MINNESOTA WOMEN'S PRESS

Co-op Culture

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Minnesota Women's Press has been sharing the stories of women since 1985, as the longest continuously run feminist print publications in the country. It is freely available at more than 300 locations.

Our mission: Authentic community-based journalism that amplifies and inspires the stories, action steps, and leadership of powerful, everyday women (cis and trans) and nonbinary people.

Our vision: We all are parts of a greater whole. Our stronger future will be built from the collective energy of people who shift narratives to effect change.

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Cover: Natalia Mendez. See her story on page 6. Photo by Skye Rygh.

Minnesota Women's Press earned three photography and two writing awards from the Minnesota Newspaper Association for 2024.

Upcoming magazine topics include Energy (August), Collective Health (September)

PHOTO MINNESOTA HOUSE DFL CAUCUS

Minnesota House leader Melissa Hortman and her husband Mark shortly before they were killed. Two days before she was assassinated, after the special legislative session ended, Hortman wrote to constituents: "Our top priority is to change a status quo that is tilted against everyday Minnesotans." The widely respected leader exemplified the best in strong, values-oriented leadership.

"I can promise you that women working together — linked, informed, and educated — can bring peace and prosperity to this forsaken planet."

— Isabel Allende

WHAT'S INSIDE?

Editor's Letter 3
Announcing a Bold Experiment

Money & Business 4–5
Imagining a Potential Co-op Future

Ecolution 6–7
Why I Have Built My Life Around Co-op Culture

Adventure 8–9
Susan Raffo: Listening to America's People and the Land

Gender-Based Violence 15–17
Addressing Violence in a Collective Way

Healing 18–19
Team Care Is Self-Care at Our Nonprofit

Sports 20–21
Dodgeball Is Not Just for Gym Class

Thoughts 23
Values in a Rural Town

SPECIALTY GUIDES

Buy Local 10–14
Navigating the Divide

Classified Ads 22

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Announcing a Bold Experiment

by Mikki Morrissette

Some of the widest gaps between people's perspectives tend to be disagreements about whether we have limited resources that should be controlled by some, or whether we are capable of collaboration in providing mutual aid for all. I believe we are all choosing on a spectrum, regardless of political affiliation or faith; it is not a binary one-or-the-other. I also believe we can nudge people into gradations of cooperation if we start off in the right place.

In this month's magazine, we learn from several people about the ways that cooperation, collaboration, and new collective experiences have energized their lives. We also announce a new intention for the future of this magazine.

In 2020, during the pandemic and after George Floyd's murder by police, Minnesota Women's Press started transforming into a more responsive media platform that reflects the mutual aid and perspectives needed in the moment. We added the term "ecolution" to our vocabulary — our own invention, reflecting the ways local economies and ecosystems are being restored and revitalized, largely by women. We started building Changemakers Alliance, with its own weekly newsletter, to share these new online stories. And more recently, we created the Badass membership, so readers can support content and conversations alongside underwriters who care about our sustained attention to major community issues: transforming justice, age- and gender-based trauma, housing, caregiving gaps, and ecofeminism.

Continuing our pioneering spirit, in September we will offer a somewhat larger publication that is distributed once every two months. This will give our evolving statewide team more time to develop the funding and content from new "CALL Connect" discussion guides that hosts will use to convene conversation circles around Minnesota.

Thanks to grants from Press Forward Minnesota and the national Lenfest Institute for Journalism, we are generating prompt questions for key articles we have published. Neighbors, colleagues, family, and friends can choose to discuss these topics together from personal (rather than political) perspectives. We will collect reports from some of these discussions to fuel future stories, which will in turn launch additional conversations.

In 2026, we will publish deep dives about these key topics, as well as reflections that are shared with us from the conversations. There is risk involved — it reduces our revenue from monthly print advertising — but we are betting on increased support from statewide readers. If successful, this will lead to an even more bold experiment in 2027, which you will read about in this issue.

Our responsibility as a media platform is to showcase the best of who we are, what we want to build, and how we work to do it together.

Support unique media:

Cirien Saadeh, founder of Journalism of Color Training Center

Imagining a Potential Co-op Future for Minnesota Women's Press

Written by Priscilla Trinh, from a white paper developed by Cirien Saadeh, thanks to a Democracy Funds grant

Minnesota Women's Press recently celebrated its 40th year as the nation's longest continuously run feminist print publication. Changemakers Alliance, established in 2022 as a series-oriented online extension of the magazine, has sought to reimagine community-centered journalism by expanding its first-person narratives and social justice solutions reporting. In the coming year, the media platform will explore whether it can transition into a cooperative, member-owned news organization.

The shift from a founder-led for-profit to a member-owned co-op would be a radical breakthrough in today's media landscape. In the context of journalism, cooperative ownership holds potential not only as an organizational model but as a democratic practice. It would challenge the sometimes exploitative media dynamics — increasingly led by the agendas of its primary owners — and center the voices and leadership of community members who benefit from sustained attention to social issues and solutions.

A few U.S. cooperative newsroom experiments have not succeeded, but the co-op model in general is a powerful structure in Minnesota's landscape, from food centers to farming, from housing to art.

Minnesota Women's Press is eager to try to go where others have not yet succeeded, partly because its unique platform is already authentically community- and membership-based.

Current publisher Mikki Morrissette has been convening an editorial board for the past year as a first step in story generation with a team. She is interested in eventually transitioning her 100 percent ownership to a leadership team that is chosen by co-op members.

What Is Co-op Media?

Cooperative journalism, as defined here, is journalism practiced within a cooperative socio-financial and legal structure. It refers to how an organization is internally structured and governed, particularly in relation to the community it serves. Cooperative journalism is distinct from collaborative journalism, which typically refers to partnerships between organizations.

Cooperatives are organizations formed by people who voluntarily unite to meet common needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise. There are three main cooperative types: consumer-owned cooperative, producer-owned cooperative, and/or worker-owned cooperative — each with distinct governance structures and member engagement approaches.

The history of cooperatives in the U.S. — although they are not uniquely an American phenomenon — unfolds alongside the labor movement. Working-class people sought to resist an oppressive "wage system." Black Americans sought to establish autonomous mutual aid networks that centered community care.

