

Thank you, Randy Lee!

46 Years of Cooperative Service

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

In June of 2017, Randy Lee was recognized at CCMA by colleagues from across the U.S. and presented with a Cooperative Service award. In early 2018, Randy retired after a co-op career as CFO at PCC Community Markets in Seattle.

The present report gives a farewell tribute to Randy Lee and his outstanding contributions to cooperatives, with comments by colleagues both local and national. I count myself among the many who have benefited from his counsel and leadership—he began contributing knowledgeable financial guidance in our food co-op trade magazine during the 1980s.

Randy Lee joined PCC (then known as Puget Consumers Co-op) in 1970 and within a year became the manager at the one-store co-op. By 1981 he had become financial coordinator of a three-store co-op. Subsequently, Randy was the PCC finance manager and CFO during its years of expansion to an 11-store operation.

His legacy is one of model leadership. Remarkably, during Randy's years at PCC he also served four different times as interim CEO of the co-op. In 2018, he retired with PCC Natural Markets a thriving operation—generating annual sales now approaching \$300 million and with plans for opening additional stores in the extremely competitive Seattle market. (For a recent story on rebranding at PCC Community Markets, see the article “What's in a Name?” by Heather Snively, *Cooperative Grocer* 193, archived at grocer.coop).

Over the past three decades, Randy also contributed substantially to two other organizations that have continuing positive impacts. In 1990, he was a founding director of PCC Farmland Trust, and most recently he has served as president of this innovative model of preserving farmland for organic production. (Learn more about this nonprofit at: pccfarmlandtrust.org.)

Randy has also been active over many years in food cooperative networks and associations. He was an advocate and leader in the formation of National Cooperative Grocers Association, currently National Co+op Grocers (NCG), and served on the board of directors from its inception. Randy also helped establish the NCG



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Development Co+op and served on its board of directors.

Read on for comments of praise for Randy Lee and his principled and dedicated service to cooperatives.

Terry Appleby, former general manager of Hanover Co-op and a former NCG board member, also had a background at PCC in Seattle. In his spring 2017 letter, Appleby said: “I, and many other cooperators, have been fortunate in our cooperative careers to have Randy as a mentor and a friend. His calm and thoughtful demeanor and genuine respect for the views of others helped numerous contentious issues to be considered and resolved. He has been a voice of reason and competence, whether in discussing (and executing) the expansion into new areas of the Seattle market for PCC or the creation of new policies and priorities for NCG. The entire consumer food cooperative movement has benefited from Randy’s dedicated service.

“For more than 36 years I have observed Randy Lee consider matters of critical importance to cooperatives. Randy lives the cooperative values as he works in the service of the cooperative movement. His thinking and advice never fail to take into account the social and environmental costs of decisions, as well as the financial. His ‘triple bottom line’ approach is not unusual for a financial officer of a cooperative, but his dedication and long-term commitment to the movement set him far apart. Randy Lee is, in my mind, the standard by which other cooperative financial officers should be measured.”

Nancy Taylor, vice president of human resources at PCC Natural Markets, worked with Randy for 30 years and testified: “I have experienced first-hand the intelligence, dedication, and wisdom that he has exhibited in his role as our CFO and in stepping in to lead the organization on three different occasions.

“Randy has been a guiding light through easy and challenging times and everything in between. His ability to calmly, thoroughly think things through in nearly every aspect of the business has been invaluable to the co-op and to each of us who works with him. Without Randy, we would not be the organization we are

today. Randy is passionate about PCC and compassionate about the people who work here.”

Robynn Shrader, CEO of National Co+op Grocers, noted that Randy served longer than anyone on the NCG board of directors, dating back to 2000: “He has been a constant voice of reason and strategic thinking, often taking a contrary view for purposes of getting past the politics of ‘feel good’ efforts to get to those efforts that will effectively move the sector forward.”

Shrader noted the strength of the NCG reorganization and its tremendous growth in cooperative assets: “This accomplishment is due, in part, to Randy’s dedication to collaborating, compromising, and strategizing to position our cooperatives to thrive and build...”

“He understands and embraces the role of mentoring the next generation of co-op leadership. Not only has he been a sounding board for my own ideas and challenges over the years, but also I have watched him do the same repeatedly for new directors on the NCG board.”

Rebecca Sadinsky, executive director of PCC Farmland Trust, noted Randy’s “essential and continuous leadership” of that organization since its founding in 1999 as a separate nonprofit: “In the early days the fledgling organization was embedded

inside PCC and relied on the co-op for material assistance and administrative services. Shaping the relationship between the small nonprofit and growing consumer co-op so that each would progress, distinct but allied, was among Randy’s most important leadership duties for the Trust. Because of Randy’s guidance, the Trust is now recognized as an innovative farmland conservation organization in our region.

“Because of Randy’s example, the Trust now relies on a talented and experienced set of community volunteers serving as his fellow board members and a large community of supporters for its material and administrative needs.

“I know of no other nonprofit founded in this novel way. The multi-faceted relationship that has evolved since then is unique. Randy is the Trust’s trailblazer and thought leader, deserving much of the credit for an independent, productive nonprofit pledged to conserve farmland in our region for sustainable and organic producers.”

I spoke briefly with Randy Lee after composing this tribute. He mentioned his oft-repeated comment (shared by so many others): “Our co-ops always need to first succeed as the businesses that they are, in order for us to accomplish the many other values we embraced in organizing under that democratic ownership structure.” •

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