with the Rochdale Pioneers]. We have to change those narratives. The histories are much longer and broader—evolving in every era, among every population."

Jessica's seminal work, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought*

*and Practice*, plays a role in changing that narrative. "It's really weird that we think of food co-ops as not being black…Most of the co-ops I found in the history were food co-ops…and for some reason we forgot that the Black Panthers established co-ops. Even the Nation of Islam establishes co-ops. But they were not as visible, and as a race we don't talk about them as much." Through her writing, blacks can see that "we are a part of the cooperative movement."

Second, change the outreach and education materials that co-ops use. Make them more inclusive of these histories and experiences, and the needs of people of color and low-income people. Highlight the accomplishments of people of color in the co-op movement.

Third, connect to what's already happening in black communities and communities of color—to current black organizations and movements. Jessica says, "It's not 'if we build it they will come,' they have to be part of building it…Make sure to bring people in from the beginning."

"Fourth, pay attention to inclusion and diversity in leadership in whatever way that means—sometimes it means changing where, how, and when you have meetings." She cautions, "You might get a bunch of neighborhood people participating, but all the leaders are white middle-class people." This can be avoided by using "buddy systems or other ways to bring people into leadership who might not normally think of themselves as leaders." Think about overcoming barriers to people's participation.

"Fifth. Talk to the community, not just about leading, but getting them in as members to feel like the store is really part of the community, helping to solve their actual problems—and is a place they want to be and feel comfortable in from day one." About Mandela Foods, for example, a worker-owned grocery in Oakland, CA, Jessica shares, "About a year before they opened, they did a door-to-door campaign in the neighborhood and asked folks what kind of food would they want and need in a community grocery store. They made sure to have those groceries in the store from the first day…You can get people to come on the first day for opening, but if they don't see what they want or need, they'll never come back."

Sixth. Affordability. Jessica asks, "What's affordable in the context of your community, and what are the strategies for making sure at least some of the foods in the co-op are affordable?… Do you need to accept food stamps? Have one day a week when prices are lower? Solving and taking affordability seriously as a potential barrier is very important."

*"We could have all these plans and strategies, but if you don't have a group of people who want to change, it's not going to happen."*

Jessica adds that anti-oppression and conflict resolution trainings are also important. "Liberal people seem less willing to have it out and get all the issues on the table—conflict can actually help an organization move to a better place if you know how to handle it." It's not enough to just be aware of racism, co-ops have to be able to talk about and resolve difficult issues.

**Willingness to Change**

Ultimately, though, for food co-ops to be successful at inclusion, "There has to be a will. And I don't know exactly how you make sure there's a will. We could have all these plans and strategies, but if you don't have a group of people who want to change, it's not going to happen."

Finally, Jessica encourages food co-ops to talk up all the ways they benefit communities. "Talk about how food co-ops recirculate money and resources much more than regular grocery stores.…Even non-co-op people, if they see that kind of data and analysis, will be more interested in shopping at a place where their money will go further to support their values."

# Karen Zimbelman

**Karen Zimbelman is National Co+op Grocers' Senior Director for Membership and Cooperative Relations. Prior to her current position KZ was a self-employed consultant specializing in co-op governance, education and training program design, and employee benefits. In 1994, she was recognized with the Cooperative Service award at CCMA and in 1999 was given an award for contributions to co-op education. She lives in Eureka, California with her husband, Chris Copple, retired general manager of a worker co-op.**

Karen Zimbelman was always interested in language—and became a leader in the food co-op sector through her writing, organizing and speaking skills. "How I wanted to be in the world was to be multilingual and reach out to people of different cultures and languages." As a young woman, Karen had the opportunity to live abroad as a student in France and Switzerland and loved learning French and German.

Karen is white and grew up in western Michigan. Her family moved a few times while she was young, and they lived primarily in racially diverse communities in Kalamazoo until she was in the 9th grade. That's when her parents moved the family to the suburbs, where her life was "a lot more insulated from any kind of diversity." Her family leaned politically liberal, and she remembers that they never had a problem with black and white students playing together on teams or hanging out socially. "I never faced any eyebrow raising about that. It was not an issue."

The suburbs were mostly white, middle-class and due to their homogeneity, insulated from certain social and economic challenges. As a grown woman, she understands that white privilege allowed her to ignore differences most of the time. "It was something I had the luxury of not having to pay attention to. It wasn't the way I had to look at the world."

Her parents were college graduates (the first of their generation) and it was expected that she would go to college as well. She attended Michigan State in East Lansing as an undergrad, getting a bachelor's degree in French and minoring in environmental education. At the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Karen got a master's degree in environmental education with an emphasis on community development.

