

Oshkosh Food Co-op Board Nominee: Melissa Weyland, Neenah

About 17 years ago, I was a typical farm child running around our dairy with my messy, blonde hair, dirty fingernails, ripped jeans and bare feet. Looking back, I didn't know it, but life was hard. Mom and dad were struggling dairy farmers. Milk price was only slightly above \$10/cwt that year. Our farm house was practically falling-down around us. School clothes shopping always involved second-hand stores and hand-me-downs. There were nights I remember going to bed so hungry my tummy hurt. The reality of struggling farmers back then was real and it still is today. I didn't know it then as a child but there were many times that our family farm, something my parents had poured their blood sweat and tears into, almost didn't make it through to the following year.

On February 15, 2001 our lives changed. On that day, the Organic Valley milk truck pulled into our yard for the first time. Mom and dad went organic. They made it. Fast-forward over the next 17 years, mom and dad built their dream home, put me through college and have grown to a sizeable operation that will make it healthily into the next generation. They proved a family-sized farm can make it, against all the odds. Organic Valley was founded by struggling farmers, driven to save family farms. A true agriculture cooperative.

In 2009, I joined the Organic Valley family as an employee. I started in an entry level position, eventually becoming the supervisor of Farmer Relations and now serve as the Midwest East Regional Pool manager where I serve members across the eastern half of Wisconsin. I am responsible for recruitment, education, ambassador, compliance and general field service type functions. I am proud to work for the nation's largest farmer-owned cooperative based right here in Wisconsin, an organization that came together for the benefit of all – the farmer, the consumer and our communities.

Shortly after beginning my journey with Organic Valley, I purchased my first ever food coop membership at the Viroqua Food Coop in Southwest Wisconsin. I will never forget the first day I walked into that store. It felt different. It felt warm, like a community but it was a grocery store. Everything was placed so beautifully, the colors of the produce section so radiant it felt imaginary. There were local farmers bios and location of origin signs posted above most of the produce. P6 principles artfully trimmed the displays. "I've never seen anything like this!" I thought.

The more I learned about the food coop structure, the more I fell in love with the movement. The community giving, the patronage, the democratic decision making to the fair wages to employees and shelf space for real, local farmers. Coops are a gateway to a better world, a community-oriented world. I am now a huge cooperative advocate – whether it be food, farmer, employee, financial, electric or any other coop in between. At one point I was a member of five different types of cooperatives, now a member of three food coops alone. I believe in the power of investing in the local food movement through cooperatives. I travel around Wisconsin a lot in my position and frequent food coops. Every community's food coop is unique in its own way but there are also many commonalities I have found, particularly that warm, almost indescribable community feel you get when you walk through their door.

I find that the social responsibility that coops bring to communities is something we need. We have a lot of barriers in our food system. Our food and farming economics are out of whack but are something we can overcome together. I whole-heartedly love and believe in cooperatives. Without CROPP Cooperative, my family farm would likely not even exist today. I believe in this. And I especially believe in the future of the Oshkosh Food Coop.

I would truly be honored to serve as your next Oshkosh Food Coop Board member!

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

1. Embodiment of cooperative values, live the cooperative way
2. LOVE, commitment and belief in a better way, a better food system.
3. Experience in the organic food industry
4. Farmer perspective, organic farming experience and perspective

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

1. Life.
2. More members. Engaged members that feel pride in their coop.
3. Community education – why coops are important, healthy eating, etc.
4. Local sourcing possibilities analysis – so many across east Wisconsin we could feature!
5. Our headquarters for great food, coffee/tea, stronger communities, and a healthier world.
6. Becoming part of the P6 movement

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

1. We are long overdue! The first coop I became part of came to life in 1995 (Viroqua). We can do this. It's time.
2. Depending on member preferences, we could be place for local, organic food. We really don't have such a thing now. Organic food costs too much at large supermarket chains and the profits are often going to profit the chain vs the farmers. As a coop, we have better control over our farmer pay and consumer prices since we are socially responsible for much more than just our bottom line.
3. Place of gathering – “third space” theory. This sense of community is needed. Great hangout for millennials that love the good food movement.
4. Paving the way for the system we want to see.
5. Oshkosh is a college town, generally college towns are exceptional spots coops.
6. There are so many small farmers around here – this is another great hub to help them sell their produce locally.

4. Why cooperatives?

1. Cooperatives give back to our communities!
2. I have always been a believer in coops – I think at one time I was a member of 5 (food coop, electric coop, telephone/communications coops, employee/shareholder in a coop, coop credit union).
3. I have always been fascinated coops that are ran like coops – where everyone is in it together. A coop is such a selfless business model.
4. Democratic system, we are in this together. We are stronger together.
5. The P6 principles– who thought consumers would love to get to know their farmers? The chain of fairness throughout the whole system ends with the retail shelf and our ability to get that local food to market.

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

1. I advocate for a better food system in my everyday life. Growing up on an organic dairy farm that was “saved” by a cooperative, I learned there is a different way, a better way, from adolescence.
2. I am extremely dedicated to the largest, farmer-owned, organic farmer coop in the nation
3. We are going to face challenges. Every supermarket chain across America is beginning to mirror the farmers-market, hometown, local look and feel that Food Coops typically embody. I think my 7+ years' experience in cooperative advocacy will really bring something to the table as we

work to overcome that competition going forward through public education. How can we differentiate ourselves from the Aldi's and other big players entering the organic/natural channel for profits?

4. As a regional manager for my coop, I spend a lot of time on the road. I will always seek out local food hubs to support this system. I have seen A LOT of food coops and have purchased memberships with many. I think I will bring a unique perspective of the culture I've seen in food coops around the Midwest.
5. Although I have a farming background, I care about what our members care about. Being a food coop consumer, I care also care where my food comes from, how it was grown, what's on the ingredients label, animal care, etc. I care about the farmer making enough to continue while the customer price is as reasonable as possible.
6. I am currently a member of 3 different food coops. Long-term member of Viroqua Food Coop and Free Market in Appleton (Free Market is not a coop though), Goodside Grocery & Food Cooperative in Sheboygan, Oshkosh Food coop. I always seek out coops in my work travels. I'm also subscribed to a program called Garden to Doorstep Organics delivers great organic food to my doorstep every week. If this did not exist, I wouldn't be able to get such a great food in Neenah.
7. I take pride in living a very healthy lifestyle. LOVE cooking and live on a whole-food diet. I'm even training for first half-marathon!
8. I have been particularly inspired on coops after getting to know some amazing, inspiration cooperative leaders and educators – Adam Schwartz who is the founder of The Cooperative Way, a cooperative consulting service. Also, Dr. Mike Cook who is professor from the University of Missouri and well-known cooperative speaker.
9. I'm starting own certified organic produce business with my youngest sister – “Three Sisters Produce” summer 2017. We are an organic dairy farming family but are currently planning to get into the vegetable business to serve our local community great organic, fresh food. Wish us luck!
10. I believe in this with my whole heart. I will listen. I am cooperative minded and hearted.

My dedication to this movement is engrained deep within, I will be fully committed!