

# Building Partnerships Across Race and Class: *Our next frontier?*

BY JADE BARKER

**C**ooperative grocery stores across the country are making efforts to integrate their cooperatives across race and class. How did they get into this work? What are they doing? What are they learning? And what are the benefits?

Seeking answers to these questions, I reached out to a handful of the many co-ops involved in diversifying their staff and member-owner base: People's Food Co-op in Kalamazoo, Mich.; GreenStar Cooperative Market in Ithaca, N.Y.; Mariposa Food Co-op in Philadelphia, Penn.; Brattleboro Food Cooperative in Brattleboro, Vt.; and National Co+op Grocers, an organization of 143 food co-ops.

## Seeking mutual benefits

Overall, the cooperators I spoke with agreed that serving their entire communities, not just the white and well-off, coincided with their cooperative values. As Brandon Kane of GreenStar explained, "Most of us end up in cooperative work not because it's lucrative, but because we can make a living working for social change." Yet, precisely because co-ops serve mostly the white and economically secure, cooperators can be blind to the different ways race and class operate in our society. And when they do attempt to address class and racial differences, a misguided sense of being saviors can be off-putting to the very people they hope to engage.

Part of the enthusiasm I discovered in those doing this work seemed to come from the realization that cooperation could create true and meaningful partnerships with benefits flowing both ways. For example, discount programs for people with low incomes help co-ops remain true to their values. When I asked Sabine Rhyne, Brattleboro's general manager (beginning July 1), why their co-op started its "Food for All" program, she said, "I think it's a cooperative value. We like to think we're inclusive as cooperatives." Brattleboro's is one of a dozen programs among New England co-ops alone that offers generous discounts to low-income shoppers, making healthy food affordable for all.

Currently at National Co+op Grocers (NCG), the board of directors is working to build shared understanding of diversity and inclusivity through study groups, with support

from several CDS Consulting Co-op members. These general manager-led study groups, organized through emails and conference calls, are learning about such topics as systemic racism and oppression, community economic development, creating a welcoming co-op culture, and reducing obstacles to accessibility. Terry Appleby, former board president of NCG, explains that this work grew out of NCG member co-ops' interest in promoting a more diverse movement. The NCG study group has recently evolved to include about 35 members from outside the board who are interested and enthusiastic.

What are other cooperatives doing? Following are a few current examples.