*"Are we really leveraging the cooperative model in a powerful way?."*

Karen studied under Jim Crowfoot, now professor emeritus of the University of Michigan Natural Resources & Environment and Urban and Regional Planning Program. He also focused his work on processes of organizational and social change regarding environmental problems and social justice. Karen was inspired by Crowfoot and thrived under his tutelage. "I chose to do a practicum…connected with a project that the newly formed Michigan Alliance of Cooperatives was doing."

In the early 1980s when people talked about helping the environment, that usually meant recycling. Karen wanted to go deeper. "The environmental movement was important to me because of the consciousness it was contributing to in our world about the impact of our actions…and thinking about the world in a global way. But it was tirelessly negative…the only positive thing we could work toward was recycling." When she discovered food co-ops, Karen found a way to express the positive change

she sought. "Food co-ops were a natural extension of consciousness-based sustainability…what they were doing in the world was motivating to me, and learning about a business model that had [values] as a construct, I was, yeah, I want to do that."

She became a volunteer at People's Food Co-op in Ann Arbor. Eventually she was hired as a cashier and egg buyer, and stayed from 1978-84 as an involved member. During that time, one co-worker was black, but the co-op itself did not have a lot of black shoppers. "The university community was white and not that diverse." Gender equality, however, was common in new wave co-ops, and she found the workplace to be freeing and exciting. Karen wanted to put into action the education and advocacy work that she learned from Jim Crowfoot and Bunyan Bryant, another University of Michigan professor. "It all contributed to my concern for environmental justice and thinking about how it impacts different communities."

Karen then got a job with North American Students of Cooperation (NASCO), a group focused on student housing co-ops. The students involved were typically white middle-class students; no black colleges were a part of NASCO at that time.

The National Co-op Bank gave NASCO a grant to develop board training and Karen's professional co-op career was launched. Her work with NASCO intersected with the increased development of food co-ops, especially in white college towns. "Housing co-ops were campus-based, but there was this growing food co-op movement in university towns, near student housing co-ops and there was a lot of crossover. NASCO did a lot of work with food co-ops, too."

As Karen thinks about the passage of time from the 80s to now she doesn't see a lot of change in the racial dynamic in food or housing co-ops. "Our food co-ops, despite the rhetoric, have not done a very good job. It's been a big source of disappointment to me how segregated our world is from real communities needing help and wanting what we have to offer."

**Comfort with Racial Isolation**

"Whenever anyone would ask about diversity and being more inclusive, it would be like 'come on in, we want you to join us,' but passive welcome doesn't really move any needles," she said. "We had missionary zeal and purpose to our lives, but we're in these comfortable middle-class institutions, working hard to keep them alive, but are we helping those who need help? Are we really leveraging the cooperative model in a powerful way?"

*"Whenever anyone would ask about diversity and being more inclusive, it would be like 'come on in, we want you to join us,' but passive welcome doesn't really move any needles."*

Karen thinks that sense of comfort in racial isolation, and the discomfort that changing it brought about, left people stymied and inactive in reaching out to other communities. "We're so insulated."

Concurrently, she thinks that the food co-op movement's focus on a particular product line also contributed to a homogenous environment. "We were very focused from day one on a product line that was anti-establishment, and on what wasn't necessarily what people were eating but we thought people should eat," Karen said. It was a consciousness that still pervades food co-ops today—and in how certain populations perceive food co-ops as the 'food police.' She believed that there was a food-first, co-op-second approach to retailing that put organic and natural food above cooperation as the organizational focus. "I think that consciousness pervades. It's still a part of who we are."

"We let ourselves take the easy road, to go into highly educated markets and lead with natural food products," she said. "We became industry pioneers that included a higher cost structure." These choices led to more segregated stores, and market studies confirmed that without customers with those high income or education demographics, a food co-op would not be successful.

She also believes that the emphasis on product line purity has set co-ops up to meet unrealistic expectations. "People get disappointed if the co-op is selling Ritz crackers." It's an Achilles heel for reaching

a broader community (regardless of race) as well as for being sustainable. "If you can't put conventional produce on the shelves without firing the general manager, how will you ever have more diverse shoppers?" She thinks that baby-boomer culture, which grew out of a rejecting mainstream establishment forces, can also be deeply judgmental.

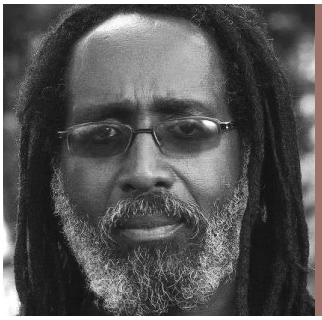
**The Food Co-op: Food or Co-op?**

Karen remembered reading an article published in 1979 called "The Food Co-op: Food or Co-op?"[4] that examined the competing philosophies of retailing natural and organic food and the cooperative goals of community development. "That tension contributes to who we are today," she said. She thinks that food co-ops have not focused enough on the cooperative principles. "Education is one of the co-op principles: we have cooking classes, but not classes on cooperation or any meaningful education about what it means to co-own our grocery stores with thousands of our neighbors."