Co-ops are not inherently anti-capitalist or socialist, though some may operate with those values. Instead, they represent

a flexible economic model grounded in democratic control and mutual benefit. The seven principles of cooperative enterprises in practice are:

- Voluntary and open membership
- Democratic member control
- Member economic participation
- Autonomy and independence
- Education, training, and information
- Cooperation amongst cooperatives
- Concern for communities

The magazine's online component, Changemakers Alliance, is supported by membership and embodies these values, but is not formally a co-op. In the coming year, with an increasingly statewide team, it will seek to deepen co-op principles in order to deliver community-driven news under the Minnesota Women's Press umbrella.

Cooperative journalism is not just a business model. It is a relational practice grounded in trust, accountability, and the belief that communities deserve to co-create the media that serves them. In the case of Minnesota Women's Press, a consumer-ownership model appears the most aligned with the organization's mission to center grassroots voices and build infrastructure for civic engagement.

Next Steps

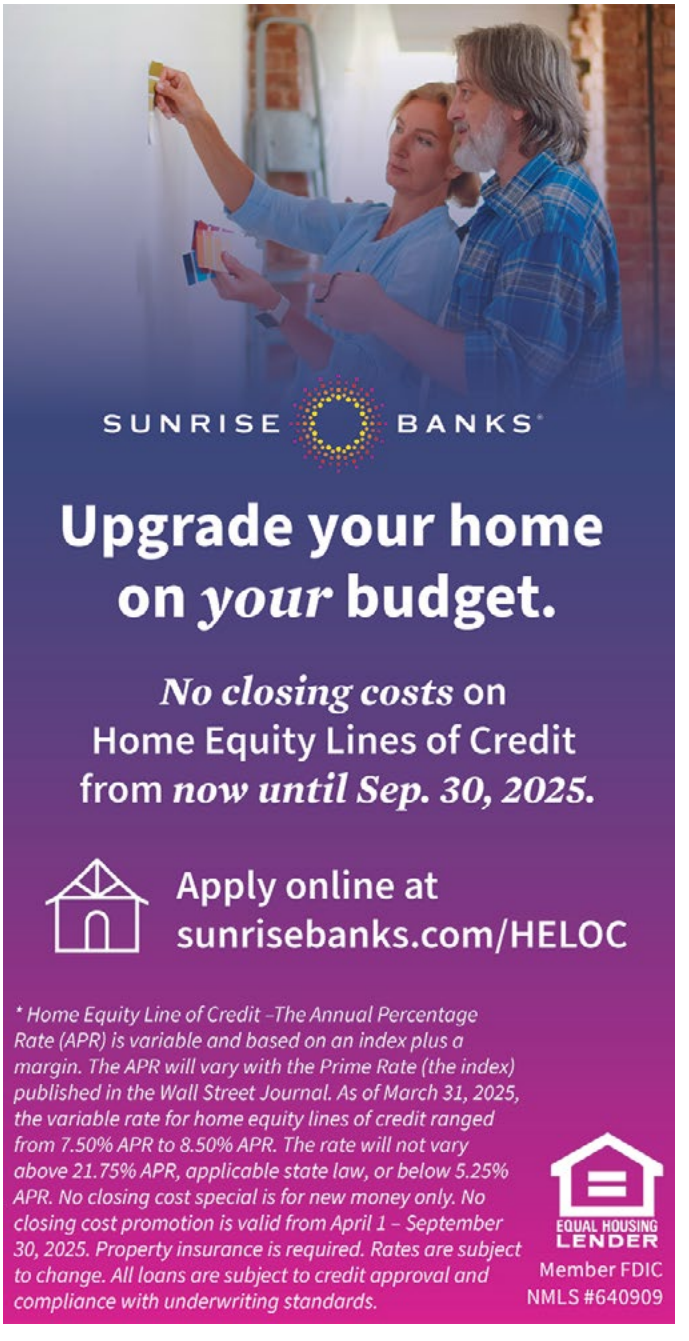
To successfully transition to a consumer-owned digital news organization, the magazine will begin a process, co-led by a voluntary leadership team, that seeks to:

- Engage the editorial board and broader community in educational work, to ground cooperative practices in shared language and collective understanding.
- Seek support from cooperative development organizations to provide legal, organizational, and strategic insight to guide the transformation process.
- Embed sustained relationship-building into the roles and responsibilities of editorial leadership.
- Align leaders around a common vision and provide a road map for implementing cooperative practices.

Cooperative journalism is practiced in several European communities. When done well, the model builds trust not only among its storytelling network, but in the power of community itself. As a media platform rooted in personal story-sharing, solutions journalism, and community action, the magazine hopes to make this transition by 2027. MWP

If you are interested in being part of the transition leadership team, please indicate your interest, and any experience in co-operative ventures, by contacting editor@womenspress.com

Find Cirien Saadeh's full white paper here



Why I Have Built My Life Around Co-op Culture

PHOTO SKYE RYGH

written by Natalia Mendez

I am the director of marketing at Seward Co-op, which is a full-service grocery store, deli, and community space that was created in 1972 and now serves over 25,000 households in South Minneapolis. The co-op model is a business structure rooted in seven principles:

- Ownership is voluntary and open, meaning that anyone can be an owner.
- Ownership control is democratic; everyone has one share, one vote for who serves on the board. There are no shareholders who have a larger say in how things are run or who receive a higher percentage of money out of co-op profits because they own more shares.
- Owners have the autonomous and independent choice to shop and work here.
- Education is a strong value, so we offer classes about local food systems and sustainability. We also work to educate those in community about the ins and outs of the economics of cooperation, whether that's by uplifting local vendors, sharing information from other local businesses and organizations that align with our values, or trying to break down complex topics so more people can understand the importance of cooperation and its role in our future.
- We manifest cooperation among cooperatives — we work in conjunction with other co-ops.
- Concern for community is central. We prioritize working with small-scale local businesses that have sustainable and environmentally friendly practices as sources for the products we stock on our shelves.
- Financial accessibility is also one of our values, so for those that qualify, we offer needs-based memberships that allow folks to pay for ownership incrementally. Currently, a single Class A stock is $75. We also have an option that provides a 10 percent discount on shopping trips for a year, which can be renewed annually.

