

A New Co-op Organizing Effort Is Taking Root in Central Brooklyn

By Frank Haberle

Taking a hands-on approach to address health equity issues, longtime residents of the Central Brooklyn neighborhoods are coming together to develop a new food cooperative with an aim to make fresh, healthy food more accessible and affordable for longtime community residents of Central Brooklyn. Local residents of these communities now have the opportunity to express their ideas and interest in the new co-op through an on-line community survey, available now through mid-November 2014.

Currently in the planning and development phase, the Central Brooklyn Food Co-op, projected to open its doors in 2016, is taking shape through the vision and input of a food co-op coordinating committee composed of local, community-based activists. The food co-op was originally organized and incubated by the Brooklyn Movement Center (a community organizing group based in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights), and is also supported by North East Brooklyn Housing Development Corporation and other community based organizations. Over the past 15 months, the food co-op coordinating committee has been operating through three committees and has conducted an outreach campaign and accessed technical assistance from existing Brooklyn co-ops, including the Park Slope Food Coop, to explore and understand different co-op business and financial models. The Central Brooklyn Food Co-op launched its community survey this past summer with a two-fold purpose: 1) to identify shopping patterns and food buying preferences among Central Brooklyn community members, and 2) to conduct outreach in the community that raises awareness for the Central Brooklyn Food Co-op project. The Central Brooklyn Food Co-op is inviting Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights residents to take part in the survey online before mid-November 2014.

Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights have seen significant gentrification in the past decade, but they are still home to a majority of lower-to-moderate-income communities and communities of color who have lived in these neighborhoods for generations. According to the most recent census data, the median income of Bedford-Stuyvesant households is \$34,735, versus a citywide average of \$51,865. Neighboring Crown Heights has a median household income of \$37,687. The Central Brooklyn Food Co-op's business and planning committee has found through research that fresh and affordable food options are few and far between in Central Brooklyn neighborhoods.

The bigger grocery stores rarely offer fresh vegetables or organic products, focusing on cheaper, unhealthy foods. The few "green and healthy markets" that have popped up in Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights offer specialty "gourmet" organic products and health foods, but at very high prices.

By the People, For the People—Food Sovereignty

The issue of food sovereignty—meaning that com-



PHOTO BY BMC

Harvir Kaur is part of the movement to start a food coop serving Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights.

munity members take charge of their food supply and build a more just food system by bringing healthier, affordable food options into the neighborhoods—has gained traction in Central Brooklyn. The Brooklyn Movement Center's community organizing efforts are led by Mark Winston-Griffith, a longtime resident of Crown Heights, along with a range of community members. The Brooklyn Movement Center brings residents of Bed-Stuy and Crown



PHOTO BY VERALYN WILLIAMS

Mark Winston Griffith, community activist.

Heights together to identify issues of importance to them, to build power and to improve conditions in their community. Food Sovereignty is one priority issue area of BMC. In addition to incubating the development of the new Central Brooklyn Food Co-op, the Brooklyn Movement Center provides an online food justice tool kit where residents can identify green spaces, community gardens, community-supported agriculture programs and other resources in Central Brooklyn, while also providing opportunities for residents to take action on food sovereignty issues.

The co-op organizing project is being coordinated by the BMC's Food Sovereignty Organizer Harvir Kaur, who joined the organization in March 2013. "Food sovereignty issues are ingrained in DNA," says Harvir. "Food is who I am, and it is how I grew up." Harvir was excited to take on an internship opportunity with BMC to help lead the food co-op organizing effort.

A Step-by-Step Process

The development of the Central Brooklyn Food Co-op began over a year ago, when the Brooklyn Movement Center reached out to local co-ops, including the Park Slope Food Coop, for information. "When we hosted our first community meeting, the Park Slope Food Coop gave us a great start, doing a mailing to inform its 1,000 members who live in our community districts of our plans to start a food co-op organizing effort for Central Brooklyn and invite them to the meeting," reports Harvir. Forty Central Brooklyn community



PHOTO BY MURRAY COX

Harvir Kaur discussing the proposed Central Brooklyn Food Co-op with an interested member of the community.

members joined their neighbors at the first meeting organized through a "Grub Party," which are potluck gatherings where the Brooklyn Movement Center engages residents of Central Brooklyn in conversations around inequities that exist within the food system and possible solution in addressing those inequities.

With a commitment to finding a business model that meets the community's needs and its vision of economic and racial justice, the Central Brooklyn Food Co-op held a food co-op business models teach-in session in March 2014. "We held a teach-in around the different food co-op business models for our food co-op coordinating committee members to engage in a conversation with folks from Bushwick, Greene Hill, and Park Slope Food Coops around their different food co-op business models and the advantages and challenges of their different co-op models," Harvir says.

The pieces for the Central Brooklyn Food Co-op are now coming together. The business model is now in development. While a mission statement and core value statement are now being finalized, a location for the new coop has yet to be determined but will be somewhere in Bed-Stuy or northern Crown Heights. The Central Brooklyn Food Co-op's outreach and membership committee developed a strong plan for community engagement in June 2014 and have been hitting the pavement since then, engaging with their neighbors about the food co-op initiative through the community survey.

The current survey, conducted on the street over the past three months, has recently been launched on-line. "This summer, we began with street surveys to collect information and build our base," Harvir continues. "We've held community survey training sessions throughout the summer in order to train interested folks from our community who were interested in being part of the

outreach campaign in how to conduct the community survey and how to communicate about our organizing effort to our community members. We have conducted outreach in more than 20 locations—in front of food pantries, supermarkets and at transportation hubs and have collected over 200 surveys on the street."

With the survey now on-line, the Central Brooklyn Food Co-op has already collected another 100 surveys. "Our goal is 500 surveys," says Harvir. "We're going to wrap-up our survey street outreach effort by the end of October, and hope to hit our goal of 500 surveys with our on-line survey by mid-November. But our outreach campaign will continue as we continue to develop the Central Brooklyn Food Co-op and beyond." ■

If you are a resident of Central Brooklyn, would like to have a say in shaping the new Central Brooklyn Food Co-op, please participate in the survey by November 15: It can be accessed on-line here: www.nyu.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_cBYa7sIN-3juzt0pd.

To learn more about the Brooklyn Movement Center and get directly involved in its Food Co-op Coordinating Committee please contact Harvir Kaur at hkaur@brooklynmovement-center.org or (718) 771-7000.

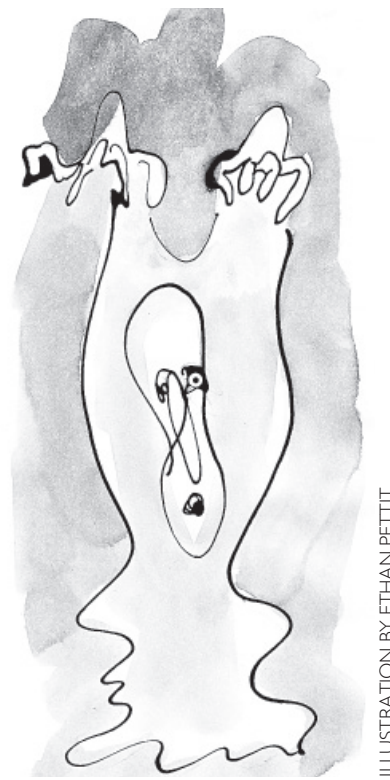


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