"If cooperation is an important part of our identity, the thing that distinguishes us the most, how are we going to get the next generation to understand the value of co-ops? And by extension, be more inclusive? The cooperative model is driven by values, including equity and fairness, not specific product lines. Membership recruitment efforts aren't really thinking about that right now."

Karen thinks the food co-ops need to undertake big cultural changes to be more economically and racially inclusive. "Each co-op needs to think about what they are trying to accomplish," she said. Asking themselves: "Who feels welcome? What does the co-op offer?" She doesn't think change will be easy, and people need to commit to it for it to be successful, to be willing to learn from others. "We've got to figure it out," she said.

[4] "The Food Co-op: Food or Co-op?" by Philip C. Kreitner, The New Harbinger CO-OP Magazine, July/August 1979, pages 23-26.



# Malik Yakini

**Malik Kenyatta Yakini is a co-founder and the Executive Director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN). DBCFSN operates a seven-acre urban farm and is spearheading the opening of a co-op grocery store in Detroit's North End. Yakini views the "good food revolution" as part of the larger movement for freedom, justice and equality. He has an intense interest in contributing to the development of an international food sovereignty movement that embraces black communities in the Americas, the Caribbean and Africa.**

Malik, a lifelong resident of Detroit, lives in the house he grew up in, a few miles away from the site of the infamous 1967 Detroit rebellion, one of the deadliest and most destructive in the history of the United States. In 1960, Detroit was booming as a result of the post WWII auto industry, and, due to the removal of race-based covenants, Malik's parents were able to purchase a house through the GI Bill. He remembers early on playing with white children in the neighborhood, but within two years of his family's arrival the neighborhood was entirely black—a victim of white flight—and has remained so until today.

Both of Malik's parents were first generation Detroiters whose parents had emigrated from the south in search of better opportunities. High school graduates, they each got jobs at the post office, where they met, and held their jobs for over 30 years each; for a time, these were the best jobs that blacks could get. Malik remembers growing up in a time of progress, prosperity and expectation. Motown provided the soundtrack for his childhood; his kindergarten was across the street from the Motown studios. Malik and his brother attended school with the children of Gladys Knight, Eddie Holland, and Jackie Wilson. He felt a real sense of community among these upwardly mobile black folks, as well as a great deal of camaraderie and neighborliness. Malik describes his childhood as a wonderful time.

It was also a time of change. Malik recalls 1967 as a period of major rebellion in Detroit, prior to, during, and after the infamous uprising. He was developing a black consciousness and by age thirteen Malik had become radicalized by the general context around him; he was exposed to the speeches of Malcolm X, Black Panther newspapers and other expressions of radical thought.

In talking about race, Malik notes that such conversations can be challenging, in that he finds that "all of the terms used to describe the various manifestations of humankind to be inadequate…as race is not a scientific reality." While Malik doesn't recall race being explicitly discussed in his home as a child, he learned by observation and experience. His family was among the first five black families on his block, so he watched the exodus of white families from his neighborhood. For a time, he remembers an ongoing feud with some white kids who lived on the corner of his block; mostly rock fights and water balloon fights. And though he describes the feud as childish, there was still a sense of friction and animosity. He says, "There was a tension almost as far back as I can remember…It was clearly us and them. My block was still the northernmost borderline, anything north of the street that was my

*"Within that context, co-ops are the best option we have to get the most value out of the economic strength that we have."*

block was all white—a clear line of demarcation. There wasn't still legal segregation; there was de facto segregation. I realized there were two different worlds."

**Ujamaa: the practice of African Socialism**

Malik's involvement in the food co-op movement is an extension of his involvement in the black liberation movement. In 1975, he was president of the black student association at Eastern Michigan University. He was exposed to concept of Ujamaa, which was practiced in Tanzania shortly after that country achieved independence. Malik says, "They tried to create villages practicing African socialism." His exposure to that concept led him to start a cooperative food-buying club in 1975. "We'd go to large farmers markets and purchase food wholesale to distribute." He's had an interest in food co-ops since that time. While Malik thinks that capitalism is a terrible system for meeting people's needs, "Within that context, co-ops are the best option we have to get the most value out of the economic strength that we have."

Most recently, Malik's involvement in the food system is through his role as Executive Director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN), a grassroots, community-based, nonprofit organization working to build food security, food justice and food sovereignty for Detroit's black residents. DBCFSN is spearheading the Detroit People's Food Co-op, planned to be the cornerstone of the Detroit Food Commons development.