Other business structures are often owned and governed by shareholders. The profits of those businesses go to the investors. In a co-op, however, people purchase the stock in exchange for ownership and the profit belongs to those owners. Owners can run for a seat on the board of directors, and owners each have one vote to elect those directors as well as for one vote on any special bylaws. This year, we are asking for votes on whether to

raise the price of lifetime ownership — since it has been the same since the 1980s.

At this time, with businesses rolling back their diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, we're seeing people wanting to vote with their dollars. Many are turning to — or back to — us for that.

Overall, our goal is to create a cooperative economy, which means that the people who own and democratically control each business are also the consumers of the goods and services they provide. It's a very "for us by us" system. Although we currently exist within a capitalist system, cooperatives aim to serve as an antidote to it and strive to make decisions that will be beneficial to the community in the long run.

Every business has a different statement that motivates their decision-making, and for us that is our Ends statement: Seward Co-op will sustain a healthy community that has equitable economic relationships, positive environmental impacts, and inclusive, socially responsible practices.

This has been driving our vision of cooperation for over 50 years.

The Benefits and Barriers of Cooperation

The act of cooperation predates capitalism. Communities have always worked together to raise each other's kids, harvest shared food, and trade. Living in community, sharing resources, and interdependence are traditional values.

The co-op system is especially valuable to people who have been marginalized and/or negatively impacted by oppressive systems of power. This is a movement that is not new. We do it without recognizing it. In the post–Vietnam War era, the Twin Cities was a hot spot for the cooperative movement.

There was controversy. The documentary *Co-op Wars* captures the sometimes violent struggle between two factions of the food cooperative movement: one that prioritized organic food purity, and the other that prioritized equitable food access.

There are no simple solutions to bridging the gap between the two factions, even today, which is why we offer a mix of organic and conventional products. Additionally, only certain brands and products qualify for assistance programs. In our pursuit of food access, you may sometimes see products on the shelves that are not organic, but do qualify for the guidelines of SNAP and WIC.

Annie Young was an important player in the Twin Cities. She eventually was known for working on the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, but prior to that, she started a buying club in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. After moving to the Twin Cities, she worked on a food distribution alliance. Ultimately, she helped build our membership, implemented our numbering system for owners, and helped us increase our price of ownership to ensure financial sustainability.

One of the things I am proud of is we value equity, which means uplifting marginalized people — whether that is their race, ability, sexuality, gender, or presentation. When we noticed that staff at our stores did not adequately reflect the communities we served, we committed to a 10-year plan for increased equity and improvement.

LaDonna Sanders Redmond is on our board of directors. She is a powerhouse in equity work and helped us turn things around. Today, 41 percent of our staff identifies as Black, Indigenous, or people of color. While this is an improvement of inclusion, we continue to look for ways to expand and advance our equity work.

Minnesota Was, Partly, Built on Cooperation

As of October 2024, Minnesota leads the nation in the number of agricultural cooperatives per state. Perhaps that has something to do with the farmers who settled here, operating within an existing cooperative structure. However, it also should be acknowledged that this is a sanitized version of history. It does not include the history of colonization and genocide of still-existing Indigenous nations that led to land grabs of this fertile farmland.

Nonetheless, this is an abundant place for farming, and there is enough for all of us. The cooperative movement economically embodies those values.

While our prices were already not too far off from some of the other big-box brands, even before the tariffs, our prices have always factored in the real cost of food, such as the farmers we work with who pay a higher wage to those harvesting crops. Some produce organic crops that may incur smaller yield and require certifications for their growing practices. We pay the people who work at our stores industry-setting living wages.

Many people already know Minnesota is a great place to live for fresh, local food access and clean water, along with our policies as a trans-refuge state. We're beginning to see people moving here as a refuge from the effects of the climate crisis. We also have food hubs like The Good Acre, which fulfills orders for purchasers like Seward Co-op.

This is a prime example of how cooperation and interdependence work in action within our local food systems to maintain the natural order of diversity. For local farmers to thrive, there must be a demand for their products. Shopping at Seward Co-op helps sustain local food systems so that they can sustain us long-term. MWP

ALL PHOTOS ANNA LEMLER

Susan Raffo: Listening to America's People and the Land

recorded by Marcie Rendon

When I was 16, I read *Walking Across America,* by Peter Jenkins. A couple days after reading it, I woke up knowing I would do this. In my 60th year, I wanted to know if it is possible for us to live together on this land.

The Seven Fires Prophecy

On this walk, I was guided by my understanding of the Prophecy of the Seven Fires — an Anishinaabeg prophecy that primarily offers wisdom and guidance for Anishinaabeg people, but also carries warnings about the impact of "the light-skinned ones." We are living in the time of the Seventh Fire: a time in which we are standing at a fork in the road, with one fork leading to our shared destruction and the other to the Eighth Fire, a time when we live together on this land in peace.

As I have come to understand it, there is a warning for those who follow the ways of the light-skinned ones, who are not acting as though we are part of creation. We do this when we assume that gathering enough money, enough strategy, and enough people will enable us to somehow fix the complexity of problems that include people we don't know, as well as other beings of the Earth. It's important for us to remember that we are makers — we bring together resources that already exist, beings with their own lives, and make small shifts and changes in the greater complexity that is this land. These teachings shaped the walk, and they continue to shape how I understand change and possibility.

About Truth-Telling

I think about the piece of the Prophecy that focuses on how you can't immediately tell if the light-skinned ones are friend or foe — and you will know when the rivers [are poisoned] and the fish begin to die. Initially, I thought this was about outright lying and manipulation, or lying to an external audience, but I've now started to think of it as an internal state. I notice the excuses I made about this walk, and the excuses I continue to make so that I feel more badass than I actually am.

The truth is, on the walk I wanted some comfort at the end of the day. I wanted a shower. I wanted a feeling of home. I wanted to know where I was going to sleep, even if it was in a tent. I wanted access to people or to some form of connection, rather than just being alone in a tent in the middle of an unknown space.

I wanted to be the person who just camps in an empty field — sometimes I was her, but I wanted to be her far less than I thought I would. So, I am noticing; I believe the Prophecy is as much about the internal lying — the internal separation of the performed self from the true self — as it is about external audiences.

