

ORGANIC PLANET WORKER CO-OP

What It Means to be a Worker Co-op



Who is Organic Planet Worker Co-op?

An Interview with Elizabeth McMechan

MCA had the pleasure of interviewing Elizabeth McMechan, a member at Organic Planet Co-op who brought us up to speed on some of the great initiatives and values that exist in their co-op.

In the spring of 2003, the location at 877 Westminster once again opened its doors as the newly founded Organic Planet Worker Co-op. There are many different ways a worker co-op can be run, the only requirement is that ownership and democratic control rests with the workers. The staff at Organic Planet Worker Co-op choose to run the store as democratically as possible. Each share is worth \$1000 and a one year probation period is required before new staff becomes full co-op members. Currently, they have 8 members. Decisions are made jointly by the whole staff at meetings, allowing all workers to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. The co-op's assets are collectively owned and any surplus earnings are re-invested in the business or allocated to the workers according to policies established by the co-op.

In its incarnations as both a consumer co-op and a worker co-op (Harvest Collective and Organic Planet), the business has reflected its members' rejection of a food and economic system based on profit, and choose a system based on the equitable collective action to meet people's needs. 877 Westminster has been operating as an alternative food store for over 30 years. It has been serving Wolseley and Winnipeg as a place to find whole, fair trade, healthy, organic foods. It is also a long-running and successful model of community building, showing what people working collectively to meet their own needs can produce.

Engaging Members

As explained by Elizabeth, the co-op currently has four full-time members and four part-time members. They are an organic grocery store and a vegan deli. "We work with fresh produce and reduce waste. We take some of the produce that's not longer sellable. Sometimes food comes in with scratches and stuff, the odd ugly shaped potato, and we turn it into something useable that we can give back to the community as a vegan or vegan and gluten free food item. Over the last year, because of COVID, we're sort of having to re-examine the way we do a lot of things. It hasn't been easy to navigate all of these changes. There's the sort of confrontation that comes with having to tell your customers to put on masks or to use hand sanitizer that wasn't there before pre-pandemic."

"Our customers have been extremely supportive with being respectful during the pandemic. In this time we instituted free city-wide delivery. That has been received very well by our customers. We have managed to get deliveries either the day of or the following day. Anywhere between 1-2 business days. We've been able to bring organic and vegan food across the city even to places such as Stonewall and all over Winnipeg and to some of the surrounding areas. Our first and foremost priority during this pandemic has been to keep our workers and customers safe – we've become very protective of our customers."

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"It's been interesting to see because when customers come in to the store, you don't necessarily know which neighborhood they are from. But, when you do these deliveries, you realize just how far people are willing to travel to support our small business. This is something I have personally come to appreciate. Prior to this, I truly had no idea where a lot of our customers came from, where now I see just how far people are travelling."

"So, with COVID, because we are an essential business, things have been really busy. We're experiencing higher customer volume. We're trying to navigate that with being short on products that we're unable to get from the United States or other places because of COVID regulations. We are experiencing an influx of business but not always having the capacity to have some of our products ready and stocked. Our workers are working tirelessly to bring in these new products. With the winter, there is of course that additional stress of bringing in and ensuring our fresh produce is available in the store. If produce is coming from B.C, or California, it obviously has to travel a long way to get here."



Reducing Waste

Organic Planet Co-op continually finds ways to reduce their waste in as many ways as they possibly can. A prime example of this is making connections with community outreach organizations where they can share any food from their deli or grocery section that they aren't able to necessarily sell but is still perfectly good for consumption. Building relationships with these organizations is important to the co-op as active community members and while it does focus on a reduced waste platform, it also gets food to people in need in the community.

Other ways the co-op tries to reduce waste is by partnering with a local plastics recycling program that takes any plastics that aren't recyclable through the city program. This has reduced their waste exponentially in the past two months. The end result is that garden planters made by these broken down plastics are created by this small operation here in Winnipeg.

Other smaller ways that the co-op reduces their contribution to the landfills is by reusing containers as many times as possible such as the clamshells that cherry tomatoes come in that they can later use when the co-op has bulk berries that need packaging. Where they used to use plastic wrap, they have been able to source reusable plastics that can be washed and reused indefinitely.

The composting program that the co-op partners with is a small independent farm just outside the city where they compose of foods that are still edible. In addition, the co-op has partnered up with Kismet Creek Farms Animal Sanctuary just outside of Steinbach, Manitoba, where they gather up edible fruits and vegetables for the animals to eat. Their volunteers come down to the co-op to pick up the vegetables and deliver them to Kismet Creek.



Cooperative Values

Elizabeth explained the importance and difference of what it was like for her to be involved in a co-op. "I'd say it is, the non-hierarchical structure. For example, on my first day at the co-op, if I was confused or had a question, you can just ask anybody! Instead of people telling you what to do, they ask for your opinion. Well what do you think about it? Do you think we should change it? Suddenly right off the bat your opinions matter because you're contributing as a member. There is obviously a seniority for the members who have been there 10-15 years because they know the store inside and out, but there is still great respect for new members and for them to offer fresh opinions and perspectives. There is an understanding that a business like Organic Planet cannot be stagnant. All people are respected the same, regardless of your age or background."

"In addition I think that with more capitalistic work places you're dealing with this expectation that you are this customer service machine where you clock in at the beginning of the day and clock out at the end. If we have a personal issue in our co-op, people are very understanding. There's this mutual respect that's happening constantly with your co-workers. There's a certain amount of freedom to have the opportunity to be honest about how you feel about certain things. What personally motivated me to stay at Organic Planet and engage was because I was able to bring my personal passions in and become and advocate for social movements in the city. For example, during the Black Lives Matter movement, we shut down the store and went to attend the rally to show our support. We were able to donate food to the organizers so that they could have lunch. If you feel passionate about something, you aren't sitting in front of a panel of bosses, but rather in front of your peers who all respect what you have to say."

"Working at Organic Planet was my first time working at a workers co-op. So, when I was undergoing my review process, I felt a lot of what I was learning was what my co-workers expected from me, and what I needed to expect from myself working there. You sort of go into it expecting to do a little bit of everything. A little bit of conflict management, learning how to order different things, communication skills, work in a deli and produce. There is this unique opportunity during the hiring process, where we get to sit down with someone and feel out what kind of person they are and what personal passion they can bring to our co-op. Because of that, as our membership changes and different people come and go, "