Malik's intersection with the national food co-op movement came about through his interest in strengthening black communities and increasing their access to healthy food. For the past three years, he has attended the Up & Coming Conference, produced by the Food Co-op Initiative to support startup food co-ops, and is in conversations with several predominately black food co-op efforts nationally as DBCFSN works to open the Detroit People's Food Co-op in 2018.

The vast majority of the people Malik collaborates with are black, but he also works with white people, most of whom he describes as, "struggling with their own privilege and how they participate, introspective and reflecting and are able to follow black leadership." In fact, Malik says, "We work with almost every group in the city of Detroit that is working towards social justice and equity."

While Malik's focus is on strengthening black communities, and not around race relations, he recognizes that black communities don't exist in a vacuum. "Things that happen in larger society impact black folks as well, so we can't function in a bubble." For example, he sees a connection between the federally created highway system and diminished population density in cities; grocery stores situate themselves, in part, based on population density.

*"We need to have honest discussions about race with members of co-ops so one can learn how they may unintentionally participate in a system that gives privilege and advantage folks who have white skin."*

Malik explains, "Some groups want to create harmonious relationships between white and black people. In our own work, if we are able to do that that's a good thing, but that's not our primary objective. Our primary objective is to determine our own destiny." But Malik is quick to add, "We are the main organization creating food security policy for the city of Detroit.…There is no black and white food policy; it impacts everyone."

Asked about why most food co-ops are overwhelmingly white, Malik's guesses it might be due to the outgrowth of these organizations during the 60's and 70's as part of a counter-culture movement. It seems to him that these movements centered in affluent and college towns, and that that trend seems to have continued.

Also, Malik thinks that blacks have become disconnected from the cooperative movement. In the south, during legally enforced segregation, blacks were forced to cooperate due to their exclusion from white society; in the north, in cities such as Detroit, blacks have had more access to the "trappings of the larger society." Also, Malik reflects, another issue is

access to capital. "We don't see black-owned businesses," and the "things necessary for life to continue" are owned by whites, "part of a larger extractive trend that tends to function in African-American communities."

While Malik has no personal interest in integrating white co-ops, he is foremost an activist involved in strengthening black communities, he did have some ideas about how to make food co-ops more racially diverse. "I think that the first thing is raising the profile of this discussion. What you are doing with this project [for example]. People's thinking is shaped by the narratives they hear. They need to hear more diverse narratives."

### Discrepancies Rooted in Race and Class

As an example of an alternative narrative, Malik has stopped using the term "food desert," in part because it "is imposed on our communities from outside." Another reason it has become problematic, according to Malik, is that the way it frames the food access problem—as an area where folks have to travel further to a major grocery store—suggests a false solution: more grocery stores.

Malik believes that grocery stores as we know them are a symptom of a broken food system, and that the real problem is racial disparities in food access. Grocery stores in black areas far too often sell inferior quality food compared to the white areas. "We definitely see discrepancies and disparities rooted in race and class."

He also suggests that, "co-ops need to be intentional about leadership," and make much more of an effort "to make sure racial diversity is reflected in upper tiers. They need to have the issues of racial justice and equity as an ongoing theme. We need to have honest discussions about race with members of co-ops so one can learn how they may unintentionally participate in a system that gives privilege and advantage to folks who have white skin." And finally, "people of color need to do more to create co-ops in their own communities. As whites grapple with their systems, and make them more intentionally just, black people need to practice self-determination and not be so dependent on others."

# Marilyn Scholl

**Marilyn Scholl is the manager of Columinate and has provided consulting services to food co-ops through CDS CC since 1996. She is a former food co-op general manager at two co-ops (Wheatsville and Gordon Park) and helped organize CCMA for 7 years. Marilyn has a Masters degree in adult education from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and resides just outside of Putney, Vermont.**

Marilyn Scholl was the youngest of four children, and the only girl, born to a Christian Lutheran farming family in southeast Indiana. She remembers that her family originally raised all of their own food, but, over the years, increasing legal restrictions forced her family to eliminate, first dairy, then egg production, from their farm. Marilyn calls it, "a progression to becoming primarily beef farmers and growing food for cows, not for us," though her family always maintained a small vegetable garden. Marilyn grew up in a house built by her great-grandfather in 1860, in a family heavily steeped in tradition. In addition to farming, her mother taught at the small local school; her father was a rural mail carrier.

Marilyn recalls her father as somewhat rigid in his religious ideology, but her mother believed in the evolution of ideas. Her mother would sometimes question dogma, saying, "That's not consistent with what Jesus said about loving and taking care of each other."