On Listening Well, Care ... and Violence

One of the commitments I made was to listen but not allow violence to go unchallenged. It was usually the verbal violence that people would lay at my feet. It was anti-immigrant stuff or transphobia, mostly. When I pushed back, I also tried to keep a connection. How do we deeply disagree but not write each other off?

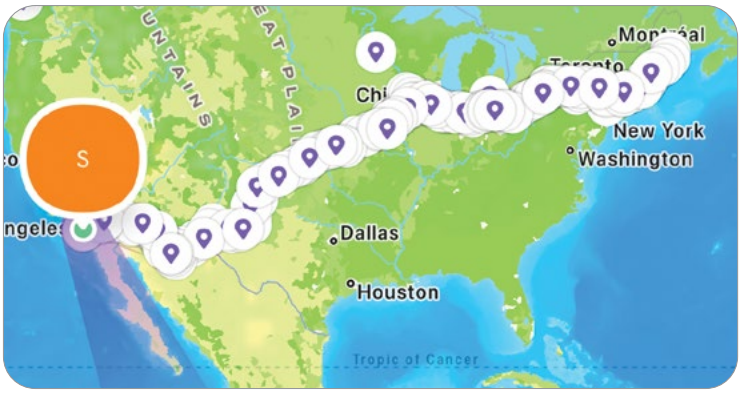
I met more ex-police officers and active police officers on this walk than I've met in my entire life. Who is going to meet a stranger walking across the fields? It would be them. But when it got to the point where I felt there was a power struggle about to happen, where I could feel them trying to control me, almost always the question that would soften them would be some version of, "Is this the best that we can hope for our children?"

So, unsurprisingly, being in relationship to Descendants is what would help even the most tight-minded soften.

Kansas and Missouri both touched me deeply. I think they're the poorest states I walked through. There I was reminded of where I grew up and who I grew up with. There I witnessed generations of destruction of rural infrastructure. The slow, constant erosion in which family businesses became big-box stores. Then big-box stores closed. Moving through places where the nearest grocery store is 50 or 60 miles away, I saw and experienced so much care. I stayed in many RV parks where people ended up living together who didn't know each other previously, where they are taking care of each other. But in the city, that's not how it worked.

I didn't have people try to proselytize me, like I thought might happen. I talked with people about God more than politics, because that's what they wanted to talk about. I was also very clear that I'm not Christian in the way they know, but that I do believe there is spirit; I believe in source. They wanted to go there with me. That is what we mostly talked about.

I've witnessed, been written about, and been a part of so many movements that have language about collective care and safety, with analysis and awareness about consent. I think about the movements I'm in where there is so much focus on



The walk started on April 13, 2024, from Castine, Maine. The walk finished on January 11, 2025, at Doheny Beach State Park, California. Miles traveled: 3,450 walked, 750 ridden (approximates). Pairs of shoes worn through: five, with the sixth pair on Susan Raffo's feet at the end.

people getting exactly what they need — but it doesn't last.

Nothing lasts unless it's really local, rooted in a family connection, or there's a reason people are together. But outside of that, it doesn't last.

The irony is that the coastal communities, where the liberal bastions are, were the only places I experienced cruelty. In California, I think people perceived me as unhoused. They threw things at me from their cars, yelled, and pretended they were going to run me over. On the East Coast, people mostly called 911. It was cold and closed, and I was considered a problem somebody else needed to deal with.

The West Coast had f*** you energy. And it wasn't just a one-off thing. People were actively cruel toward me. On the East Coast, people called the cops to make me disappear.

Takeaway

I wanted to know, "Is it possible for us to live on and with this land together?" What tended to happen would be a pause, a connection, a softening, and a listening. Only two people I met tried to answer that question directly. The most profound experience occurred when an Amish elder said, "Well, that would be the right question, wouldn't it?" MWP

susanraffo.com/the-walk

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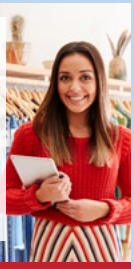

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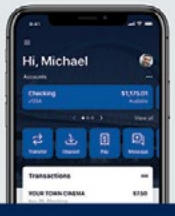

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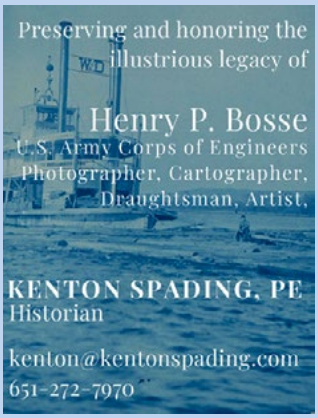
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Navigating the Divide: Cooperation in the Age of Division

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

submitted by Angela Dawson

I've been a member of a co-op most of my adult life, and always admired successful co-ops who seemingly get "it right." When I founded Forty Acre Co-op in 2020, I believed — perhaps naively — that the cooperative model would serve as an antidote to the isolation and exclusion I encountered as a Black woman farmer. Cooperatives are meant to exemplify shared power, mutual aid, and economic democracy. Yet, in this age characterized by fear — fear of difference, fear of loss, fear of change — cooperation itself has become a contested space, particularly for those of us who do not conform to traditional leadership molds.

The name I chose for this co-op is intentionally an ode to the promise of "Forty Acres and a Mule," which emerged during the Civil War — a time when hope hung delicately in the air for countless formerly enslaved individuals. Special Field Order No. 15, issued by General William Sherman in January 1865, was a beacon of hope, offering freed families the opportunity to cultivate their own land and build a new life; a chance at agency and dignity that had been denied to them for generations.

Yet months after the first set of families began to settle on their land, the winds of political change swept through the nation — the land was taken back and the families were removed. This historical betrayal is not merely a dusty footnote in our past; it remains a poignant part of the collective memory that shapes our present-day reality.

My journey into cooperative advocacy has been born out of necessity. I grew up understanding that food and farming are not merely economic activities; they are the roots that anchor our communities. However, as a Black woman, I faced barriers at every turn: access to land, equipment, training. Fair markets

were regulated by unspoken rules and gatekeepers who rarely looked like me. The cooperative model, with its promise of shared ownership and democratic control, appeared to be the ideal solution.

