

At CCMA from People's Food Co-op (Kalamazoo, Mich.) were Gaby Gerken, marketing assistant manager, and Erik Nabors, front end manager.



At CCMA, the master of ceremonies was Erbin Crowell, executive director of Neighboring Food Co-op Association.



Larry Daniels from Weavers Way Co-op (Philadelphia, Penn.) and Mary Alice Smalls of Seward Co-op (Minneapolis, Minn.) enjoyed a break.

Thriving in a Disrupted Future: CCMA at 60

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

Under the theme, “Disrupting the Future,” over 400 cooperators met at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst on June 9–11 for the 60th annual Consumer Cooperative Management Association (CCMA) conference. Participants from across the country discussed critical strategic issues and explored “cooperative food and the next generation.” CCMA offers a diverse program for food co-ops and their close allies during three days of intense conversations, local tours, workshop presentations, keynote speakers, and awards—a kind of summit conference for the food co-op sector.

The primary conference sponsor, National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA), our national cross-sector organization and international co-op development leader, is observing the centennial of its founding as Cooperative League of the USA (CLUSA). Across the globe, millions of people know CLUSA as a source of vital aid in forming credit unions, farmer co-ops, and other democratic improvements (more at ncba.coop).

Attendees celebrated other co-op anniversaries, from 90 years to 10—along with more store openings in the continuing wave of food co-op formation. We also applauded the recipients of awards recognizing retail excellence and cooperative service.

Voices past and present

Master of ceremonies Erbin Crowell and others spoke about our cooperative heritage. The conference was based at the Murray Lincoln Center, named for a prominent cooperator who was president of CLUSA for 25 years ending 1965 and a leader of farm and insurance co-ops. Lincoln also helped found CARE, the postwar campaign that later expanded from Europe to the entire globe—perhaps we need to extend this concept of “cooperatives for assistance and relief everywhere.”

Another historic figure, in Massachusetts and internationally, is W.E.B. Dubois, who grew up in nearby Great Barrington; after his death in 1963, a major library on the Amherst University campus was named after him. Dubois, a prolific historian and writer on black Americans and a prominent activist, opposed capitalism and strongly promoted cooperatives in his campaigns for racial justice and for the economic improvement of all working people.

Keynote speaker Shirley Sharrod vividly illustrated the persistent discrimination faced by black citizens—she has been working for justice for Southern black farmers ever since she was 17, when her father was murdered by a white man who was never charged. She and her husband, on

At CCMA, board member Wayne Pulford and store manager Sarah Hannigan from Whole Foods Co-op (Duluth, Minn.) enjoyed a break.



At CCMA, Rebecca Dunn of Cooperative Fund of New England accepted the rose honoring the Fund's 40 years.

Seward Co-op's general manager, Sean Doyle, received a Cooperative Service award.



behalf of Alabama farmers, founded the first community land trust; Sharrod later worked for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and helped with its decades-long fight on behalf of black farmers; she has been recognized for her many contributions through induction into the Cooperative Hall of Fame. Facing injustice but seeing opportunities, she reminded us, "Never give up!"

A second keynote speaker, Nick Buettner, and his brother Dan have researched longevity factors—80 percent of which are environmental and therefore changeable—in specific communities around the world that have exceptional community health and individual longevity. The Blue Zone Foundation engages with cities that want to promote the common positive practices these communities exhibit—such as fresh food and a moderate diet, and daily physical work; bonds with friends and family, and having a tribe or faith community; plus environmental design supporting shared public activities. The discussion ended with a clear message that co-ops have strong opportunities to lead or join campaigns for improved community health.

At various workshop discussions and when crossing paths, attendees inquired about other matters such as leadership succession plans and board/management alignment, financial programs and strategies for development, fair trade and international cooperation, innovative programs that ally the co-op with community institutions, and more—a few key topics are covered in this report. (Some of the CCMA presentations will be posted at grocer.coop.)

Sponsors

Let the networking begin! On the first day, conference half-day bus tours highlighted area businesses and other sites—scattered across a green New

England landscape of hills and valleys, a dense network of towns and farms. Attendees had to choose one of five different options for brief site visits to co-ops in Northampton or Greenfield or Brattleboro, an organic farm, worker-owned producers, and additional attractions.

The itinerant CCMA annually provides a unique cross-fertilizing venue for co-op board members, managers, and staff, along with consultants, representatives of financial services, and producer allies. Our national cross-sector cooperative, NCBA, is the main sponsor, but it relies on wide sponsor support in planning the conference. Major sponsors this year:

- ECRS (technology support services for co-ops; ecrs.com);
- Neighboring Food Co-op Association (find a searchable map of member co-ops at nfca.coop);
- Franklin Community Co-op in Greenfield and Shelburne Falls, Mass. (franklincommunity.coop); and
- River Valley Co-op in Northampton (rivervalleymarket.coop).

