



## *It Takes a Village...Newsletter*

**No. 5 /December 1, 2020**

**'The Holiday Issue'**

### **A Yummy, Joyful Holiday Gift for Us All: The River Valley Coop's Expansion to Nearby Easthampton**

**By Melinda Darer**

*(Another in a series of articles by Melinda highlighting the local businesses which are treasures needing our support, especially now).*



*A few weeks ago, I had a delightful conversation with Liesel de Boor, general manager of the River Valley Food Coop in Northampton. Coincidentally, Liesl is a good friend of VHC member Meg Bogdan, so we get to see Liesl and her dog Scout often at Village Hill.*

*In addition, over the past year, Liesl and I have begun brief conversations about VHC's potentially partnering with the coop to offer programs for the greater community once the Common House opens.*

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In this season of giving and receiving, Village Hill Cohousing and all of Northampton and the surrounding towns are about to receive a big gift. River Valley Coop, as we all know, is a community-owned natural foods grocery store on King Street. And now it's expanding, building a second location just over the border in Easthampton and scheduled to open in the summer of 2021. From VHC, the new store will be a mere five-minute drive or short bike ride away.

### **Brief History**

The Coop opened in April 2008 and was built into a bowl-shaped flat plateau that resulted from quarry operations dating back to 1900–1934. It was carved from the hillside and surrounded by granite cliffs rising on three sides. The cliffs act as a natural barrier between the store and neighboring residential areas. It also provides a beautiful setting.

If you haven't yet shopped there, the Coop is a 15,000-square-foot green-constructed building which offers a deli seating area (in non-pandemic times), and departments for fresh produce, meat and seafood, wellness products, beer and wine; bulk foods, cheese, dairy, grocery and more!

This store rapidly outgrew the space within a few years of opening and General Manager Rochelle Prouty and the board of directors started looking for a second location. They wanted to take pressure off of the current coop to make shopping and parking more enjoyable.

The good news is that they chose Easthampton: There is a lot happening in Easthampton in terms of culinary activities, breweries and downtown expansion. And there is space at the new site: This second store will be a little larger than the current space with much more parking.

### **More about the Easthampton Store**

The exciting news is that 100 percent of the new store's annual electric needs will be generated with on-site solar. This is possible because the coop can use the

rooftop for solar power generation as well as create solar canopies that both shade the parking lot and generate a substantial amount of electricity.

The Easthampton store has also been designed for state-of-the-art energy efficiency with virtually no fossil fuel beyond propane for the food production equipment. It will include electric vehicle chargers installed by a third party.

### **Revising Store Plans for a Post-COVID Reality**

An important consideration was that the coop needed to revise its Easthampton store plans to address likely post COVID-19 customer needs for safer shopping.

In this context, revisions include the elimination of a self-serve salad bar, hot bar and coffee bar. Instead, there'll be an exciting lineup of service displays and made-to-order stations. Also being added is a hand-washing sink at the store entrance and of course, plexiglass barriers as needed for the safety of checkout and service counters. The level of air filtration in the HVAC system has been increased as well, as was done in the Northampton store. Likewise, scoop bulk bins and will be eliminated and replaced with gravity bins.

### **'Wild about Local' Is the Motto of the River Valley Coop**

Being a community-owned grocery store during the pandemic has reinforced the necessity of obtaining food locally. During Covid's early days, the food-supply distribution chain was disrupted and many products were unavailable.

But the coop's mission to obtain 30 percent to 40 percent of its produce from local farmer, keeps the food in our community and makes the supply less vulnerable and more resilient. It also keeps prices competitive for organic produce.

The Coop actively promotes its identity as a community-owned grocery store. A staff person works on equity diversity and inclusion, and a social justice committee reviews the images and language accompanying new products.

In addition the coop has a program called: Food for All. Those who participate in SNAP, WIC or SSI are eligible to receive a 10 percent discount on their co-op purchases.

## Giving Back

Finally, here is a gentle invitation to give back during this holiday season. The Co-op is holding a drive to acquire 3,000 new members. Even though shopping privileges are open to everyone regardless of membership, a one-time gift of \$150 (which can be spread it out over six payments) provides us many benefits.

Most important among them is the satisfaction of supporting a local food coop that gives so much back to our larger community. For more information on how to join and to become an owner visit the [coop's website](#).

## Our Christmas/Hanukkah Memories

*What do the holidays mean for us? Below, members recount their personal memories – the sweet ones, the sad ones, the funny ones.*

### On Not Having a Christmas Tree

By Julie Wittes Schlack



As a kid growing up in Montreal, I admired the Christmas lights adorning peoples' homes and often peered covetously through their windows every December.