Convergence in Conflict

Despite challenges, Forty Acre Co-op has experienced growth, gaining 10, then 20, then 30 members — primarily newer women of color who have recently acquired farms. Today, our cooperative stands as the only vertically integrated Black-owned hemp company in the nation, having trained hundreds of new and aspiring farmers, many from historically excluded communities. We achieved this not by awaiting permission, but by insisting that our voices, our history, and our needs matter.

We developed a model wherein farmers are not merely producers but decision-makers. Our "Seed to Wellness Promise" is rooted in regenerative agriculture, fair pricing, and a commitment to healing both the land and the people who cultivate it. This requires more than farming resilience.

We've demonstrated that when marginalized communities define cooperation on our own terms, we can create something powerful and deeply hopeful. Unfortunately, we continue to grapple with a lack of resources and the difficulties of farming in unstable climate conditions amidst a legacy of systemic inequality.

Five years after founding the cooperative, I am reminded that true cooperation remains a radical act, especially in the agricultural sector.

For farmers of color, fear is palpable: fear of legal repercussions, exploitation, stigma, and losing the little we've gained. In the financial world, I constantly encounter obstacles of restrictive financial options that fail to align with our business needs, as well as extractive investors with ulterior motives. Within these spaces, my leadership is often met with suspicion or outright hostility.

Yet, like a true-to-heart farmer, I persist. To do otherwise would be to allow fear to triumph — to surrender our future to others. For me, cooperation transcends an economic model; it is an act of resistance. It embodies a refusal to be silenced, a commitment to collective empowerment, and a belief that another way is possible. I recognize I must remain flexible and patient to sustain this vision, meaning that the co-op must adapt, find new partnerships, and discern when to part ways with others.

We are expanding our reach to other BIPOC farmer groups to multiply our impact. We have merged programs with the Minnesota Black Farmers Association and collaborated on resource management for our members. We are working with Indigenous farmers to develop tribal co-op ventures, such as the Indigenous Hemp Farmers Cooperative, and partnering with tribal elders to create what will be the state's first Black-Indigenous woman-owned cannabis venture.

Reclaiming the Cooperative Model

I do not wish to romanticize the struggle. Gaining the trust of marginalized communities in the cooperative model is challenging, messy, and slow. However, I remain critically hopeful. I have witnessed the transformation that occurs when we reclaim cooperation, asserting our right to define it for ourselves. I have seen farmers, once isolated and afraid, evolve into leaders and mentors. I have witnessed land restored, families healed, and possibilities expanded.

In this age of fear, cooperation is more necessary — and more revolutionary — than ever. My hope is that we continue to build cooperatives that are authentically by us and for us, spaces where everyone can thrive, not merely survive. This is the future I am striving toward, one seed and one act of courage at a time. MWP

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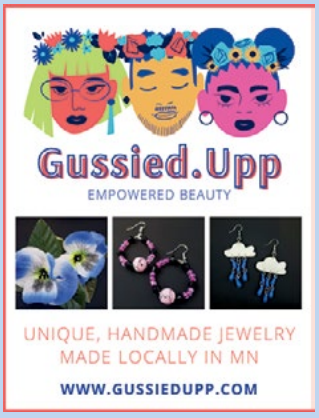
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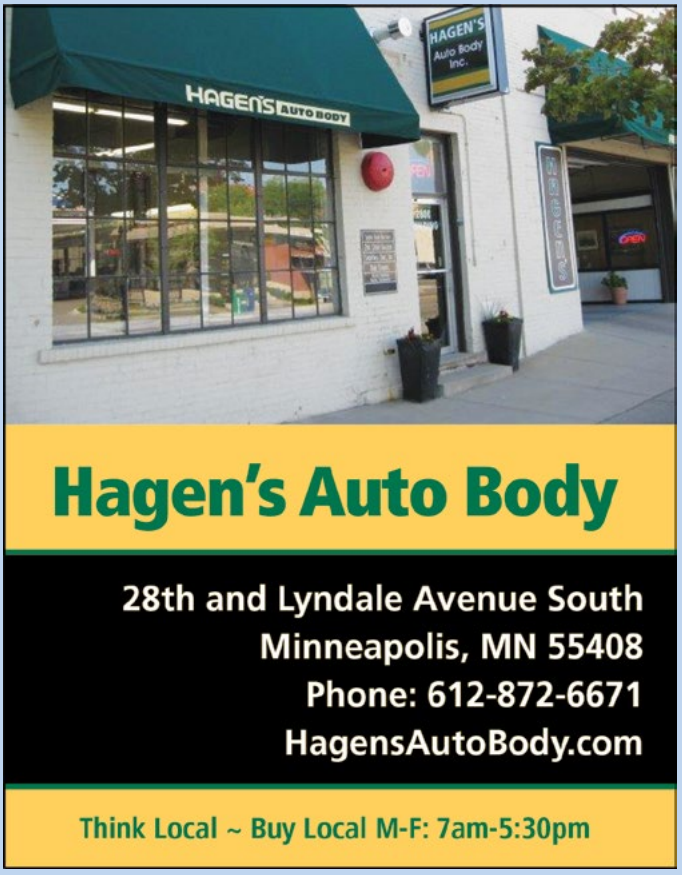
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How to Address Domestic Violence in a Collective Way

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

reported by
Mikki Morrissette

Amirthini Keefe, at the Domestic Abuse Project office in Northeast Minneapolis

The number of people abused by intimate partners has not gone down over decades. There continues to be a lack of public demand for culture changes that might prevent household violence from happening in the first place. In our new "Where Do We Go From Here?" series, we are discussing a few topics that require sustained community discussions about solutions. This story is one of a series of conversation starters about age- and gender-based trauma that exist in all communities. The goal: Identify what local leaders, community members, and advocates can do together to help survivors feel that they have options. For this conversation, we talked with three advocates.

Frustrations

Amirthini Keefe, executive director of the Domestic Abuse Project (DAP): I feel like there's been a scarcity model in the domestic violence community. We have been working so hard to keep our pay competitive so that we can keep our team rooted at the organization, because that impacts the quality of work that we provide and the way that we can innovate. It takes time to develop skills, to hold people accountable, and to get comfortable having certain kinds of conversations. By the time folks develop that skill, and get their clinical license, they get paid more money to do the work somewhere else. It's hard to compete, not only with other nonprofits, but with hospital systems and private practices. Usually about 50 percent of the folks that do this work are survivors themselves and are still trying to pay for the lost wages and other expenses as a result of their DV experience.