Marilyn's first exposure to the concept of race happened at a young age, when she was four or five. She overheard a conversation where she learned that one of her mother's friends had a woman who helped her clean, and that that woman was colored. Her only other experience of "colored" was some striped drinking glasses her family owned. She didn't understand that "colored" was a racial term.

Many years later, she was watching TV with her family when the picture of a young high school basketball star from Indianapolis came on the screen. She remembers that her father said, "He looks like he just came out of the jungle." She knew by then that that was a bad thing to say, but she didn't quite know why or what she could do about it.

For most of her childhood, Marilyn attended the small all-white rural school where her mother taught; everyone's family farmed, and everyone knew everyone else. When she entered eighth grade, however, the school was merged into the town school where there was much more diversity, including racial diversity.

*"Without concerted effort to invite and include people not like us, nothing will change."*

After high school, she was anxious to get away from her small town and chose a college in Ohio. It was the early 70's and the women's movement had a big impact on Marilyn. She dropped out of college and spent time with people more interested in exploring themselves and the world than in academics.

During those years, she came out as a lesbian and worked a variety of local jobs; eventually she and her then-girlfriend bought a van and decided to move to Boston. It was 1975, and there was incredible racial tension in that city as result of court-enforced school desegregation; a series of racially motivated protests and riots brought national attention to Boston's struggles with race.

This was also where Marilyn gained first-hand experience of life on the other side of the color line. Marilyn's girlfriend was black, and they weren't able to find a place to rent in Boston because they were an

interracial couple.

One place they were offered, the woman subletting had said yes, but neighbors threatened to burn the place down if they moved in. When they looked at another apartment, upstairs from an Italian grocery, the landlord raised a mop at them and angrily told them to get out. Marilyn still remembers today, viscerally, how that experience made her feel. She recalls both anger and sadness, awareness of her privilege as a white person and also of the impact of racial discrimination.

Unable to find housing in Boston, Marilyn and her partner set out for the West Coast, stopping briefly in Milwaukee to visit friends. That's where they ran out of money, settled down, and eventually split up.

**Gordon Park Food Co-op**

Marilyn stayed in Milwaukee and ended up settling in the Riverwest neighborhood, which was quite racially diverse. "Both the inner city and the wealthier eastside spilled over boundaries and integrated a formerly Polish working-class neighborhood." Exploring her neighborhood, she stumbled upon a food co-op, and went in. "It was Outpost; I didn't understand it at all. There was a rusty cooler in the back. Grains were sold out of big garbage cans. It looked like what we fed the animals back home. I didn't know what you would do with that food. And it didn't appeal to me that much."

The Gordon Park Food Co-op was in the same building; they had products that Marilyn recognized and was familiar with, "Gordon Park sold everything—Campbell soup, Twinkies, cigarettes…I knew what it was and how to eat it and how to cook it."

She also believed that Gordon Park members experienced elitism from other food co-ops because of the food they sold. "We always felt different at Gordon Park and we were treated differently.…We felt like second-class citizens. We were looked down on; we weren't pure. We weren't about natural foods."

Marilyn was one of many volunteers at Gordon Park, "I was a cheese cutter; through that I learned about how Gordon Park worked and how it was different than Outpost next door…I didn't notice it at the time, but noticed in hindsight, that the staff at Gordon Park was all white." The 50 or 60 volunteers were more racially diverse, and included both Hispanics and blacks, but were still predominately white.

Eventually a job opened up, Marilyn applied and joined the staff collective at Gordon Park in June 1978.

She recalls, during her time at Gordon Park, having a conversation with a coworker about a shared acquaintance. She remembers saying that the person's name was MAR-tin-ez. Her colleague corrected her, "'I think that's pronounced Mar-TIN-ez.' I had pronounced it wrong.…I remember of feeling naive and thinking, 'wow, I've got a lot to learn.'"

*"This place is not only going to be okay, it is specifically telling me; they want me to know I am welcome. That's what I think co-ops don't do."*

Outpost eventually moved out of the neighborhood, and Gordon Park started selling more natural foods. When a Pick-n-Save moved in a few blocks away, Gordon Park wasn't able to compete on prices and went out of business. Though Marilyn had left Gordon Park years earlier to become General Manager at Wheatsville Co-op in Austin Texas, Gordon Park's closing made her keenly aware of the enormous challenges faced by co-ops that sell conventional food.

In the late 80s, Marilyn was hired by the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives to assist with program development for food co-op managers and helped to organized the Consumer Cooperatives Management Association (CCMA) annual conference. This was her first experience with the broader co-op community, and the first time that race came to the forefront of the conversation.

