

# Mentoring Can Make All the Difference:

## *Established co-ops helping startups*

BY JACQUELINE HANNAH

“It has made all the difference in the world,” says Shelia Conboy. Conboy is the project manager for East Aurora Food Co-op, a startup that has been organizing its own food co-op in East Aurora, N.Y., since 2010. That’s over five years of organizing, and Conboy has been with the East Aurora project from day one. What has made all the difference? Mentoring—specifically the mentorship of Lexington Cooperative Market in Buffalo, N.Y., and their strong relationship with its general manager, Tim Bartlett.

“We met with Tim, initially, to get a sense if the idea (of mentorship) was an even slightly good one for East Aurora. We started off with just four founding members meeting with him casually on a Sunday,” recalls Conboy. From there, a powerful partnership grew.

“They were serious about it,” states Bartlett. “I’d give them advice, and they’d follow up on it and not come back to me until they’d done what I suggested, could show progress, and were ready to say, ‘What’s next?’”

Like every general manager, Bartlett was deeply busy. But when approached by East Aurora, he was willing to give them a little of his time to find out how serious they were. When asked what was the first piece of advice he gave the fledgling food co-op group, Bartlett didn’t hesitate: “Call Bill Gessner” (a co-op consultant)—and they did. The relationship between Lexington Cooperative Market and East Aurora Food Co-op started there, and has blossomed and grown in depth.

### Use the market study

With more than 125 communities all over the country at some stage of considering developing or actively organizing their own food cooperatives, the phones of just about every mature food co-op in the nation ring from time to time with requests for assistance from startups. Pam Mehnert of Outpost Natural Foods says they are no exception and that they’ve done more than just answer calls for some startups.

“Outside of answering general questions about growing membership and what it takes to run a store, I’ve worked with one co-op specifically on review of their market study and how market studies work,” explains Mehnert. “I think one of the great dangers of site selection without experience is falling into the romance of what a site can be. A lot of cities, developers, and business districts will ‘romance’ a potential store about how the development is going to ‘save the downtown’ or ‘be one of a kind.’ But market studies are the real deal.”

The startup Mehnert is talking about assisting is Wild Root Market in Racine, Wis., about 40 minutes south of Outpost stores in the Milwaukee region. “From the beginning, Outpost has been an invaluable resource for both inspiration and information, enthusiastically cheering us on and generously sharing their expertise,” shares Margie Michicich, president of the board at Wild Root Market.

Wild Root began organizing in 2009 and is currently working hard to secure a site for its store. “Many people in our community are familiar with Outpost and their reputation for excellence, so our relationship with Outpost lends credibility to our organization. Knowing we can call on Outpost for guidance on key decisions provides an incomparable level of assurance to our board,” continued Michicich. “It’s better than a super-hero hotline!”

When asked why Outpost has chosen to support an ongoing mentorship relationship with Wild Root, Menhert had the following to say, “We think of them as our sister co-op. The proximity to our stores is closer than most startups, but a bit out of our market. They have a significant number of member/owners who belong to Outpost (in that area), so it was easy to think about helping out our own owners who really want a co-op in their town. Plus, they are familiar enough with us to know what they want—so that’s always a great reference point.”

In the past few years, every single successful startup food cooperative had a mature co-op that mentored them, gave them guidance (even some that was hard to hear), and had their back at the toughest times.

### Mutual inspiration

But is it worth doing? A general manager of a busy and continually growing food co-op has to ask that question. “Oh, definitely it is,” answers Mehnert, “just from the relationships we’ve built and my own level of understanding of what it takes to start a co-op without a lot of resources. I can’t imagine doing that level of work today without the resources I’m used to relying on. They (startups) inspire me to do better in my own work.”

Bartlett shared the sentiment, “If they are doing the work, of course it is worth doing. Getting to share our knowledge and watch them grow because of it is what cooperation is about.”

Still, mature food co-ops have to be protective of their time resources. A startup that understands this is much more likely to find a mature co-op that will agree to mentor them and really invest in them when things get tough in the development process.

East Aurora Food Co-op now has a site and has begun construction on its store. Conboy credits the team at Lexington with being a big part of the reason they are going to be able to open their doors in 2016. “They paid for our first market study and then met with our board members whenever we requested it. We had assistance from their finance team and their marketing team. Due to their recent remodel, Lexington also donated many pieces of equipment to us that we will use in our store.”

When reviewing the development stories of the most successful startup food cooperatives opened in the last few years, Food Co-op Initiative has found that every single one of them had a mature co-op that mentored them, gave them guidance (even some that was hard to hear), and had their back at the toughest times.

## Considering Mentorship (for mature co-ops)

There is no doubt that your co-op can have a powerful impact on the future of a startup in your region through mentorship, but not all groups are ready to be mentored or will effectively utilize your support. Making sure you apply your efforts only to groups that will do the utmost with your support is crucial to the experience being valuable to your co-op. Here are tips and shortcuts to determining if a startup is a good fit for mentorship:

**Homework:** Is the startup in touch with Food Co-op Initiative? FCI is the place to begin for all startups, with vast document and webinar resources. If the group has not been in contact with us and/or at least read the FCI guide on how to start a food co-op, send them to us to have a conversation before proceeding.

**Models:** Is the startup looking to do something similar to what your co-op does? Are they planning to be worker-owned while your co-op is consumer-owned? Is the startup talking about being mostly conventional while your co-op is deeply focused on organic and local? These aren't necessarily reasons mentorship could not be fruitful between your co-ops, but consider them yellow flags; there might be a co-op out there that is a better fit for their goals.