Shannon Wussow, executive director of the Relationship Safety Alliance in Brainerd: Every person on our team is aware of what our budget is, what our funding sources are, where we are needing to pull back, because it's a big part of our daily reality. We have an amazing team. They are great at what they do. They are not short for ideas. I've got a wish list on my computer that I've been keeping track of since December 2016, when I walked in the door for the first time as director. We've had funding challenges since then. If we could focus on services and prevention, that would have a huge ripple effect in our community. There is so much more we could do if we weren't having to worry about losing funding.

Sometimes we also have to educate the public simply on what we do. Some people thought we were providing abortions at our shelter.

continued on next page

Nikki Engel, systems change senior manager at Violence Free Minnesota (VFMN): I've never met more creative people than advocates. As a society, there's a lot of lip service given to interrupting and ending violence, and yet if even one agency had the time and the money to implement its ideas in their community, it could reduce advocate burnout and have a huge impact on the community.

Advocates tell me it's not the work with survivors that is hard or overwhelming; it's the fact that we see so many things wrong, and all those systems and the culture are resistant to the changes that we want to implement.

Whether it's the bureaucracy of a system that must go through a million steps to change a form that would make something easier for a survivor, or the attitudes of folks in those systems, or the systems not being trauma-informed — those are the things that are like butting your head against brick walls. It is a part of what makes the work so hard and increases the difficulty of sustaining advocates in the field on top of the pay issues. It's the immovability of the systems and the culture to implement the changes that we think need to happen to end intimate partner violence.

Funding and Community Support

Wussow: We have a lot of community support for our work in Brainerd and Region 5+. But we have been here since 1978, and I think many people just assume that we're always going to be here. Yet it is impossible to make the numbers work. Our office needs and program needs are not fully funded.

Keefe: Twenty percent of our funding comes through federal dollars. After we lost United Way funding a few years ago, we moved toward diversifying funding. We started billing insurance companies for mental health services to offset some of the cost, which is not great because of infrastructure and client experiences with insurance companies. Some of the new federal requirements say that we can't talk about domestic violence as a social justice issue; it can only be talked about as an individual crime. Yet from a healing perspective, for survivors and folks who use violence, and from an accountability perspective, it is a social justice and systemic issue. All this work to get funding takes away from being able to focus on what matters.

Engel: We have had amazing champions at the legislature going to bat for us each year to increase funding for crime victim services, but it's never enough, because we're trying to backfill years with no increase to keep pace with the rising costs. We are never in a place where we can be comfortable.

There have been some creative funding solutions brought to the legislature these past few years, including the creation of a state VOCA [Victims of Crime Act] fund, which passed this year. The passage of the MRRA [Minnesota Rehabilitation and Reinvestment Act] in 2023 mandated that 50 percent of the resulting cost savings are intended to go to victim services. These could be incredibly beneficial for victims services in Minnesota, but it's going to take time until those dollars trickle down to our programs in a way that's meaningful.

Wussow: This is a predominantly female field, which I think also impacts the pay scales. It also can be difficult to accept government money, because that might come with strings attached. That means we have to make decisions about whether to accept funding that might come with strings, which could ultimately impact the quality of the services that we provide to survivors.

Collective Movement Building

Wussow: Having access to safe, affordable housing is an absolute issue in our community, and it has created longer stays at our shelter. We're designed to be a 30-day crisis facility, and we're seeing stays go anywhere from three to four months. But if the only thing standing in between a survivor and safety is a grant deadline or a budget vote, then we have completely failed as a society.

Keefe: I do think a challenge for the domestic violence community to figure out is what sharing and collaborating and innovating together looks like. We are absolutely going to be challenged, especially given the way that this administration is attacking marginalized communities. Will mainstream organizations stand up for culturally specific or identity-specific organizations as everyone attempts to survive?

Similarly to the people we work with, we have to cut power dynamics out. We are always in competition with each other. That is the world and the environment that we live in. We need to support each other. The director calls that we're on have wonderful conversations, but that is one hour out of our month. I feel like we are pitted against each other to fight for scraps, and we have to figure out how to get out of that.

Preventive Work

Wussow: Preventative activities generally are not a permissible expense for our Office of Justice Programs grant. We have made some progress recently with getting back into the school system to talk with students about healthy relationships and bullying. We also have a good partnership with Crow Wing County Community Corrections in cofacilitating the men's nonviolence program. There also are a few other programs that have been offered by for-profit mental health agencies that help educate abusers.

Keefe: Early intervention is really where it's at. When men who have used violence are done with programming, one of the most common things they say is that they wish they would have gotten this information when they were in high school, or before they got married, or when they were starting their relationship. Going into schools is so valuable.

When I was a social work student, part of my job was to do good-touch/bad-touch presentations with kindergarten through sixth graders. Being South Asian, my parents were mortified at the idea that I was talking to children in kindergarten about these things. But the reality is that kids are aware of what's happening in their environment, and they are already impacted by it. There are ways that we can have these conversations.

Knowledge is power. Helping folks in community understand what abuse is, and having access to resources, and reducing shame, and actually getting connected to those resources, is the best way that we can engage in change.

At DAP, we do a lot of systems change work. Right now, that involves bringing different system partners together to talk about what the collective response to domestic violence looks like, and what that means for folks in the community.

Engel: A few years ago, VFMN was excited to be working on a grant project that allowed us to explore what a non-law-enforcement-based response to domestic violence could look like in Minnesota. However, under the current federal administration, developing alternatives for survivors — not eliminating the criminal justice path, but making more paths — is a nonstarter. The administration is tying federal funding to work that understands domestic violence as a crime of individuals, and nothing else.

When VAWA passed in 1994, federal funding was heavily tied to work within the criminal justice system. It has only been in the last few years, through the work of countless advocates, that we were starting to see federal funding open to other possibilities, such as restorative practices. My fear is that we are going backward right now. MWP

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Find related stories, including a recent news story about testimony given to public officials by Keefe and others.

Thanks to 2025 underwriters to date, who support Changemakers Alliance content development

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Team Care Is Self-Care at Our Nonprofit

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Pamela Zeller stands in front of materials generated at an event in which people wrote on Post-it notes where they had lived, or had lineage or travel experience, and used yarn to connect it back to Saint Paul.