She recalls participants in the conference asking, "Hey, we're all white here. Why aren't there more African-Americans at this conference?" Marilyn was part of organizing and running the conference and thought, "this conference is for managers and directors of food co-ops, why are you asking us? Are there non-white people who are managers and directors who are not coming to the conference?" Marilyn

didn't know the answer to those questions, and, at the time thought it was the co-ops', not the conference organizers, responsibility to address it.

For the last few years, Columinate has been having trainings and conversations about race and Marilyn says that, as a result, "my thoughts have changed quite a bit…I do see some things we could have done, but we didn't."

She recalled conversations with early organizers of Renaissance Community Cooperative in Greensboro, NC. "When I first heard [about the project] I was pessimistic." She had remembered the difficulties at Gordon Park Food Co-op, especially with selling conventional foods in a small-format store in a marketplace that demands high volume to keep prices reasonable. "I thought, this is going to be hard. You're not going to be able to offer products at a price point that's competitive." Her honesty was perceived as racist. "Some people thought I was saying [what I said] because African-Americans were involved," but the opposite was true. "I want them to succeed."

**An Opportunity for Change**

Marilyn now thinks that food co-ops have "a strategic responsibility and opportunity to reverse or confront the situation where most people in most of our food co-ops are mostly white." She doesn't think that food co-ops clientele are white entirely because of the food they sell, though that could be part of it.

Then why are our co-ops so white? "People are comfortable around people like them. Without concerted effort to invite and include people not like us, nothing will change." She gives an example of visiting a Quaker meetinghouse for the first time. "A little sign on the door said 'We welcome gays and lesbians.' I hadn't been worried about it, but when I saw [the sign] I immediately felt different. This place is not only going to be okay, it is specifically telling me; they want me to know I am welcome. That's what I think co-ops don't do."

Marilyn is aware that being more racially inclusive might require a steep learning curve for some white cooperators. But she does believe that food co-ops can become racially inclusive. "That's my instinct, my gut, and I think it's possible. I see what they've done at Seward's Friendship store and Durham." She's also noticed that some established co-ops have moved into underserved, racially diverse neighbors, have faced considerable challenges, and are not achieving their sales projections—there is still no clear formula for the type of store and the type of community engagement that will lead to success.

# Patricia Cumbie

**Patricia Cumbie is a member of the Columinate living in Minneapolis, Minn. She has worked in the food co-op sector since 1989 as a member services and marketing director and writer. For many years she was also the editor of the Twin Cities food co-op newspaper the *Mix*. Patricia is also the co-author of *Growing with Purpose: Forty Years of Seward Community Cooperative*. She is proud to say she enjoys ownership in a wide variety of co-ops, and has devoted her career to writing about and chronicling the cooperative movement.**

Growing up primarily in Racine, Wisconsin, a mid-sized factory town, Pat describes her upbringing as "unsettled." Born in California, she also lived in Alabama briefly during her middle school years. Often, as their financial circumstances fluctuated, they moved to different places in Racine. Before Pat started high school, her family had moved eight times. Originally shy and introverted, Pat believes her somewhat nomadic childhood taught her how to blend into many different environments, as well as helped develop her skill for making friends.

She considers her upbringing unusual, not only because of the frequent moves, but also because her father's parents were sharecroppers. Born in a tent in Alabama, her father moved throughout the south during his childhood. "Before my dad died at 68, he had lived 38 places." She describes her family's history as marked by tragedies linked with alcoholism, poverty and abuse, some due to economic circumstances, and some due to their ongoing efforts to achieve the American dream. While sometimes it seemed that they had finally achieved financial stability, it never lasted.

A typical working-class family, Pat's father was the primary wage earner, working mostly in factories; her mother took odd jobs babysitting or house cleaning while raising their four children. Pat's mother married at age 17 due to an unplanned pregnancy, as had her mother before her. Pat's parents were the only children in their families to finish high school.

The first person on both sides of her family to go to college, Pat didn't know what to expect from education, but had a vague notion that it could improve her life. "A lot has changed for me as a person because I was able to get an education. The fact that I can make a living with my mind is an astonishing thing to me."

### Racial Tensions

While most of her childhood Pat lived in neighborhoods that were racially mixed, she recalls that "there wasn't a whole lot of hanging out with each other." People shared neighborhoods and similar economic situations, but not much else. Racine, originally a white blue-collar town, was heavily impacted by the Great Migration, as black Americans left the south and headed north and west for greater opportunities. Pat thinks of Racine as somewhat of a hard place. She recalls an "incredibly demeaning social attitude for pretty much everyone, except being black was the worst possible thing." Racial epithets were a frequent part of the cultural milieu she grew up in.

*"The idea that people of color would be involved was couched in the idea of personal choice."*

Yet, Pat remembers her father as "probably the least racist person" that she knew as a child. "He didn't cotton to any kind of discrimination talk. He never participated in jokes, didn't call folks names,

and was conscious that his status in comparison to other groups wasn't that far off."