**Respecting your time and expertise:** When the startup reaches out to you, do they respect your time and have an understanding of the depth of resources they are asking for? Did they just show up at your co-op with a group expecting a tour and a few hours of your time, or do they always call first and ask what works for you? Are their expectations reasonable when they contact you, and are they open to feedback on what is reasonable to ask?

**Developmental stage:** It's hard to know how functional and effective a startup's leadership will be until they are beyond the early organizing phase. Being available to give advice early on is great, but consider putting off deepening or formalizing your mentorship relationship until the group has coalesced and developed clear leadership.

**Assistance:** Want to make sure a startup is strong and healthy before getting involved? Want an intermediary involved to help keep the relationship with the startup manageable? FCI can help with both of these issues and more to make sure the mentorship relationship is successful for both co-ops—please don't hesitate to contact us.

## Considering mentorship (for startup co-ops)

Having a mature food co-op that is in your corner and available to give your startup advice and support every step of the way is a known factor in startup success. Finding the right mentor for your startup and keeping that relationship healthy

are important for the future of your startup. Here are tips on finding the right mentor and doing your part to make the relationship strong:

**Find the right fit:** Sometimes the right mentor co-op for your startup is the one nearest to you, but not always. Sometimes your goals are too different, or the nearby co-op is simply too busy with its own projects to be regularly involved. Consider calling us at FCI to review possible mentor co-ops and find a good fit.

**Start slow:** Don't expect the sun and the moon from your potential mentor co-op right away. Ask if you can bring a group to take a tour of their co-op and spend an hour with someone on their staff to learn about their co-op and its journey. Ask if you can send a concise monthly update to them about your startup's current efforts with a short list of questions for them.

**Listen, follow up, and respect their time:** Your potential mentor co-op is sharing its time and expertise because they want you to be a success. Write down their advice, follow it as often as possible, and update them on your progress on their advised actions. If you find your startup leadership is not following the advice of the mentor co-op because it is not ready to do so, acknowledge that, thank the mentor for their time and support, and pause the relationship until your startup is ready to make good use of their expertise. □

### Eastern corridor meets financing gap

The relationship between East Aurora and Lexington became strong after four years of mentorship. When East Aurora was about to close on the loans to build its store, the final term sheet from one lender came back nothing like they'd expected, and the co-op suddenly found themselves with a \$250,000 gap in the project financing. Conboy jumped in the car and drove straight to Lexington Cooperative Market without invitation.

"We were crestfallen," said Conboy, "and could only scramble to use the resources we had at our disposal for help. When I showed up at the store totally unexpectedly, Tim immediately offered to sit down with me and hear what the problem was. As soon as I finished, he took out a piece of paper and began working the numbers."

When the idea came up of asking his fellow peer general managers of the eastern corridor of the National Co+op Grocers, at a meeting they were having a few days later, to step in and fill this gap, Bartlett was immediately on board, and Rochelle Prunty of River Valley Market in Northhampton, Mass., made a commitment to help make the case to the peer co-ops as well. "Our marketing team put together a packet, and within six minutes' time at the corridor meeting 20 of the eastern corridor co-ops pledged \$250,000 to the East Aurora Cooperative Market. It was nothing short of a miracle, and we are incredibly grateful."

A miracle? Perhaps. A miracle created by the hard work of two co-op communities and the power of cooperation among cooperatives. For startup co-ops, mentorship truly makes the difference. □

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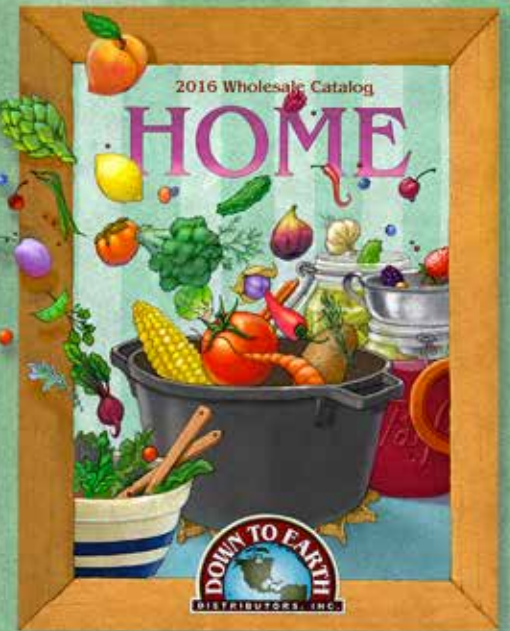
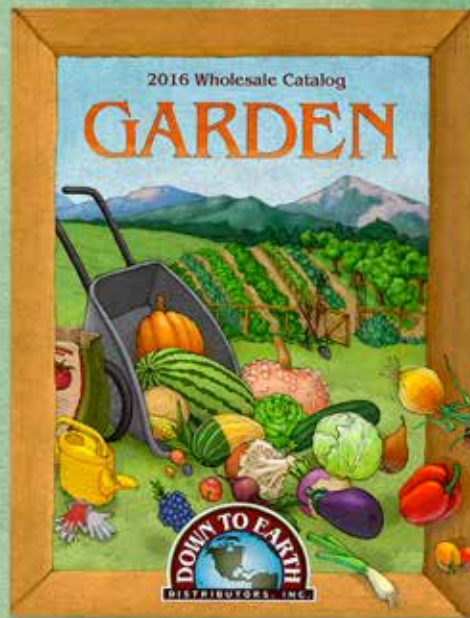
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