

A Co-op letter from America



By **David J. Thompson**

President Obama is steeped in the Co-op tradition

PRESIDENT Barack Obama is a resident of Chicago, Illinois. As an adult, his only homes have been in the Hyde Park neighbourhood which is home to the University of Chicago.

The Hyde Park area has all of the elements of other university communities — except it is in a major city. Here's a look at a number of co-ops in Mr Obama's local area.

Artisans 21 is an artist-run co-op in Hyde Park, which is the oldest in Chicago and one of the oldest co-operative galleries in the country. Its 20 or so members provide the co-op with "jewellery, ceramics, wearable textiles, photography, calligraphy, digital art, mosaics, quilting and weaving".

57th Street Books is one of three stores that are part of the Seminary Co-op Bookstore in Chicago. On 57th Street, the Obama family have been co-op members and buying their books since 1986. It is at 57th Street Books that Obama did his first book signing of 'The Audacity of Hope'. Seminary Co-op Bookstore has almost 60,000 members worldwide.

Gamma Alpha Housing Co-operative is a student housing co-operative on University Avenue, which is home to 15 graduate students. The co-op was founded in 1908 and has been co-ed since 1976.

Housing

Global Serve Co-op owns four buildings in the Hyde Park and Woodlawn area and houses 45 people. "We are an inter-faith, inter-cultural, radical-welcoming and peace-building community of students and friends who want to be involved in our neighborhood through volunteer service."

Harper Square Housing Co-operative is a 591 unit housing co-operative built in 1970. Consisting of two 25-floor towers and town homes, it is one of the largest housing co-ops in Chicago. To join the co-op, the share investment is less than \$4,000 and the monthly carrying charges are very low. Because it is such a low-cost co-op, people don't want to leave and so almost half of the residents are now seniors. There is a minimum of six years wait to get into one of the co-op's units. From many of the apartments there are beautiful views overlooking Lake Michigan. The co-op at Harper Square is one of the best kept secrets in Chicago.

The Hyde Park Co-op was one of the great consumer co-ops of America and lasted 76 years until 2008. Regretably, it closed after attempting to operate a major new store as part of efforts to revitalise a nearby neighbourhood. The real-estate deal went bad and the anticipated volume did not arrive. The Hyde Park Co-op is revered for so many of its innovations over its long history. The Obamas were members.

Qumbya Co-op is a student housing co-operative that owns

three buildings, which house about 50 students. The homes are owned by a subsidiary of NASCO (North American Students of Co-operation), a national non-profit group.

Pioneer Co-op is a 21 unit housing co-operative located only a block away from East Rochdale Place in Hyde Park. It was founded in the 1950s by Hyde Park liberal housing activists to fight the restricted covenants being used to prevent blacks from owning homes in Hyde Park. As an Alderman, one of the co-op founders, Leon Despres, became the "conscience" of the Chicago City Council. He was living at the co-op when he died at age 101. In a statement, President Obama said: "Through two decades on the Chicago City Council and a long lifetime of activism, Leon Despres was an indomitable champion for justice and reform. With an incisive mind, rapier wit and unstinting courage, he waged legendary battles against the corruption and discrimination that blighted our city, and he lived every one of his 101 years with purpose and meaning. I have been blessed by his wise counsel and inspired by his example."

Southside Community Federal Credit Union was established in 2003 to provide a community development credit union for the low income residents of the Southside of Chicago. This credit union helps its members avoid the predatory lending practices prevalent in the area. Prior to his presidency, Barack Obama served on a foundation that provided the funding to start the credit union.

United Credit Union was founded in 1930 to assist school teachers. It has grown to 23,000 members and over \$120 million in assets.

On their recently filed 2008 tax returns, the Obamas donated \$25,000 to CARE — the worldwide development organisation with co-op connections. CARE was founded by the Co-operative League of the USA, the precursor to the National Cooperative Business Association. CARE began as Co-operative for Remittances to Europe at the end of the Second World War and was a co-operative of co-operatives and other non-profit organisations serving the people of war-ravaged Europe.

For the numerologists among you, keep in mind that Obama is the 44th President of the USA and the Rochdale Pioneers date from 1844!



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