And yet, when he was teaching Pat to drive, he warned her, "'you've got to watch out how the black people drive.' He wasn't any kind of racial saint." Pat's sharecropper grandfather, however "was an incredibly racist person" who, though he suffered many of life's deprivations, felt he "was still superior because he was a white man."

Pat's mother's view on race was somewhat more complicated. Pat recalls clearly her mother's resentment of school desegregation, concerned that including blacks would diminish the school's academic standards.

She remembers especially the tension caused by school busing, and questioning "was it better to keep people in their neighborhoods or force them to interact?…In a lot of ways I was afraid of black people. [I thought] there's a reason they are in these neighborhoods, because they are generally a violent people. My parents weren't explicit, but in the whole society that was the message."

Pat remembers the issue of race as challenging and confusing, and felt that, in order to fit in, that she just had to "sit tight and be quiet…I never confronted anyone on their racial attitudes, and I participated plenty in my own way. I just wanted to feel acceptance from my peers."

And yet, at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, in response to two unpleasant racial incidents—one involving a white fraternity dressing up in blackface, another a mock slave auction—Pat got involved in a diversity group. Pat felt strongly enough that she wanted to be part of the solution, yet she recalls being "ill-equipped to be there…I just could not admit that I would have any kind of racial bias or racism in my heart…there is so much work to do when you are a white person."

### Co-op Love Affair

Pat's exposure to food co-ops came through her then boyfriend, now husband, Sean, who was a member of the Mifflin St. Co-op, the radical leftie food co-op in Madison. She recalls, "He had this funky anise co-op toothpaste. He carried his food around in a baggie." Sean was a young radical, and the co-op meant a lot to him. When they moved into together, they joined Willy Street Co-op together.

After college, Pat and Sean moved to Minneapolis in search of work. Pat started to learn what a co-op really was when she started working at Seward Community Co-op as member services director.

She learned about the Rochdale Pioneers, reading David Thompson's book, *Weavers of Dreams*, and was incredibly taken with their story. She empathized with them. "I thought it was just amazing that these people who worked as weavers in the textile mills gave their money and pursued this dream of bettering themselves through cooperation and education…That's when I feel like my love affair with cooperation started. [Here] was this incredibly inspiring story of these people who reminded me of my parents and all these other people that I had grown up with."

*"I think co-ops need to change their approach to customer service and outreach: how they train and acquire leaders and how we educate people about what co-ops are about."*

Pat recalls that, at that time, Seward had an all-white staff, and was "overwhelmingly white in terms of the customer base." In the monthly orientations that she performed for new co-op members, she remembers that new members tended to be people who went to the University of Minnesota and nearby Augsburg College.

When Pat first noticed that her food co-op was mostly white, she didn't think very deeply about it. About her attitude then, she says, "I felt like, if we are all liberals here, and we feel like we are not prejudiced individuals, then that means that if people want to come along and be involved, they are totally welcome. So the idea that people of color would be involved was couched in the idea of personal choice."

### A Paradigm Shift

But over time Pat's thoughts have changed. "One of the questions we've been asking people in this

project is, why do you think the co-ops are so white? I think the attitude I just talked about is prevalent in our sector, but I think that, as a sector we do need to go deeper into thinking about our unexamined biases and racism." According to Pat, "The natural food industry has really helped cultivate a culture of elitism. You look at the advertising; it's all about the best, handcrafted, lovingly sourced. In some ways that's really awesome, in some ways it shuts a lot of people out."

Pat continues, "One of the big challenges that food co-ops face now, is that people have a limited understanding of what goes on in the food industry as a whole, how incredibly exploitive it is on so many levels. That butts up against the whole question of access and price and who's left out. And when you've got this industry that is promoting everything under the guise of natural, good, and the best, it just does such an incredible disservice to the need for equity on so many levels."

Pat recalls her years in co-op marketing, her infatuation with the Rochdale pioneers to the exclusion of other stories, the romanticizing of farming. She now realizes that there is a whole lot more to the story, including the experiences of people who have traditionally been left out. "I think there's an assumption that, the black people, they don't care about this anyway. I think we've seen with…the burgeoning startups happening that yes, actually, they do."

So how can existing food co-ops become more racially diverse? Pat says, "I think co-ops need to change their approach to customer service and outreach: how they train and acquire leaders and how we educate people about what co-ops are about. I think that elitism question is the corner that we've backed ourselves into, wittingly or unwittingly; a big part of the work is undoing that. I think that will require a paradigm shift in the way we all think about our work in the sector."

