

The Original Corner Store

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Cathe Casey lives around the corner from the Niskayuna Co-op Market, where she is a board member. Twenty years ago when her home burned, before the fire trucks had even left the street, the co-op manager came to her and said there was an account set up for her family. Until the rest of their lives were sorted out, he told her, they didn't need to think about paying for food.

"One of the smartest investments I ever made was my membership in this co-op—best \$5 I ever spent," said New York state Assemblyman James Tedisco last Friday (Sept. 21) at a ribbon-cutting to celebrate the store's redesign. Tedisco said he wished he could bottle the co-operation embodied in this store and its community and bring it to the government at the state and federal levels.

Anyone can shop at the store, but for \$5, anyone can become a member, and those anyones number more than 15,000 people. The cooperative supermarket is run on a membership model that has no work requirement. Sixty staff run the grocery and 25 of them work full-time. A volunteer board governs the operation. Board member Corinne Derry grew up in Schenectady and recalls the Niskayuna Co-op as a community gathering place. When she retired and returned to the area five years ago, she returned to the co-op, and has been on the board for three years. She still sees the community aspect of the co-op as its strength, in terms of uniting shoppers, serving local producers as a sales outlet, and helping community organizations such as the Schenectady Inner City Mission, which operates a food bank.

The co-op opened in 1943 when gas rationing was in effect and people didn't want to drive the mile to Union Street, according to Ben Wallach, the store's marketing director. The original location of the grocery is down the block and now houses a liquor store. This spot has had some expansions and revisions, most recently nine years ago.

A few years ago, an entirely new store was being planned, but when ShopRite moved across Balltown Road last fall, the co-op decided to regroup and remodel instead.

"ShopRite challenged the co-op to step up the game and identify the things that make it special," said Cameron Varano, store nutritionist. She works full-time for the JCC of Schenectady and part time for the co-op. A recent transplant from Virginia, she found a great sense of community at the co-op as she settled in the area. She's excited to be making recipes for the co-op's newsletter and helping customers realize the resources—both nutritional and personal—the co-op offers.

“If you’re following a certain diet, the co-op will work to bring it in,” Varano said. She wants to develop the co-op as a natural starting and stopping place for walking groups and other fitness activities.

The shape of the store is generally the same as before—cash registers by the door, a few rows of grocery items, and a good-sized meat section. Customers rave about butchering services, and there are grass-fed options available. Everything is a little roomier and brighter, with new lighting and, hidden above that new lighting, new heating and ductwork under last year’s new roof. Work took place over a six-week period, starting at 8 PM and sweeping up by 6 AM, when crews came in to cut meat, bake, and stock the store.

The produce area is notable to both the management, who want to emphasize its importance, and customers, who can see the attention the fruits and vegetables have received. Not just for the ribbon-cutting ceremony but over the past year.

“We buy as much local as we can,” said Don Bisgrove, the general manager of the store for 37 years.

There is a good-sized organic section, and produce labels—organic and non—reflect this shift toward local producers: Slack Hollow, Parson, Wellington, Kleinkill, Better Nature Produce, Feura Bush Farms, and Knights Orchard. Enormous green peppers from Juliano Farms in Herkimer dwarf the red, yellow and orange peppers grown elsewhere.

Local food producers dot the shelves and, on this special weekend, the aisles, too, sampling their wares. Meesh’s Marinara, Honeybee Farm and Gatherer’s Granola fed shoppers after the ribbon cutting.

“Being here expanded my business tremendously,” said Michelle Moricone, who switched from a career in nursing to bottling her own sauce in Green Island. Having her jars on the shelves in the Niskayuna Co-op boosted sales even more than farmers markets have.



Local before local was cool: Assemblyman James Tedisco and other members celebrate at the Niskayuna Co-op Market.

Sandro Gerbini of Gatherer's Granola is also a fan of the store's ability to build his business. "This is one of our first clients," he said as he offered three varieties of granola, now produced right in Schenectady. The co-op has been one of the top-two-selling stores, regardless of size, during the two years the business has been in existence.

Hand-selling helps start the word of mouth that earns customers, especially in a store that's a size where word of mouth, and other dialogues, can easily happen.

"There's a need for this size market, and there's a need for that size market," Don Bisgrove said of ShopRite. He and others involved with the co-op are banking that the \$500,000 investment in this building—\$200,000 for a new roof, and the rest on the redesign—will help find more customers who want that kind of intimacy and connection as they shop for food.