

The New Deal Cafe

1995 - 2025



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THE NEW DEAL CAFÉ: 1995 - 2025

The idea of a café arose in 1994 – appropriately – from members of the volunteer organization – the GHI Woodlands committee - that help protect and manage the GHI woodland and forest. Don Comis recollects that he, Alan Turnbull, Ray Stevens, Bob Buzzanco were on the tailgate of Bill Phelan’s pickup truck in the woods, after replacing a footbridge and doing trail work, and wished they had a place to go. The only places available were Beijing of Greenbelt, that wasn’t appropriate for muddy forest workers, and Generous Joes that was small and similarly inappropriate. The idea of a café sounded nice. Someone heard that the Mellon Bank had vacated its space and an inquiry was made to Reality 1, Inc. in Roosevelt Center. Real estate agent Leonard Wallace showed the space and the group thought it was great. He agreed to make the space available for an open house so community support could be gauged. Ray Stevens recollected that he was sitting at the house of Alan and Wendy Turnbull discussing the need for small coffee house or café meeting place for people in Greenbelt. There is consensus that it was Wendy who came up with the name New Deal Café, in honor of the Roosevelt Center and Greenbelt. Consistent with Greenbelt’s New Deal ethos, it was to be a member-based cooperative where members would have a voice over the character and direction of the café.

Two years later the Maryland Department of Assessment and Taxation on November 29, 1996 accepted the Article of Incorporation of a non-profit, nonstock corporation entitled the “New Deal Café, Inc.” organized for the purpose of “making, selling, and serving food, drinks, and assorted clothing and other paraphernalia related to the Café in a friendly atmosphere and to present entertainment for the Greenbelt, Maryland community and to celebrate the community spirit and historic traditions of Greenbelt.” The signatures on the articles were Andrew Levin, Terri Rutledge, Sarah McNaull and Steven Bernheisel. The café’s by-laws instructed that café’s should “a) serve as a watering hole or “living room” for the community with a 1930s décor; b) serve light fare; c) be run professionally.”

1994: The First Organizing Committee

The café's first organizing committee, spearheaded by Amy Hasen, met on Saturday, October 22, 1994, when about 40 people sat on the concrete floor of the vacant Mellon Bank to brainstorm on how to open a co-op Café. The bank was in the Roosevelt Center at 113 Centerway – the same place where the Café resides today. Many attendees dressed in 1930s-style clothes that heralded back to Greenbelt's founding days, and a copy of a newly released biography of Eleanor Roosevelt was given to the best-dressed attendee. Plans were made for an open house party to rally larger community support for the café. Pledges were made for coffee and for discounted food from the University of Maryland's food collective and volunteers promised to bring tables, tablecloths, chairs, muffins, and cookies. Musicians promised to play. A call went out for book donations, as the café was envisioned to be a "not-for-profit coffeehouse-bookstore coop." Book contributions were dropped off at 8-G Plateau Place.

The open house on November 5, 1994 exceeded all expectations. Festivities started at 9 pm, and when the doors closed at midnight, hundreds of people passed by, with never less than 20 people mingling in the former bank. As the Greenbelt News Review ("GNR") put it, "the place was packed." Live jazz was played, and muffins, scones, and cheesecake baked by volunteers were passed out, with donations accepted. But the café was still only a concept, as the space was provided only for the day by the Center's landlord, George Chistakosa, who remains so today. Organizers recruited members and a survey was carried out, asking people what they wanted from the café. Over 400 people answered the survey.

A general meeting was held three months later at the Greenbelt Arts Center, where about 50 people discussed how to make the café a reality. A nine-member steering committee was formed that met weekly and was tasked to figure it out, chaired by Amy Hansen. The immediate need was to raise start-up capital. They analyzed area marketing statistics, researched health code requirements, consulted with an architect and developed a financial plan for the first year's operations. In June 1995, 40 people showed up at the Greenbelt Theater and became the founding members of the New Deal Cafe and elected a five-member board of directors. The empty Mellon Bank was the planned venue where the

café would offer, as the GNR put it, “a variety of fine coffees, dessert, and light vegetarian cuisine in an eclectic sit-and-chat atmosphere.” To achieve such informal soirees and culinary delights, however, financial capital had to be secured for renovation and equipment. The volunteers knocked on doors and passed out brochures in an effort to sign up 500 dues-paying members. On Saturdays’ volunteers set up a table with coffee and live music to ask passersby to invest in Greenbelt’s newest cooperative. Membership drives included evening open air music fests, where musicians waited in line to volunteer their talents. One board member explained that joining the café was “contributing to a community-involving business that matches the way Greenbelt lives.” The café was envisioned as place to go where, as the GNR put it, “Greenbelt moms dropping their kids at the pool and Greenbelt ‘honeys’ not quite ready to go home after the weekend movie.”