It wasn't that I felt deprived. My extended family had two Hanukkah parties every year that I was sure rivaled anyone else's Christmas morning. We got both the magical gifts -- a toy farm set, a nested Russian doll, a *Man from UNCLE* poster -- and the ridiculous ones that have fueled family lore ever since. (My mother maintained until her last days of life that she genuinely thought my brother *liked* Frank Sinatra, and my cousin Harriet

insists that she was *not* the one to have given him a brightly-wrapped edition of *The History of Torture*.)

Nor was it all that lovely Christmas music that I felt excluded from; we happily sang the holiday's classics with our friends, unburdened by their meaning.

But Christmas always had one forbidden enticement: the Christmas tree.

Even when I became an adult, living far from the Jewish enclave in which I'd grown up, I couldn't bring myself to get one. When Mark and I had children, we instead preserved and invented some Hanukkah rituals of our own: hauling out my grandmother's MixMaster to shred and mix potatoes for latkes, alternating which child got to light the *shamash* candle and letting the kids decide what charities to donate to in lieu of at least one night's gifts. (If endangered elephants, whales and gorillas can be deemed religious symbols, I'm confident that those symbols made Jews of at least some of them.)

Still, in retrospect, I realize that by refusing to fully assimilate, we were unintentionally but fortunately teaching our children the resilience and empathy that can be derived from not fitting into the dominant culture.

This holiday season, I'll again admire the lights of my neighbors and revel in the friendship of Christian friends who, in pre-pandemic times, welcomed us into their homes. Then, in the brilliant blue light of a cold winter day, I'll go for a walk in the woods, an appreciative foreigner in the trees' native land.

*This is an abridged version of "The Christmas Tree I Never Had," which appeared in [Cognoscenti](#).*

## The Doll That I Wanted So Much but No One Else Did

By Maital Levy



For Hanukkah, in my childhood home, we always lit the candles, said the blessings, and ate latkes. But presents were rare – until the year I was 6 or 7. For that particular Hanukkah, my parents made an exception in order to fulfil my heart’s desire: a Charmin’ Chatty doll.

Who was Charmin’ Chatty? She was produced by Mattel in 1963 and 1964 and she talked! She was not a beautiful doll so I could relate to her. She had blonde hair and life-like blue “decal” eyes; wore glasses and a sailor outfit and saddle shoes. She was a “tomboy” just like I was at that age.

I would often sit her in a chair and talk to her as the friend she

was. Chats were easy as she talked back! In fact she uttered different phrases when a pull string attached to a “chatty ring” protruding from her back was pulled. Inside was a low-fidelity phonograph record. Those records could be replaced, giving the doll a wide range of remarks.

Charmin’ Chatty she wasn’t the first talking doll; she actually belonged to a line of highly successful such dolls begun in 1960. Chatty had been the first. Mattel actually trade-marked the word “Chatty.”

I didn’t care about all that; I just knew that I loved her. So when my family moved and, later as an adult I relocated for work, my “friend” always accompanied us – to Mattapan and Sharon in Massachusetts; and once I became an international agricultural consultant, Charmin’ Chatty came with my grownup family to

Ecuador. There, my young sons gave her a place of honor standing her up in their toy box, though she was not always their chosen doll for their pretend play games.

Over the years, I held on to Charmin' Chatty, hoping to pass her on to future grandchildren. But, alas, that plan came to naught recently when I introduced my doll to my daughter-in-law, who politely pronounced Charmin' Chatty as being "scary."

At that point, Charmin' Chatty had been with me 57 years. It was time to say goodbye. Lovingly, I placed her in the garbage. Her eyes were sunken; her hair had aged into frizzy straw. She was destined to go to a doll's after-life, having given me love, companionship, and dreams for a good future.

## **I Love My Mom, But She's a Digital Dork**

**By Anya Oleck**

The funniest holiday memory I have, dating from Hanukkah three or four years ago, was when my mom bought me an iPhone. True, it was a used phone from a Manhattan Apple store – all my mom could afford -- but I was extremely excited when I opened the box! Then I took out the phone.

I couldn't help myself; I collapsed in giggles because what I was holding in my small hand was an enormous iPhone 7 Plus. Confused by my laughter, my mom asked, "Don't you like it?? I got you the 7 Plus! That's the best one, right?" I had to diplomatically point out that the model she'd bought was too big for my hands, never mind my jeans pocket and that the word "plus" referred to the phone's size.

I subsequently traded in that Plus phone for the regular 7. But I still think it was a great present and hopefully a gentle technology lesson for my mom.

## The Christmas That My Mutt on a Mission Outfoxed Me

By Joan Oleck



Gypsy was my childhood love; a big, slobbering English setter with a zest for life unmatched in my experience before or since.

