

# Sharing the Wealth of Knowledge

## Honoring our cooperative past and present by building our future

BY STUART REID

Imagine yourself opening a new grocery store. You and your family and a couple of close friends have double-mortgaged your homes and the dream of owning your own store is about to happen. Where will you turn for advice and support? Would the Target Superstore on the edge of town share their organic vendor list with you? How many managers from the local Wal-Mart natural foods department have offered to help you set shelves and train your staff? Have you called Cub Foods yet to ask about labor schedules? Sorry, folks—corporate policy and competitive pressure do not allow us to do that for you.

Fortunately for all of us in food co-ops, we don't have corporate policies that keep us from supporting each other. Rather, we have a set of inspiring principles that guide our business lives; principles that are not just tucked away in our bylaws, but are posted in our stores, shared and explained to our owners and customers and used by our boards to make business decisions. It is easy to forget how much difference this makes in the success of our co-ops and the opportunities it affords new co-ops.

The 6th cooperative principle, "cooperation among cooperatives," is defined to mean, "Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures." The food co-op community has many such structures. The National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA) emulates a virtual chain for its members, providing support, training, and efficiencies of scale. Co-op foundations manage funds and reinvest in co-op businesses. Food Co-op 500 provides resources to new co-ops as they organize.

All of these groups do their best to support new co-ops, but it is the work of individual co-ops, their boards and staff that can make the biggest difference for startup co-ops. Following are some highlights of these contributions.

### Weavers Way: reputation, communication, organization

Weavers Way Co-op has become a focal point for new co-ops in the Philadelphia area (weaversway.coop). There are many strong projects underway that they have helped launch, among them CreekSide Co-op in Elkins Park,

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WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 12, 2009 TEXT SIZE

**IT'S OFFICIAL!!!**

On December 18th, as more than 250 prospective members of CreekSide Co-op spilled out of the doorways of Curtis Hall, your volunteer Board of Directors formally announced the location!

**7909 High School Road, Elkins Park, PA 19027**

From this day forward, this location (which many of you know as the old *Ashbourne Market*) will forever be known as the home of CreekSide Co-op, your full-service cooperative food market!

Our new landlord is a Mt. Airy development group that has extensive experience in renovating urban neighborhoods, we are thrilled to have made this exciting announcement.

We also asked everyone to share in three key messages;

**Vision** - to join us in creating something fantastic in our community

**Commitment** - by becoming a member, and a fully-vested member if you can afford it. Over 60% of those that attended tonight paid the full \$400.00 lifetime household capital contribution!

**Engagement** - it's now your turn to get involved! Volunteer to host a house-party/fundraiser, donate your expertise & time, SPREAD THE WORD!

Elkins Park, PA 19027

The Kensington Co-op, Lehigh Valley Food Co-op, Chester's Community Food Co-op, and the Bella Vista Food Co-op.

CreekSide Co-op began when Weavers Way General Manager Glenn Bergman responded to an inquiry from the Elkins Park neighborhood about whether he might open a co-op in their community. Glenn agreed to sponsor an open meeting to discuss the possibilities and gauge interest. He rented space, helped provide publicity, and set up 30 chairs. When Glenn and Weavers Way board members showed up a few days before Christmas 2008, they were inundated by over 200 co-op supporters. With a clear mandate, a new co-op started forming. Weavers Way became their mentor instead of the owner of a second store and helped the group to organize an effective steering committee. Since that first meeting, Creekside has signed up nearly 1,200 members, begun negotiations on a site, and applied for financing. They are projecting first-year sales in excess of \$3 million.

Board member Jennifer Brandabuhr credits Weavers Way with three broad areas of support.

First, they provided credibility to the project through their reputation—sponsoring organizing meetings, providing speakers, and serving on their board of directors. By including a link to the CreekSide project on their website and sending meeting notices, Weavers Way provided valuable communication opportunities and helped build the Creekside contact lists. Finally, they helped create a strong, balanced board of directors that has the organization, structure, and skills to succeed. Bergman and Jonathan McGoran (communications director) of Weavers Way are both active CreekSide board members. Along the way, they also helped locate resources and services that the co-op needed.

The Kensington Co-op is one of the most recent additions to the Philadelphia-area development scene. Board Chair Helen Lena credits Weavers Way for introducing them to the job ahead with a two-hour tour of their operations and a detailed, no-nonsense description that was "almost overwhelming"—a true reality check. Weavers Way board members also noted that one of their important contributions to

◀ startup groups is their ability to help organizers realize what is ahead, from the lengthy and sophisticated planning process to the hours upon hours of time commitment and the intricacies of raising capital. The Kensington board also attended Weavers Way's board workshop and regional networking picnic. Bergman even took the time to make a personal follow-up call to the invitation. Kensington sees Weavers Way as a model of what they can become and a trusted source of advice. To start a co-op, as Lena so aptly puts it, "You have to do the work—and you have to get help."