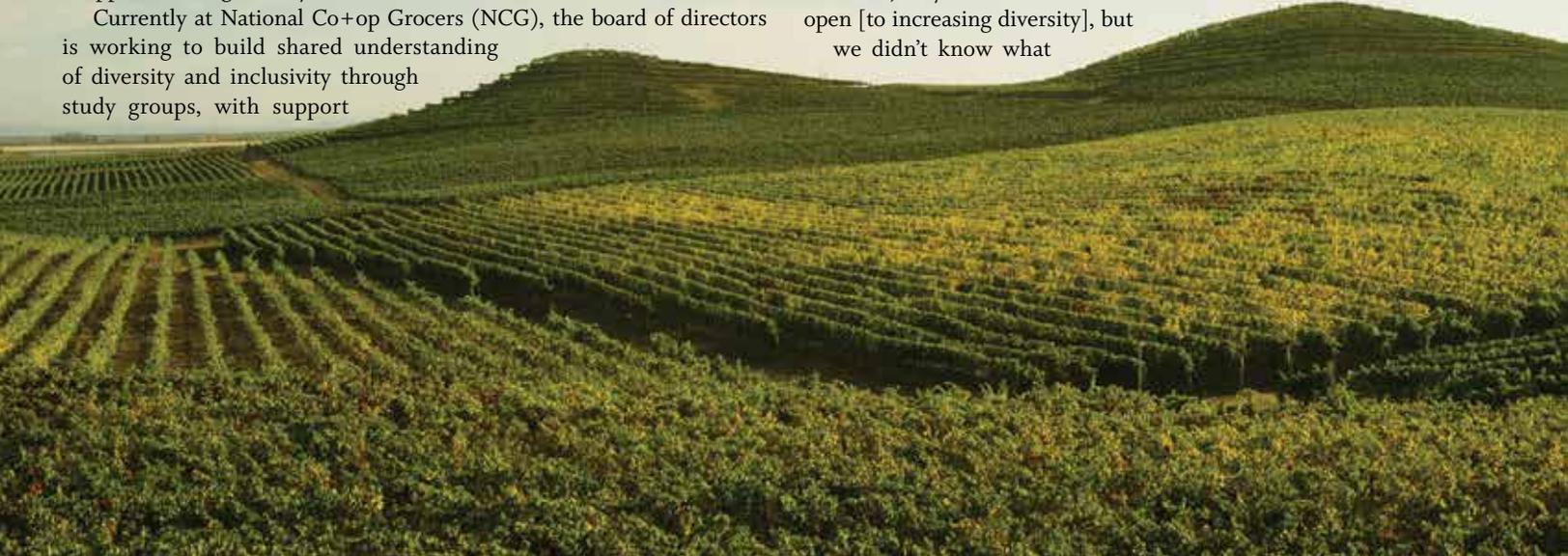
## GreenStar Cooperative Market, Ithaca

Brandon Kane, GreenStar's general manager, was, like everyone else I interviewed, excited about his co-op's diversity work. "We're discovering a new purpose; it's not just about food and social change with food; it's refocusing the change that we want to see in the world."

GreenStar had heard grumblings over the years that their store was inaccessible to low- and middle-income folks and that it was a white, primarily affluent organization that practiced a sort of passive discrimination. Its staff and clientele were almost 100 percent white in a city where over 25 percent of the citizens are people of color. Looking back, Kane says, "We were naive. We said, 'The doors are open, that should be enough.'"

That changed about four years ago when GreenStar received an email from a disgruntled member-owner accusing the co-op of being racist. The email was copied to leaders of several local community groups and the director of the diversity consortium at Cornell, the local university. This email captured the attention of the co-op's board and general manager.

12th Moon, president of the GreenStar Council (the co-op's board of directors), says, "We felt terrible. We were open [to increasing diversity], but we didn't know what



to do... That's when the community leaders reached out and said, 'If you're really serious, we'll help you.'

After GreenStar received that critical email, the council organized a meeting with community organizations and individuals it had identified as "critics" and held an off-site two-hour meeting, where they did something remarkable that started a big turnaround for them: they listened. And then they acted.

12th Moon says, "The biggest thing we did was we stopped being passively discriminatory. Those meetings were brutal. It was an ego-stripping process. We were asked: 'Do we have an anti-racism statement? What does our internal culture look like? Are there areas that are unwelcoming?' Then we started changing."

As Kane says, "We got a clear recommendation from the group: you need to make a strong stand against systemic racism. If you say that's what your cooperative is about, change your systems and how you operate, how you train people. We drafted an anti-racism statement with them. It's at the top of our application and most of our marketing materials. [Systemic racism] is a pervasive situation throughout America. People appreciate that they are dealing with a co-op that's trying to address these issues and not gloss over it."

GreenStar has continued meeting with community leaders and now spends the majority of its marketing budget supporting community events. Annually, numerous staff members take a 2.5-day training delivered through the Undoing Racism Organizing Collective. And the co-op has instituted a discount healthy food access program called FLOWER: Fresh, Local & Organic Within Everyone's Reach.

While GreenStar leaders feel they are just beginning their journey, the changes so far have already been profound. Within four years, the co-op went from 1.8 percent to 20 percent of employees identifying as people of color.

### People's Food Co-op, Kalamazoo

People's Food Co-op in Kalamazoo, Mich., got its start in addressing issues of race and social justice after a store expansion and relocation. Before the move, says General Manager Chris Dilley, "People who came in the store were primarily white. People working at store were totally white." As a result of a relocation, the co-op found itself between two low-income neighborhoods, one African-American and the other racially mixed.

This move prompted some discoveries, such as, according to Board President Jo Ann Mundy, race and racism. One tendency of whites in the U.S. is to see themselves as outside of race,

or racially neutral. That view was challenged when People's became an all-white island in a sea of color. Dilley says, "I learned I was white. It was an identity-development process." Mundy, who also is an educator with ERACCE (Eliminating Racism and Claiming/Celebrating Equality, a nonprofit devoted to building anti-racist multicultural institutions), says, "We discovered that we didn't know some things that we didn't know. Holy shit, some folks are white, and we didn't know that. What else has been hidden from us? Sometimes I feel like my white colleagues and friends were surprised by what had been hidden from them—got angry and curious. They wondered, 'What do I do?' It felt to me, as a person of color, who is friends with y'all, that a tsunami was getting ready to hit you. Like Alice falling through the looking glass."

Dilley and Mundy credit their previous board president, Aliisa Lahti, for helping them navigate in their new environment. Dilley says that

Lahti asked the board, "We picked a site in a neighborhood that's primarily people of color—do we know what we're doing? Is this a good idea?' Her leadership asking those critical questions was important."

