

Oshkosh Food Co-op Board Nominee: Elizabeth (Za) Barron, Oshkosh

What would you bring/offer to the Oshkosh Food Co-op Board?

I moved to Oshkosh in 2013, and joined the Co-op shortly thereafter, making me member #34. I joined right away because I understand that dreams need people to support them, to do the hard work of turning them into reality, and I am a person that does the hard work. When I commit to something, I follow through to the best of my ability, and I will bring that commitment to the Board. The Co-op is a business that is structured around ideas that I am deeply committed to: supporting and proliferating economic models and practices that empower people, build community, and are environmentally sustainable. As a citizen of Oshkosh, I feel strongly that if it is in my power to be part of something that is built on these principles, it is my responsibility to help do the work to make it happen.

What is your dream for the Oshkosh Food Co-op for the coming years?

On a practical level: a fantastic in-house bakery! Oshkosh is sorely lacking quality-baked goods so an in house bakery would fill a much-needed gap in the town food scene. From a business standpoint, fresh bread and delicious pastries are products that draw people to the store on a regular basis, increasing their visiting frequency and often resulting in additional purchases. We could distribute bakery items to local shops like Planet Perk, New Moon, and Ski's Market.

More broadly: my dream for the Oshkosh Food Co-op is a thriving gathering place where people come to purchase food, to work, to meet friends, and where stepping through the doors makes you feel like you are part of a community. I am interested in exploring the options to add worker-owners to the structure of the Co-op. I want worker-owners, member-owners and shoppers to feel excited when they see the products that are available, and be motivated to try new things while also being able to find what they are looking for. I want it to be a place that inspires people to be generous of themselves, and builds good will among members. I also want it to be a place that communicates that healthy, sustainable food is for everyone and that dispels the class narrative that has developed around organic and local food.

Why do you think the Oshkosh Food Co-op is important to the greater Oshkosh community?

The greater Oshkosh community struggles with divisiveness along racial, class and neighborhood divides. There are organizations in the city that are working on these issues to be sure, but there are few functioning businesses providing jobs and quality products, that also include a mission of community building and inclusion. The success of the Farmer's Market has demonstrated what many of us know from our own lives: food brings people together. There are successful programs all over the country that are showing this: Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles supports men and women who have been previously incarcerated and/or were gang members to rebuild their lives through social enterprises and cooperative businesses including a grocery, bakery, and catering service (<http://www.homeboyindustries.org>). The Cleveland Model, based on Evergreen Cooperatives, includes a massive local food initiative organized around community share agriculture (CSAs) and a multi-stakeholder food cooperative (<http://community-wealth.org>). These are just two examples of organizations that are showing that cooperatives are ways to bring people together and revitalize communities in postindustrial cities, like Oshkosh.

Why cooperatives?

Capitalism is an economic ideology that is premised on private ownership and the exploitation of workers in order to generate a surplus. The owner decides how to distribute that surplus: to raise wages, to reinvest in the business, or to buy a bigger house and a yacht. The owner may move the business to generate a greater surplus. Capitalist businesses may or may not be concerned with the environment, depending on the owner's interests and the effects on profits, but historically environmental sustainability is not cost effective and therefore not prioritized. So, why cooperatives?

1. Because it is an economic model premised on shared ownership, and sharing the benefits of hard work among the community. The members determine how to distribute the surplus generated by the business. This often takes the form of reinvesting in the business, distributing the profits among the owners, or expanding into additional community enterprises.
2. Cooperatives are tied to the place where they exist because the owners live there.
3. Cooperatives tend to be environmentally friendly because the member-owners realize that they need to protect their local environment so they can live there, and their children and children's children can live there too.

Please offer any additional thoughts you would like Oshkosh Food Co-op member-owners to know about you:

I am a professor of Geography and Environmental Studies at UWO. Part of my work is about finding alterative economies and making them more visible to the wider public. I am a member of the Community Economies Collective (communityeconomies.org), an international group of scholars working on envisioning and enacting ethical community economies. Researching and supporting cooperatives has been a major part of this work: generating new knowledge, tools, and local and international networks that I would bring to the Board.