Lehigh Valley Food Co-op describes its website (lvfood.coop) as a virtual farmers' market for the Lehigh Valley. In addition to its online ordering system, the co-op has a small, members-only storefront that is open during limited hours until they can build up their volunteer workforce. Weavers Way has provided organizing advice and invited the Lehigh board to attend board training with them. Michael Healy from the CDS Consulting Co-op conducted the training for Weavers Way, Lehigh, and several other co-ops in the regions, both startups and established co-ops. This has been a conscious part of Weavers Way's outreach—including regional co-ops in training and networking opportunities where everyone can learn from

**Lehigh Valley Food Co-op**  
Bringing local farms closer to the family table

Home About Us Producer Info Customer Info Shop

**Welcome to the Lehigh Valley Food Cooperative**

Orders for the next delivery may be placed anytime between Friday morning and Monday at midnight. Deliveries occur every Thursday evening at various pick-up sites in the Lehigh Valley.

Our storefront is now open at the 860 Broad St, Suite 116, in Emmaus. Members can come and shop at the store during the following hours: Wed 9-3pm, Thurs 9-6pm, Sat 10-3pm, and Sun 10-3pm. > Sign-up to be a member now!

username:  Password:  Login

**Announcements:**

Trial Membership available for those who would like to try us out. E-mail the [membership@lvfood.coop](mailto:membership@lvfood.coop) to get your free trial membership week.

Order your volunteer hours for August on the website. Discounts on food now available for members volunteering 12 hours per month and more.

We have a college student who is interested in delivering orders to homes in the Macungie, Emmaus, and Allentown areas. Contact [info@lvfood.coop](mailto:info@lvfood.coop) if you are interested in having your order delivered to your door, if you live in these areas!

Light blue = Ordering days. Dark blue = Delivery days.

August 2009							September 2009						
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each other and build support networks.

The Bella Vista project started when Weavers Way board member David Woo and Glenn Bergman went to the Palumbo Recreation Center to meet with the community there about starting a co-op. The owner of Bella Vista Natural Foods wanted to sell her struggling natural foods store, thought she would spark a co-op movement,

and called interested neighbors together. About 60 people showed up.

Bergman went through his presentation on co-ops and how they are formed and what Weavers Way is about. After the presentation, they answered questions. The owner of Bella Vista realizes that the co-op, if it is formed, could go in a different direction than she ▶

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◀ would like it to and might choose to pursue a different site. However, her operation is already in place and can be up and running very quickly as a co-op if the community has the interest and energy to do it. Bergman suggested a steering committee be formed and a feasibility study commissioned. Out of the 60 attendees, 18 people remained and were interested in doing more to make this happen.

Personal involvement is at the heart of the Weavers Way support system. Bergman and his staff have given advice to new co-ops, set up and hosted community organizing meetings, sat on boards, and assumed long-term mentoring roles. Woo, Weavers Way vice president, has taken on a liaison role with the Bella Vista Co-op, and several other board members have participated in community meetings and other events, volunteering their time in support of something that their co-op and they themselves feel strongly about.

What has this support cost Weavers Way? Bergman shrugs off the question with the assertion that he has not kept track of the money, but it has not been more than a few thousand dollars. Most of the contribution is in the time that he and board members spend helping new co-ops follow their dreams.

Making time for all this happens even though Bergman is currently working on a new store project of his own for Weavers Way, and he still is thinking about the unmet potential. He says, "If we had someone on the pavement in Philly dedicated to new co-op organizing, we could open 10 co-ops in two years." Proving that this philosophy is organization-wide, Woo echoed Bergman by saying, "We should have someone on the street in each of the 10 largest cities, organizing co-ops."

### Hanover board and staff assist Littleton

In northern New Hampshire, the Hanover Co-op also recognizes its long history and success by helping the next generation. When citizens of Littleton (60 miles north of Hanover) wanted a co-op in their community, General Manager Terry Appleby and several Hanover board members met with them and explained the options and opportunities that they would need to open a store, offering a realistic picture of the development process and costs. When Littleton called a town meeting to discuss their plans and gauge interest, Appleby and his board were there to answer questions and show support. When 300 people showed up, the co-op was off and running. The Hanover board, led by then-President Don Kreis, committed the full backing of their co-op to Littleton's effort, including the time and expertise of the board and staff alike.

Jeff Wheeler, president of the Littleton Co-op board, describes Hanover's role as, "spectacularly helpful... We could not have done it without them." Throughout the organizing process, they provided advice and assistance, reviewed documents, budgets, and policies, and helped set up operational systems. When one of Littleton's lenders needed additional security, Hannover guaranteed the inventory with an agreement to purchase all nonperishables should the co-op default.