Regarding her role in changing her co-op's approach, Lahti says, "I went to an ERACCE workshop (facilitated by Crossroad Antiracism Organizing and Training) and was just blown away by how well they explained racism—specifically institutional and systemic racism. Institutions are the places where we can make the change. Okay, I'm the board chair of an institution, so I went to the next board meeting and started talking about institutional racism... It was tense; I wasn't sure what would happen. It was really scary, scary and kind of exciting."

Lahti credits CDS Consulting Co-op member Thane Joyal, who serves as People's consultant for Co-op Board Leadership Development, with giving her the courage to act on her convictions. "It was scary to use the word racism because I wasn't clear how people would react. I asked Thane if it was my place to get the co-op to do this work. Joyal said, 'It definitely is. You are the board chair, and you should lead.' She encouraged me, and I kept talking about it. I kept encouraging people to attend the workshop. Our general manager, Chris Dilley attended, and he got fired up about it, too. Over time, other directors went to the workshop, and we had a shared language and a shared understanding of what racism is. As more and more people got excited about the work, eventually there was a movement to start an anti-racism team within the co-op."

Board President Jo Ann Mundy and Vice President Chris Moore, one black, the other white, believe that "one clear, specific, concrete manifestation of racial equity in our co-op is multiracial co-leadership." They say their >



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partnership as leaders, while deeply satisfying, also acts as an “audio-visual aid” for their co-op and community. People’s also sends staff to a 2.5-day workshop addressing institutional racism, and the co-op is now in the process of creating a transformation team consisting of staff, directors, and owners. Mundy says, “You just can’t blow something up and start over from the beginning. You have to change from the inside out... We want to grow people, and we also want to grow the organization.”



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## Mariposa Food Co-op, Philadelphia

Mariposa Food Cooperative in Philadelphia, Penn., has a Food Justice and Anti-Racism (FJAR) committee to address issues of race and oppression. FJAR’s ambitious mission is, in part, “to identify and dismantle institutionalized racism, classism, patriarchy, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia within Mariposa, and to align our co-op with social change related to fair labor practices, food access, environmental justice, and anti-gentrification.”

Jasmine Hamilton, Mariposa Food Co-op’s education and outreach coordinator, has a strong anti-oppression focus. Hamilton explains that for a long time Mariposa has been over-whelmingly white. Established in West Philadelphia in 1971 in a community populated predominately by people of color, Mariposa was open only to co-op members until three years ago. Members-only organizations, Hamilton explains, have a historical association with exclusivity, and part of that historical context has been excluding people of different races and classes.

Additionally, Mariposa’s previous very small store had a waiting list for membership. For people of color—seeing a store full of almost entirely white shoppers in a racially mixed neighborhood—being told there was a waiting list could easily have been perceived as purposely exclusive. Additionally, the fact that the store previously didn’t take cash, only credit or debit cards, made it difficult for folks who didn’t have credit cards or bank accounts to shop at the store. “So, there was a history of miscommunication between owners and viewers.”

When Mariposa expanded about three years ago, the co-op opened its doors to non-members. Mariposa learned then, through a community survey and from co-op owners, that they had a lot to overcome to be perceived as welcoming to the surrounding community. Currently all staff participate in anti-oppression trainings, and they are looking to include the board of directors in that training in the future. Hamilton reaches out to community leaders and organizations to build partnerships, while offering a variety of workshops of interest to diverse clientele.

## What are the benefits?

Eliminating racism and classism’s pernicious effects on our co-ops is a long-term journey. Yet I was surprised at how many current benefits those I spoke to are getting from their work. Dilley at People’s has received both personal and professional benefits, “I see an opportunity to raise my son differently. [Without this work] we wouldn’t have spoken about race and racism so clearly.”

Also, he has seen benefits in handling challenging situations. In one recent difficulty with a staff member, Dilley says, “If it weren’t for the work that we’re doing, and the conversations that we’re having in as open a way as we have been having, [this situation] might have made the co-op explode.”

Mundy believes that at People’s they are “building resilience in our community...and building collaboration and cooperation in our organization.” For Lahti, feeling that she is part of creating long-term, tangible and sustaining change, “was/is the most beneficial thing.”

While he described those first meetings as “brutal,” at GreenStar 12th Moon now considers as friends many of the community members who support his co-op. He says, “It’s really rewarding, but also fulfilling because you’re not done yet. There’s no being done with it.” Brandon Kane says, “There are so many things that just seem futile, but in this kind of work, when you’re in an organization like GreenStar that has a real impact on the community, you can actually see tangible outcomes. You can increase employment, membership, co-sponsor events. It’s the community we all want to live in.” □



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