Throughout my decades of work with nonprofits serving victims and survivors of domestic and sexual violence, as well as working with BIPOC, immigrant, and refugee populations, I have come to recognize the importance of centering self-care as part of an organization's work culture and programming. Those of us working with people in need are often drawn to this work because we have also experienced similar situations.

The nonprofit world has come to recognize the toll that hearing people's stories, and championing their rights and needs, has taken on advocates. "Vicarious trauma," "compassion fatigue," and "vicarious resilience" are terms that attempt to define the impact our work has on us.

As the executive director of the Women's Initiative for Self Empowerment in Saint Paul, I have been intentional in centering self-care in our daily work environment — implementing policy and training, as well as setting aside resources and time for practicing new methods of self-care. At our agency, staff are encouraged to use their sick leave to take a mental health day *before* they need a mental health day. As their supervisor, I do not need to know why they are taking the day, nor do I require them to go through an approval process. They just need to let me know they are taking a mental health day.

Every quarter we schedule an all-day self-care retreat. Two rotating staff members choose the theme, and design and facilitate the activities. Recent themes have been:

- "Intimacy is not just a luxury (but a necessity)," which examined the 12 areas of intimacy that support health, wellness, and mental health
- "New beginnings (start of new year)"
- "Transformation (personal and professional)"

Every fall we host a staff retreat that starts with breakfast at Caribou Coffee before arriving in Duluth for lunch. Activities are held on the lake shore, and we take time to walk onto the pier or along the beach. The trip ends with a visit to Betty's Pies.

Activities vary for each retreat, but always include hands-on tasks that involve art and sharing each other's dreams, experiences, or goals. We try to bring new ideas and exercises to each retreat that can be used in our personal and professional life, such as Vision Bingo. This activity

prompted us to each make a bingo card with our personal aspirations for the coming year, challenging us to rewrite self-limiting beliefs for encouragement, replace self-limiting beliefs with messages of hope and positivity, or identify ways to support an abundance mindset in a world and culture that often focus on scarcity and competition for resources.

Engaging all of our senses in self-care is another way to reinforce themes and experiences. Our activities have included making scented lip balm, painting a ceramic object that decorates our individual offices and reminds us of our time at the retreat, practicing guided yoga with a yogi master who spoke about healing, selecting an empowering playlist for the trip up and back, and having delicious food.

Important to the many immigrant and refugee cultures of our staff is the act of coming together to share a meal. Sharing stories is also a very important aspect of our cultures' resilience, learning, and hope for the future.

Supporting self-care in a work setting is done through team-building, transparency, and open communication. I believe that we need to come from a place of love when we are working together. If I see you drowning and simply say, "You've got this," instead of asking how I can help, that is not loving. If I see you struggling in your position, the loving thing to do is to work with you to determine whether you need more training, discuss if you are happy in the position, and listen to your perspective. That might include offering to guide you in identifying barriers to success or helping you examine whether the job is a good fit for you, with no judgment or shame.

Self-care cannot be an afterthought, or something that we cram in between other duties. MWP

ALL PHOTOS SARAH WHITING

Dodgeball Is Not Just for Gym Class Anymore

reported by
Marla Khan-Schwartz

Emma Charlesworth-Seiler throws the ball at an opponent.

Dodgeball — that sport you might have played in middle school gym — has an adult league in the Twin Cities. The Open League is open to all gender identities, from beginners to veteran players. The Lavender League is for the queer community and cisgender female allies. There is also an adult Women, Trans, and Nonbinary League (WTNB), which started in 2024. The league offers youth programs for ages 7 to 18, and open gyms for casual pick-up games.

At a recent game in the WTNB league, I saw competitive games, but also a safe community space for bonding. One of the players, Caitlyn McGrath, says she needed a social outlet after relocating from the East Coast. She knew little about the sport, but after one game she was hooked. "It's a community where I can be all of the parts of myself at once, and it's safe to be all the parts of myself at once." Already she has been player, captain, and referee, and now she is the first non-male member of the team advisory council.

Founder Anh Phan built the opportunity in Minnesota, modeling it on his dodgeball experiences in West Hollywood, where he started playing 16 years ago. "It was where I found my closest friends and where I got to enjoy what the [Minnesota queer] community could feel like," Phan says.

Dodgeball requires strategy, teamwork, and focus. Each eight-person team has 40 minutes to complete as many games as they can play. Six balls line mid-court, three left and three right to avoid collision of the players after the whistle is blown. The balls fly as soon as the game begins. Any player that is hit by a ball leaves the court. As the number of players dwindles, the game intensifies. A player might call out "pressure" as they approach the opposing team, side by side, never turning their backs.

Although the games are intense, captain Sarah Mitzen says dodgeball is freeing. "All the anxiety, everything that I've been carrying and worrying about, turns off, and I'm completely in that moment."

Each season lasts around eight weeks, with spring, fall, and winter opportunities to play. After the latest WTNB league registration opened, it sold out in hours.

Ashley Cook was a teenager, working at Sky Zone, when she was recruited to join a Twin Cities dodgeball league ten years ago. She has since competed in four world championships, and other national and international competitions, as a member of the USA women's dodgeball team.

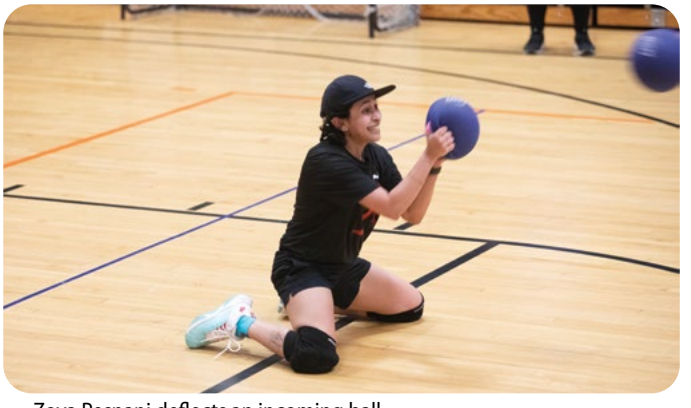
Cook already loved the sport when the queer Minnesota Dodgeball league was created in 2024. It is "awesome," she says, to have a dedicated space where people feel successful in a sport — "while learning about controlling mechanics, strategy, and being welcomed."