Pat also thinks that co-ops could listen more to feedback from the community. She mentions the work that Durham Co-op Market is doing to connect with the community surrounding the co-op. "I think maybe they are in a very fortunate position as a startup, because they don't have all that baggage that maybe established food co-ops have, so the community is willing to look at them with fresh eyes."

Pat describes changing the way co-ops connect to their community as a necessary paradigm shift. She recalls a project undertaken by National Co+op Grocers and Columinate to really listen to those few brave souls doing their startups. They asked themselves "how do we actually create a system for meeting the needs of these co-ops that are just hollering out into the wilderness looking for help? Lo and behold, FCI [Food Co-op Initiative] was born." That infrastructure grew up around this question of "how do we meet the needs of this particular constituency in our sector?" She believes the same outcome is possible if co-ops put the same energy towards thinking about inclusion and food justice.

# Resources

This is by no means an exhaustive list of resources on the subject of race and inclusivity. We'd also like to acknowledge Pollen Midwest's contribution to this resource list, especially those articles related to workplace issues. We encourage you to explore more than what's presented here, and look into your own community for organizations and resources, too.

### Books

*A Good Time for the Truth*, edited by Sun Yung Shin, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2016.

*Collective Courage, A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*, by Jessica Gordon-Nembhard, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014.

*Racism Without Racists, Color Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, by Eduardo Bonilla Silva, Rowman & Lillefield, 2017.

*The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South*, by Osha Gray Davidson, Scribner Book Company, 1996.

*The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, by Peter Senge, Deckle Edge, 2006.

*The Warmth of Other Suns*, by Isabel Wilkerson, Vintage Books, 2010.

*Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, by Debby Irving, Elephant Room Press, 2014.

*White Fragility: Why It's So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism*, by Robin DiAngelo, Beacon Press, 2018. (Forthcoming summer 2018)

*White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, by Nancy Isenberg, Viking, 2016

### Videos

"Allegories on Race and Racism | Camara Jones | TEDxEmory," July 10, 2014
youtube.com/watch?v=GNhcY6fTyBM

"Collective Courage: A Conversation on Cooperation in African-American Communities," The Laura Flanders Show, May 27, 2014
youtube.com/watch?v=EpsZw6vsH4A

"Food + Justice = Democracy: LaDonna Redmond at TEDxManhattan, 2013," March 4, 2013
youtube.com/watch?v=ydZfSuz-Hu8

"Fostering a Racially Just Food System: An Up & Coming Food Co-op Conference Video," Malik Yakini, August 22, 2016
youtube.com/watch?v=juK4z-S58Ro

"How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race-TEDxHampshire College," Jay Smooth, November 15, 2011
youtube.com/watch?v=hFcQKHh72_w

### Articles

"Asian Americans Feel Held Back at Work by Stereotypes," by Leah Askarinam, *The Atlantic*, January 26, 2016
theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/01/asian-americans-feel-held-back-at-work-by-stereotypes/458874/

"Being Black—but Not Too Black—In the Workplace," by Adia Harvey Wingfield, *The Atlantic*, October 14, 2015
theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/10/being-black-work/409990/

"Building Partnerships Across Race and Class," by Jade Barker, *Cooperative Grocer*, July-August 2015
grocer.coop/articles/building-partnerships-across-race-and-class

*—continued on page 48*

"Confronting White Supremacy in the Workplace," by Caroline Taiwo, *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, June 13, 2017
pollenmidwest.org/stories/confronting-white-supremacy-in-the-workplace/

"Everyone Welcome? Considering Race and Food Co-ops," by Jade Barker, *Solutions*, Columinate Library, July 12, 2017
library.columinate.coop/everyone-welcome-considering-race-and-food-co-ops/

"OK, I Get It! Now Tell Me How to Do It!: Why We Can't Just Tell You How to Do Critical Multicultural Education," by Robin DiAngelo, National Association for Multicultural Education, 2010
robindiangelo.com/2014site/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/OK-I-get-it.pdf

"Too Many People of Color Feel Uncomfortable at Work," by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, *Harvard Business Review*, October 18, 2012
hbr.org/2012/10/too-many-people-of-color-feel

"White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" and "Some Notes for Facilitators," by Dr. Peggy McIntosh, The National SEED Project, 1989
nationalseedproject.org/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack

"Whites Talking to Whites: Moving Beyond Anti-Racism and Privilege," by Ryan Williams Virden, Form Follows Function, December 17, 2014
ryanwilliamsvirden.com/2014/12/17/whites-talking-to-whites-moving-beyond-anti-racism-and-privilege/

**Training Organizations and Resources**

AORTA: Anti Oppression Resource and Training Alliance
aorta.coop

Training for Change
trainingforchange.org

Racial Equity Tools
racialequitytools.org

The Berkana Institute
berkana.org

Pollen Midwest
pollenmidwest.org