Among more than a dozen additional contributing sponsors were National Co+op Grocers and CDS Consulting Co-op; producer co-ops including Equal Exchange, Frontier Co-op, Organic Valley, and Pachamama Coffee; and funders at National Co-op Bank, Shared Capital Cooperative, Local Enterprise and Assistance Fund, and Co-op Fund of New England. Throughout, many of these sponsors maintained table displays, with live networking opportunities.

Milestones and awards

Annually at CCMA, major cooperative milestones are celebrated. I was pleased to announce the names of food co-ops and major allies that have completed another decade—we honored them for their durability and ongoing service. Following that, Jacqueline Hannah of Food Co-op >

FLASH!

BOWERS FUND AND CCMA LOVE AFFAIR REVEALED

BY ANNIE HOY

The Bowers Fund kicked off CCMA 2016 with an outdoor reception featuring lovely food and the Queen Mary Band, whose members all work at River Valley Co-op in nearby Northampton. There were reunions of all kinds, and you could hear the many happy greetings among cooperators who found each other after a year or more apart. Bowers Fund advisors momentarily silenced the crowd to remind them of the many scholarships given to help members attend the conference, adding to numerous grants to startup co-ops around the nation. This year the Fund provided 27 scholarships totaling \$10,000—with an additional \$1,000 from the Co-op Development Foundation.

CCMA 2016 also held a spectacular silent auction that pitted cooperators one against the other for some of the best-ever swag, services, and collectibles; and there was beer, wine, shirts, shopping bags, and so much more! Two quilts were offered—one went to CDS Consulting Co-op, to be displayed in a number of lucky co-ops around the country, while the other quilt will stay at Portland Food Co-op for an entire year. The Bowers family generously made the Apple Watch drawing possible, and we thank them for helping raise nearly \$2,000.

When we added up the proceeds from the drawing, the quilts, and the silent auction, the total came to nearly \$12,000! On behalf of the Bowers Fund, I thank you for your big-hearted giving. We deeply appreciate your financial support at CCMA and encourage you to participate in celebrating Howard Bowers Day during Co-op Month in October. Find us at cdf.coop/bowersfund.



Members of the Renaissance Community Co-op in Greensboro, N.C., were awarded the Startup of the Year by Food Co-op Initiative.



Dan Arnett, cooperator in chief at Central Co-op in Seattle and Tacoma, Wash., accepted the co-op's award for Innovation and Achievement.

Initiative announced the 10 new co-ops that had opened their store in the past year. (For the complete list, see "Milestones and More" on page 4.)

Food co-ops are encouraged to nominate from among their peers outstanding co-op leaders and businesses that deserve wider recognition. These annual awards are overseen by Cooperative Development Foundation. Marilyn Scholl presided over this year's awards ceremony, and National Co-op Grocers sponsored the event.

The 2017 award for **Cooperative Excellence** was presented to City Center Market in Cambridge, Minn., and its general manager, Gayle Cupit. After previously serving as the board president, Cupit became general manager in 2009 and has guided this small-town co-op through recovery, then growth and expansion that has generated strong local support.

Recognition for **Cooperative Service** was awarded to Sean Doyle, general manager of Seward Co-op in Minneapolis and a graduate of the Saint Mary's University master's program in co-op and credit union management. During the most recent three years of a career dedicated to cooperatives, Doyle has guided Seward Co-op through challenging expansions to two additional retail and production facilities, following an earlier strongly successful expansion of its original store. Doyle and other Seward leaders also led conference workshops on meeting co-op diversity challenges.

A second **Cooperative Service** award was presented to Sharon Murphy, who is retiring from her general manager position after 36 years of leadership contributions at Whole Foods Co-op in Duluth, Minn. The co-op is thriving, opened its second store earlier this year, and now has 160 staff and 10,000 members. To accept the award, Murphy sent a short video giving a straightforward and soft-spoken thanks and farewell.

The award for **Cooperative Innovation and Achievement** went to

General Manager
Gayle Cupit accepted
the Cooperative
Excellence award on
behalf of City Center
Market (Cambridge,
Minn.).



Friends of Marshal Kovitz in the New Mexico area and elsewhere mourned his sudden death this past spring; he had served on the La Montanita Co-op board for 35 years and posthumously was presented the Cooperative Board Service award.

At CCMA, Kaaleigh Barker (ccaglobal.com) and Jerry McGeorge (Organic Valley Co-op) promoted cooperative values.



Brenda Pfahnl (Shared
Capital Cooperative),
Allison Hermes (P6), and
Diane Gloede (Organic
Valley Co-op) enjoyed a
conversation.



Central Co-op in Seattle and Tacoma, Wash. Represented at the podium by Dan Arnett, their cooperater in chief, Central Co-op successfully implemented a \$15/hour entry wage; swiftly and with strong owners' support merged two co-ops in Tacoma and Seattle; and also won approval for its new solidarity co-op structure that establishes an equity and governance stake for co-op employees along with consumers. (For more on Central Co-op and \$15/hour, see the recent report at grocer.coop.)