The help was not limited to the Littleton startup organizing and implementation. Hanover provided product and vendor information, helped set up frontend procedures, and assisted with merchandising the store. When the time came to hire managers and staff, they sent their own managers to Littleton to work with and train the new employees. The results were significant. The Littleton Co-op opened with operating efficiency, solid operational structures and great customer service. ▶

## Cooperative Grocer

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◀■ Hanover helped hire Littleton's first general manager, and when he left unexpectedly, Hanover once again came to the rescue. Bob Hayes was retiring from the Hanover Co-op's Lebanon store, but with years of co-op and grocery experience—much of it in the Littleton area—he was recruited to jump in for the critical startup years. Hanover co-op continues to provide Hayes's benefits, office space, and equipment until the new co-op's cash flow is stronger.

I asked Appleby, "Why do you do it?" His answer was no surprise. He immediately cited the 6th cooperative principle and noted that the successful co-ops of today have an obligation to the co-ops and leaders who have come before and created the legacy of cooperation that we enjoy. But there were also real benefits to the Hanover Co-op. The people who shared their time and talents with Littleton built new professional connections, gained a greater understanding of their own work, and came away with a sense of pride and accomplishment. In addition, said Appleby, "Now we have another co-op in our region to work with—we are not so isolated." His parting words to me were, "I wish we could do more. There is a lot of demand [for new co-op development], but the resources are few and far between."

Stu Katz from the Weavers Way board agrees. "You don't know what you know until you have to teach someone else. Board members gained insights into their knowledge and skills, and it has stimulated thinking about their roles as leaders. We have the feeling that we are accomplishing something good and can help others accomplish it too. That's been rewarding."

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## Build the movement

These are only two of many co-ops across the country that have generously provided resources and encouragement to new co-ops as they organize. They personify the "Meet in the Middle" philosophy of the Food Co-op 500 development model. When a community wants a co-op, they must be willing to do what it takes to organize, plan and implement their store. However, when they succeed in meeting their commitments, the greater co-op community and support organizations like Food Co-op 500 are also committed to providing the resources and support to help them make it work. I hope that their example inspires others and that the entire co-op community recognizes the gift they are giving. With over 200 communities exploring the possibility of opening a new food co-op, there are many opportunities for established co-ops to lend a hand and, just maybe, strengthen themselves in the process. ■

## Resources

For a map of current food co-op startup projects, see: <http://mapshare.delorme.com/Consumer/V.aspx?p=wmk4qp5q>

Web sites: [www.weaversway.coop](http://www.weaversway.coop)  
[www.creekside.coop](http://www.creekside.coop)  
[www.coopfoodstore.com](http://www.coopfoodstore.com) (Hanover)  
[www.littletoncoop.org](http://www.littletoncoop.org)  
[www.lvfood.coop](http://www.lvfood.coop) (Lehigh Valley)

## The Howard Bowers Fund and New Co-ops

Did you know that the Howard Bowers Fund has given \$20,200 to 16 startup food co-ops around the country in the past two years?

These grants are in support of Food Co-op 500's efforts to bring democratically owned and managed grocery stores to communities lacking them. They were made possible by your co-op's participation in Howard Bowers Day. You have helped these co-ops get vital training and education for their staff, manager, and board members.

Howard Bowers Day is held in October, which is Co-op Month, on a day of your co-op's choosing—perhaps on the busiest day of the week! Then your co-op donates 1 percent of sales that day to the Bowers Fund or makes a flat donation in October to the Bowers Fund.

The Cooperative Development Foundation and the Howard Bowers Fund trustees thank you for your past support and hope you will participate in Howard Bowers Day 2009.

For more information, see [www.cdf.coop](http://www.cdf.coop) or contact Steve Thomas ([stthomas@cdf.coop](mailto:stthomas@cdf.coop) or 703/302-8093) or Ellen Quinn ([equinn@cdf.coop](mailto:equinn@cdf.coop) or 703/302-8094) at the Cooperative Development Foundation (2011 Crystal Drive, Suite 800, Arlington, VA 22202).

### 2008 grants

Community Market Cooperative  
 Company Shops Market  
 Fiddleheads Food Cooperative  
 Friendly City Food Cooperative  
 Harvest Moon Natural Foods  
 Mandela Foods Cooperative  
 Miami-Oxford Organic Network  
 Sierra Vista Natural Foods Co-op  
 Vancouver Food Cooperative  
 Yahara River Grocery Co-op

### 2009 grants

Big Spring Co-op  
 Canaan Community Services  
 Chatham Real Food Market  
 Harvest Moon Natural Foods  
 Indy Food Cooperative  
 New Orleans Food Community