Minnesota Dodgeball is hosting the first-ever international Lavender Challenge in August in Bloomington. Teams from around the world will compete in a tournament exclusively for queer, trans, nonbinary, and women players.

No matter what skill set any player brings to the table, empowerment is the end goal. McGrath encourages others to join — they plan to expand the league teams. "It's a supportive and inclusive environment. People make you feel welcome." MWP

Details: minnesotadodgeball.com

Cheyenne Johnson (l) watches thrower Mik Haertl from the sidelines.



Zoya Pesnani deflects an incoming ball.

Laura Skyquest (l) and Sara Remde (r) remain alert as Cheyenne Johnson attempts a catch.

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Values in a Rural Town

submitted by
Bethany Lacktorin

PHOTO: ERIK HATLESTAD

I'm an arts-based community builder in rural New London, Minnesota (population 1,304). I practice a process of learning multiple perspectives of history, people, and places where I live. I seek to understand the motivations, aspirations, and meanings behind organizations, businesses, and local governments. This also means mapping how these are connected. For me, there has been no better place to practice this work than in the place where I grew up.

For six years, I've run a nonprofit arts venue called Little Theatre Auditorium. It's a 103-year-old building full of layers. I've also served on the board of the New London Food Co-op. In a small town, you'll often see the same people serving their community in intersecting ways. For several years, we've regularly communicated, coordinated, and pooled resources to do what we are all passionate about: bringing people together.

Through food, art, and music, we have steadily built an infrastructure that enables the creation of seasonal and cultural community gatherings: New London Porchfest, Little Show on the Crow, Harvest Star, and the Autumn Equinox Parade. Our joint efforts help support local food producers, makers, musicians, and artists, while deepening community knowledge about where our food comes from, energy sources, nature, and each other.

As we grow together, we're co-creating a mini economy that builds the basis for an emerging value system — one that doesn't have to rest on ever-increasing consumption or outward expansion, but rather depends on a more comprehensive, deeper understanding of how we are connected.

From my perspective, we're building a value system in which sharing what we each have to offer helps to meet collective needs. This leads to richer relationships, meaning, shared memories, and a lifelong sense of belonging.

Bethany Lacktorin (she/her) is a Korean adoptee raised in rural Minnesota across the highway from Ordway Prairie, a nature conservancy. Fourth in a generational line of women caretakers of a home that once included a general store, she follows in her mom's footsteps as steward of the property.

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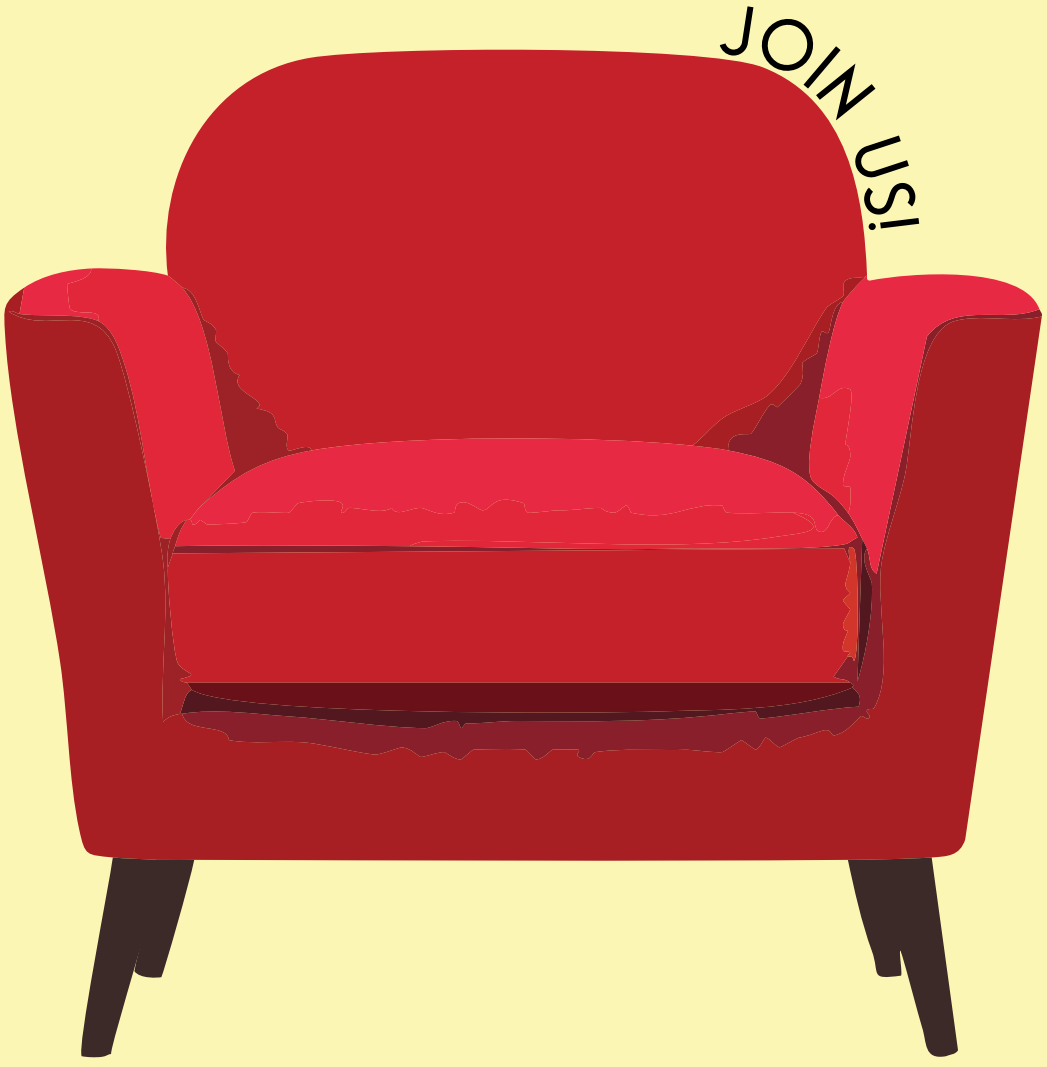

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