The **Cooperative Board Service** award was presented by Martha Whitman of La Montanita Food Co-op in Albuquerque, N.M., to Marshal Kovitz, that co-op's mourned late leader. Kovitz, who served on the La Montanita board for 35 years, died suddenly this past spring; among his various qualities, he was appreciated in his local and national co-op community for insightful and humane contributions to improved group dynamics and decision making.

Finally, Food Co-op Initiative announced its **Startup of the Year**, Renaissance Community Co-op in Greensboro, N.C. This determined campaign, centered in a food desert and a largely black community, now has over 800 co-op owners and will open its new store in 2016. A moving video of these owners who want a good food store was shown, and several co-op members and the general manager, Michael Valenti, were on hand to receive the miniature "golden shopping cart." Renaissance members also led a workshop case study discussion at the conference.

Yet another important CCMA feature (and continued throughout the year) is fundraising for the Bowers Fund. Scholarships from this fund are awarded to food co-op applicants, bringing co-op training and education to many co-op directors and staff who could not otherwise afford to do so. See page 24 for a brief report by Annie Hoy on this year's scholarships and

fundraising results for the Bowers Fund.

Future disruption

Adding to Shirley Sharrod's remarks on racial justice, conference sessions addressed efforts by food co-ops to have more diverse product offerings and to be more inclusive in their hiring and marketing. With support from National Co+op Grocers, many co-ops are adding "Co+op Basics" product lines or other ways of discounting selected grocery items of good value. CCMA workshops addressed this broadening of inventory as a necessary way to serve more moderate-income individuals and communities. Other presentations highlighted community collaboration and services that broaden the co-op's owner base.

Additional sessions focused on hiring for diversity, financing co-op expansion to serve more diverse communities, and the experiences of people of color in food co-ops. Confronted with our society's class and race disparities, co-ops are developing a few specific steps toward owner diversity—but they have much left to do in contributing to social justice and a more fair future.

Not addressed in the conference program, but certainly related to alarming trends and a disrupted food system, is encroaching climate chaos and its roots in decades of burning fossil fuels. Agriculture is among the industries most affected—but also among those most able to contribute to carbon sequestration. Here again, our food choices and advocacy matter a great deal.

Ahead of us in the near future, at least for all but a protected few, are unprecedented challenges and some deep dilemmas—comfortable solutions will likely not be achievable. What kind of crises and opportunities >

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At CCMA, attendees visited a Western Massachusetts landscape of small farms and towns.



will boost cooperatives as among the best approaches to meeting social and economic needs? Probably those crises and opportunities that are already underway! Cooperative solidarity will be a continuing need.

The day after the June conference, a mass slaying occurred in Florida. It was a horrific event tying together homophobia and our imperial military and its longest-ever war—reminding us that conditions are ripe for further disorder stemming from social conflicts along with blowback from ongoing wars. Yet in Massachusetts I had just witnessed the counter to that: the many food co-op leaders and their community aspirations, offering optimism and principled sharing. The rainbow flag that was adopted decades ago by the international cooperative movement, a symbol of co-op democracy and a shared fate, was later adopted by the gay/LGBT movement as its symbol of pride and fair treatment: the same rainbow flag.

Bringing it all back home

Planning for the future of CCMA—next, in Minneapolis on June 8–10, 2017—has been contracted to the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives; its executive director, Anne Reynolds, was present. This veteran cross-sector organization will need support from multiple sponsors and an advisory group—problematically, the just-concluded CCMA had a very inadequate online evaluation method. The conference is



Over 400 cooperators from across the country attended the 60th CCMA conference.

Fair trade coffee beans create the international cooperative twin pine symbol.

an event of considerable importance, complexity, and expense—and changes in our organizations' circumstances are continuous. Yet co-ops expect their national conference to reflect both the challenges and the profound sharing they are experiencing during this country's wild ride.

Money is tighter for most food co-ops. The overall slowdown in sales—there are many exceptions to this—likely will continue for a good while. Keys to thriving in an unrelenting competitive environment, which requires good store operations overall, are for food co-ops to excel in local foods, excel in customer service, and excel in mutually beneficial community relations. Modeling local economic democracy—this kind of leadership is already being demonstrated by many co-ops.

The uncertain years ahead will call upon cooperators and their communities to disrupt deeply destructive trends and to offer a healthier form of enterprise. Regardless, we can see that the future is going to disrupt our cooperatives and communities and much that we assume today. Co-ops can take on the opportunities before them and help forge better communities locally and around the world through fair collaboration and fair trade.

Great community connections, of course, are happening in every co-op locale. But we also need these lively gatherings of cooperators, younger and older, for our national community, a values-driven crowd of increasing diversity. What I felt in Amherst at the close of the conference was that, while building our local communities, we're sustaining a much larger cooperative culture of social justice and sharing—led by people who like to think, like to talk, and like to party at the end of the day.



A coda from Emily

Those vivid exchanges with bold eyes and minds were memorialized by a famous Amherst resident, Emily Dickinson:

Experiment to me
Is every one I meet.
If it contain a kernel?
The figure of a nut
Presents upon a tree,
Equally plausibly;
But meat within is requisite,
To squirrels and to me. □