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Margaret Mittelstadt, Director of Communications
Outpost Natural Foods Cooperative
margaret@outpostnaturalfoods.coop
414-431-3377 x170



From fringe to forty – it’s fabulous if you’re Outpost Natural Foods Co-op

They said it couldn’t be done - Outpost celebrates milestone anniversary

[Milwaukee, WI] What were you doing forty years ago? If you were a small group of Milwaukee idealists, you’d be organizing final efforts that would bring natural foods to Milwaukee. The founders of Outpost Natural Foods Cooperative filed for articles of incorporation on April 17, 1970. For the first year, it was known as the East Kane Street Food Co-op. Doors to the new neighborhood store opened later that June. Many dyed in the wool Milwaukeean may remember those early days, for regular business at the tiny 500 square foot storefront located at Kane Street and Humboldt Avenue was spirited, spontaneous and perhaps a bit too natural for the likes of some. One year later the co-op reorganized and changed the name to Outpost Natural Foods. The new incarnation was to create an “outpost” for natural and wholesome foods in a dominating world of chain supermarkets, mass-produced unhealthy packaged foods and widespread use of agricultural chemicals. Word was out and it struck true with residents.

"When the founders of Outpost set out to create a ‘food revolution’ in 1971, I wonder if they could have even imagined what we call Outpost today? Without a doubt Outpost created the market for organic, natural, and local foods in Milwaukee, long before others knew they were credible product lines and would someday be demanded by consumers," said Pam Mehnert, Outpost general manager. Indeed. The first year’s sales totaled just high of \$200,000 with a workforce made up of all volunteers. Thankfully, today, the scene is a little different. "With more than 14,000 owners, three store locations, wholesale and catering from a centralized kitchen, and over 250 employees - our more than \$27 million in revenue is a testament to the cooperative model," Mehnert added. The latest sales figure is the highest single year total ever in the co-op’s history.

Times have changed along with the natural foods landscape as well. Many of the products the co-op has offered throughout the years are now considered household names, like granola bars, bulk items, smoothies and certified organic foods. Sustainable shopping habits were also nurtured from the very beginning. Outpost offered sturdy cloth shopping bags, encouraged recycling, promoted organic agriculture before there was a national program and eagerly supported local farms and businesses. Tipi Produce of Evansville, Wisconsin, Barthel’s Apples of Mequon, and both Simple Soyman and Kallas Honey of Milwaukee are just some of the early local farms and businesses that have grown along with the co-op and still are an important part of it today.

For forty years, Outpost has quested to educate its owners on the benefits of living a sustainable, natural and holistic lifestyle. A key resource published by Outpost for over 25 years has been the free monthly periodical, *The Exchange*. Malcolm Woods has been the editor/curator of the food and wellness journal since 1994. "I really had no idea when I began as editor of the Exchange 16 years ago that the

magazine - as an extension of the co-op - really was at the core of a rather large and passionate community. It has been heartening to see the issues we have highlighted over the years become mainstream. And it has been rewarding to witness firsthand the passion and connection people feel with Outpost." Today the magazine finds itself at the dawn of a whole new day with digital media, opening up endless possibilities and opportunities to expand its coverage.

Outpost Natural Foods is a consumer owned cooperative. It exists to fill a need, a void, in the community. The people it serves democratically own it. One owner, one vote. The passionate community Woods refers to is what makes Outpost unique and home to metro Milwaukee.

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