So of course a holiday gift for my beloved pooch was mandatory. But, when one Christmas Eve – I was probably ten -- I came home with a red

rubber ball with a bell inside, to be placed under our tree (yes, we were *that* kind of Jews), I seriously underestimated what a mutt on a mission can achieve.

Carefully, I wrapped the ball. But when I shook it to make sure the bell was working. Gypsy heard that alluring tinkle and instantly knew it was his. “Hide it,” my dad suggested; and I followed his advice, placing the wrapped toy beneath a veritable mountain of family gifts.

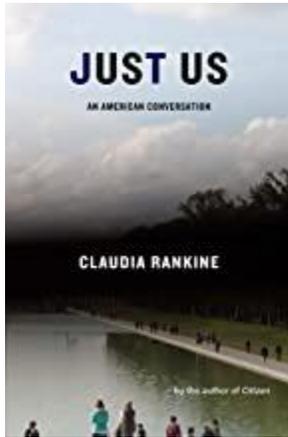
Yet, as I said, I underestimated that dog: The next morning, Christmas, there was Gypsy, happily chewing his toy, the wrapping discarded nearby. And that mountain of gifts? To this day, I still don’t understand how it remained inexplicably and utterly undisturbed.

## Recommended

### Books

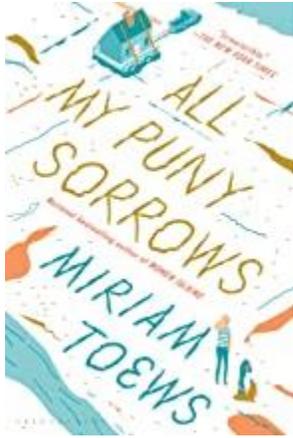
***Just Us: An American Conversation*, by Claudine Rankin (Graywolf Press, September 2020)**

**By Lisa Gelfand**



Claudia Rankine’s book-length poem, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), movingly probed the microaggressions Black Americans face every day. Her new book, *Just Us: An American Conversation*, anchors those ugly incidents in reality, describing Rankine’s racialized encounters with friends and strangers who are unable or unwilling to recognize their own whiteness. Rankine’s title *Just Us* refers to the forms of silencing and condescension unique to Black experience, but it also evokes the tensions inherent to conversations between Blacks and Whites.

Rankine recounts her painful realization that Whites’ “innate advantages” must be acknowledged and be “present inside” even the most intimate relationships -- including her own interracial marriage -- if these bonds are to be authentic. The book’s unusual format of narrative on one page and documentation notes and images on the facing one makes the reading experience more challenging and less fluid. But it is precisely such interruptions of our thinking that Rankine seeks to create. The result is a deep and powerful reflection on the ways we elide the structural role of racism in our human connections.



*All My Puny Sorrows* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019)  
*Women Talking* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020)  
Both by Miriam Toews

By Julie Wittes Schlack

Few novelists meld humor, fully-formed characters, and sometimes devastating insight as well as Canadian author Miriam Toews. [All My Puny Sorrows](#) is a contemporary novel about two loving and devoted sisters wrestling with if and how to satisfy the desire of one of them to end her own life.

[Women Talking](#) is based on a true incident in a Mennonite colony in Bolivia, where from 2005–2009, men in the community routinely drugged and raped women while they slept. Despite both books’ heavy subject matter – or perhaps because of it – the pained laughter they evoke is especially rich and real.

## Streaming

### *Slings and Arrows*

By Julie Wittes Schlack



[Slings and Arrows](#) on Acorn TV (available through Amazon Prime) is rightly considered by critics to be one of the best television shows ever. Each of its seasons revolves around a Canadian Shakespeare Company’s production of a Bard play – *Hamlet* in Season 1, *Macbeth* in Season 2 and

*King Lear* in Season 3. Mordantly funny, brilliantly acted and revelatory of actors at their best and worst, this is the only series I’ve ever watched multiple times. It’s that good.

## Articles – (also submitted by Julie)

*Literary Hub*: Rebecca Solnit on [“The Slow Road to Sudden Change”](#)  
Though the election is behind us, the massive work we need to do has just begun.

