

Interview Elisa Brock 17th November, 2020

CL

What made you want to stand for the board?

EB

I know it's a lot of work being on the board. Something that made me want to join is that I can see that the OC has been trying to do a lot of things and the board has been trying to do a lot of things and often they are trying to solve the same problems but they are not talking to each other. I think that our coop could be so much more cohesive with a bit more working together and with better communication. I believe that is something that I could bring to DTE.

CL

What is your work outside of DTE?

EB

Proofreading and editing.

CL

In the ballot write-up you talk about work in the housing cooperative. Was that done on a volunteer basis, and have you had other committee or board experience?

EB

I worked in the housing cooperative as a volunteer. DTE is where I have spent most of my volunteering in recent years. Other volunteer work was done for a few NGOs, one in particular was a relief and development organisation helping to set up small farming cooperatives in India. The work was done in Australia. I was mostly involved in running the office. The previous person who managed it died suddenly before I arrived and the administrative systems were a mess. No one knew how things were run, so I had a forensic job trying to sort out how the organisation ran, what the paper systems were, what records could be found and then put it back together as a working system again. I did that because I believe in humanitarian issues and I believe in co-ops as well. I'd like to see more of our economy composed of co-ops such as workers and buyers co-operatives.

CL

I read a humorous story about you on Facebook where, as a child, you managed to work out a problem, do you know what I am talking about?

EB

Oh that! An old school friend reminded me of that; we were eight years old at the time. The teacher lit a candle and the task was to blow through a paper cone and blow out the candle. A lot of children lined up to try, but they put the small end of the cone to their lips and the wide end to the flame like it was a loud hailer. They couldn't manage it – including the boy, who was fit and athletic. He remembered me going up and turning the cone the other way around and so that the point pointed to the candle and blowing it out with a little puff. He thought I was very clever.

CL

I liked that story because it told me that you don't react to what you see, but go beneath that and tease things out to understand it. I have seen people yelling at each other and you calmly persist and pick the issues apart and bring it back together so that people see the bigger picture of what is being discussed.

EB

It's so easy to get caught up in the emotion of arguing about something. I think often the little important details of things can slip by because they are not shouting at us. The trick is to listen to the quiet things. That means listening to the quiet people as well. It is something I do try to develop. I find there is a lot of value to be had at looking at the details and looking for other options rather than joining in the fight on one side or the other.

CL

What do you want to focus on or achieve as a director?

EB

I think something I would really like to see is a shift to a culture of cooperation and inclusiveness in our co-op. I don't think it is the board's role to instigate top down change but it can point the co-op towards looking at the issues to find solutions. Solutions work better if more people are involved in creating something, then it will work better because most people will be committed to it.

CL

One thing that gets talked about a lot is that directors often fall into a voting bloc. What are your thoughts on that?

EB

I have also seen another pattern, sometimes you have two strong characters on the board who oppose each other and the other directors are taken to be siding with one or the other, however, sometimes people assume that loyalties are behind a director's decision, but if you look closer you would notice that is not always the case.

However, I agree that heavy divisions between factions is not a healthy thing, it is important that we all try to break that down, not just on the board but the committees as well. I think that it is important that when we vote on something we really think about the issues involved, that we do our homework and all really think about it rather than just vote with a bloc.

What I have found personally is that often when I look at the details of a motion or what is being discussed, I find it's not as simple as first thought and there are implications that the person who proposed it may never have considered, which may go against the broader aims they were trying to achieve. I'm always careful to look at the details of what I'm voting on. That said, sometimes people vote as a group because people have already discussed the issue outside of the meeting, and at times that can be a positive thing because it saves time in meetings by ironing out details beforehand.

I do believe in consensus decision making. I would rather discuss something and come to a solution that everybody is okay with, rather than just take it to a vote. It's a long process that is not always feasible; it requires certain things for it to work. It needs everyone to be committed to a consensus outcome. There needs to be shared goals otherwise consensus doesn't work; it takes commitment

by everyone. There are times that people's goals and values are so different that it is not possible to come to a consensus. But it is great when it works.

CL

How do you think you will cope dedicating two years to DTE in a board capacity?

EB

I have already devoted a lot of time to DTE. This year I worked three or four days a week in FinCom for several months when doing the end of financial year accounts. Before that I worked for several months preparing Site Operations for ConFest. Dedicating time is not new to me. Being a director would be an evolution of what I do; I may need to pull back in some of my other roles.

A lot of work in FinCom is admin work but we have also been developing systems. There's a lot of work when the systems are new, so now we want to do the books quarterly so it's spread throughout the year and not just one concentrated period. I wanted to work in FinCom before even considering running for the board because I needed to know how the financial side of the cooperative works. I wanted to know how DTE does its finance.

Our rules specify things that we should be doing that we are not doing. For example, there are supposed to be joint sittings of the Board, CC and OC three or four times a year; it even says what month they are supposed to occur. There is supposed to be a whole lot of reports every SGM. There is supposed to be a projected budget for the entire year. If anyone is looking for work to do, just have a look at the rules, there's plenty

CL

In my experience of being on the board, sometimes it can be tough. Have you considered the aspect of coping with hostility?

EB

It is a concern of mine. I know that hostility comes not just from the Board but from other members of the cooperative. That is something I would like to change, stopping the culture of hostility and bullying. When encountering hostility on the Board, the best I can do is to keep the lines of communication open and talk to people. People can be more hostile in an email forum or even a Zoom meeting than they would be person to person. I think a lack of communication has contributed to hostility because people feel disenfranchised; they feel that their work is not appreciated, which can lead to bitterness. So I think more communication between the Board and the committees and members will reduce hostility. Also I think it's essential to make sure that members' volunteer work is valued and they feel supported in their work. Some of this issue is interpersonal and some structural.

CL

Elisa Brock, thank you for your time.