*Literary Hub*: [“Dorothea Lange is So Much More Than One Famous Photograph”](#)  
On the unseen work of an American master

## Recipe of the Month

### Russian Tea Cakes (submitted by Joan Oleck)

*Note: These are also called Mexican Wedding Cookies. And the recipes are interchangeable – except for my own personal touch: substituting baked pecans instead of walnuts. Whatever changes you make, these cookies make for an easy crowd favorite at holiday gatherings;*

**Ingredients** (Original recipe yields 36 servings)



1 cup butter  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
6 tablespoons confectioners'  
sugar  
2 cups all-purpose flour  
1 cup chopped, baked pecans  
 $\frac{1}{3}$  cup confectioners' sugar for  
decoration

**Step 1:** Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

**Step 2:** In a medium bowl, cream butter and vanilla until smooth. Combine the 6 tablespoons confectioners' sugar and flour; stir into the butter mixture until just blended. Lay out the pecans on a cookie sheet and bake 5 to 7 minutes until pecans start turning darker brown and fragrant, then add them to the dough. Roll dough into 1 inch balls, place them 2 inches apart on an ungreased cookie sheet.

**Step 3:** Bake for 12 minutes in the preheated oven. When cool, roll in remaining confectioners' sugar. Before serving, dust the cookies with a light covering of confectioner's sugar.

## Committee Reports

**WorkCom** is happy to welcome its newest member, Jean Garcia-Gaithright. We are examining what impact the growth and evolution of our community will have on WorkCom's priorities, mission and aims. When VHC assumes control of the HOA board and the Common House opens, what new tasks and work duties will be needed and how will they be apportioned? How will committees themselves evolve, reorient, or even disappear? – **Jim**

**Memcom** since mid-October has added several new Explorers:

- Bee Jay Baatz (Mary is her buddy),
- Aili, Jamison, and one-year-old Elena Hermann (Jess and Miles are their buddies),
- Joyce Goodlatte (Marna is her buddy),
- Nancy Lowe (Nancy Slocum is her buddy).

Please reach out to get to know them and make them feel welcome. -- **Deborah**

**The Grounds Committee** is in the process of creating planting guidelines for the community in line with our key value of sustainability. We are looking at ways to encourage residents to both learn about and embrace plants (trees, shrubs, grasses, perennials, annuals) that encourage creating a natural habitat for wildlife through the integration of native plants. Currently, part of Grounds consists of two ad hoc groups: the Sustainability Group and the Maintenance Group. We are currently reexamining the connection of these two groups to Grounds and whether they will develop into separate sub-committees. – **Karen**

The **Sustainability Group** has been doing some research into the installation of solar panels on the roof of the common house as well as individual units. We've found that installing solar panels on the common house roof will cost around \$100,000 and may start to generate a net profit after 8-9 years, though that depends on the amount of electricity the common house uses which is hard to estimate. Because of the high upfront cost, we expect that the community will likely need to save up capital reserves for several years before we're able to fund the project. We are also looking into alternative financing options that may reduce the upfront cost.

Unit owners may be interested in installing solar panels on their own roofs. Pedro is making plans to do so on Unit 7. PV Squared, a solar installer based in Greenfield, has estimated the cost at around \$32,000 per unit. If you're interested

in exploring this option for your own roof, write to us at [sustainability@villagehillcohousing.org](mailto:sustainability@villagehillcohousing.org) - if there is enough interest, we will schedule a Q&A on the topic in the coming months. -- **Jess**

**The Common House Committee** continues to pursue its charge of seeking furnishings by donation and purchase (where necessary) that will enable us to use the common house as the center of our community. We continue to review donations before we accept them to be sure they are non-allergenic and safe for use by everyone in our community. We also work to be sensitive and responsive to accessibility issues as we become aware of them. Finally, we continue to work to determine our essential financial needs to accomplish our goals. One challenge for the sub-committee is the uncertainty of the common house's opening date. We expect our work to intensify as Phase III residents begin to move in. -- **Dick**

In preparation for VHC running the HOA board, **FinLeg** is looking into such matters as managing the operating budget, hiring a bookkeeper, and reconciling the values and procedures of Sociocracy with the Massachusetts statutes governing condos.

As reported earlier, the VHC application to allow a lift in the Common House, submitted by Laura Fitch to the state's Architectural Accessibility Board, was rejected. Laura had told us ahead of time that was likely to happen, and she would appeal it. We are waiting to hear from Laura the date of the appeal hearing. The Finance/Legal Committee and a member of IDEA plan to attend. – **Deborah**

**GovCom** is organizing a new cohort to take the six-hour sociocracy training. For each one-hour lesson, you receive short video explanations and are guided through a set of exercises. Participants determine the schedule. About 18 months ago, six members did it together; that was a good size. There's a discount for three or more participants. Please contact GovCom if you're interested.

GovCom is also putting together a proposal for coordinating the transition of responsibility for our HOA to VHC. Through community input, a comprehensive list of hand-over areas will be identified, along with the means for tracking progress and arranging access to the information gathered

## **Save the Dates**

Online Meet and Greet: **Thurs, Dec. 10, 6-7 pm EST**

General Members Meeting: **Sunday, Dec. 13, 5 pm EST**