1995 – 2000: The Café at the Community Center

When the hoped for venue of the Mellon Bank fell through (taken by a collectable shop), the café’s board secured from Greenbelt’s city council permission to use the community center’s dining room and full commercial kitchen facilities on Friday and Saturday evenings. The plan was to provide desserts, live music and poetry reading and stay open till midnight and then to clean up and close at 1 a.m. Rent was set at \$80 per night, and the café began planning for its public opening, ensuring that regulatory requirements were met, insurance was had, and readying the sale of T-shirts and mugs. Gaining recognition for their unfailing efforts to launch the café were Amy Hansen, the café’s first president, Terri Rutledge, the volunteer coordinator, Alex Barnes, treasurer, and Brian York, the merchandise hawk. Diane Whaples, the café’s secretary, was tasked with the challenging job of coordinating all the volunteer efforts. Others with specific skill sets stepped forward, acquiring the café’s permits, creating architectural drawings, and identifying potential food vendors. Amy Hasen wrote a newsletter that was mailed out monthly extoling the need and virtues of café. One board member summed it up: “It’s been like magic, the way people have been so willing to help. It’s exciting.” With the grand opening a month away, a call went out,

asking “anyone with paintings, or other art to exhibit, an instrument to play, a song to sign, or a ballad to recited, here is the opportunity to enrich the community.”

The Grand Opening

The grand opening was on Saturday, December 30, 1995. But wishing to leave nothing to chance, on Friday, the café’s board held a “dry run” where about 100 due-paying members attended. Folk musicians played while members chose from an array of pastries, a chocolate cheesecake, vegetarian chili, sesame noodles and hot and sour soup. Coffee, along with cocoa and hot cider was available. The same fair was held on opening night with well over 100 patrons attending. The consensus was that the café offered a community spirit, where friends met friends and neighbors, met new compatriots, and promised to be a regular place to be on Friday and Saturday nights. Everyone had a good time. One board member commented that he was pleased that the kitchen had not run out of food but said more volunteer food servers were needed. Because the community center needed the rooms on Saturday, café volunteers set up the tables, chairs, utensils, and food services on Friday afternoon, took them down that night, and set them up again on Saturday afternoon until their takedown on Sunday evening. It was exhausting and often chaotic task, week after week. After a few weekends of operations, the café hired a part-time manager to coordinate the effort. He was the café’s sole paid employee. Ensuring enough volunteers was sometimes challenging. When the kitchen got busy and the serving lines became long, it was common that patrons would leave their tables and help to wash dishes or wait tables. There was criticism that the basement rooms of the community center’s bare white walls had an institutional feeling, with the tables too big and the overhead fluorescent lighting glaring down. An “ambiance committee” was established to reconfigure the space.

The result foreshadowed the spatial configuration of today’s café: one room was for musicians and their audience, while the other room was for those who wished to socialize. The harsh glare of the overhead lights was ameliorated by indirect lighting from new lamps and placing candles on the tables. Pictures were hung on the walls, tablecloths

put on the tables, and patrons became accustomed to the large, “family style” tables, which promoted conversation and meeting new people. Deserts, coffee and salads remained the most popular items, soup and chili were on the menu and new items were tried. A survey told that 21 percent of the membership wanted exclusively vegetarian dishes while 32 percent wanted new, non-vegetarian food, and 46 percent were neutral.

Five months after its grand opening, the café’s future looked dim. At a May 11th open board meeting, the board president announced that the primary goal was simply to “stay open.” Financial burdens had grown but membership remained at about 100, not the goal of 500. The café was busy only between the hours of 8 pm to 10 pm, an insufficient time to generate adequate income, so hours were shortened to close at eleven instead of midnight. Nightly fixed costs were about \$150 while average revenue was about \$75 a night. The city council helped out by reducing the rent to \$50 from \$80 nightly. Significantly, after many months of sustained but exhausting efforts to turn an idea into a reality, the board of directors stepped down to allow a new team to chaperon the café’s future. The board admitted it started the café with insufficient capital but didn’t want to lose community enthusiasm by delaying the opening.

The new board members consisted of Terri Rutledge, Andy Levin, Steven Berheisel, and Rueben Reyes. The café manager had resigned to return to school. Through the volunteers’ redoubled efforts and the cost cutting measures, the financial situation improved. The café’s revenues began to approach its costs.

Everyone’s efforts slowly paid off. Coffee and desert offerings were a constant draw and well-know local musicians highlighted the weekends. Public outreach included weekly paid advertisements appearing in the News Review, praising upcoming music guests and the café’s food offerings (homemade muffins were always mentioned). The closing time returned to midnight. Richard McMullin was the café’s first music coordinator, relying on his musical skills to recruit other musicians to play at the café. Performers were paid by tip baskets, placed on each table, just as they are today. A monthly open mike night began, even though there was no actual microphone – folks just signed up at 8 p.m. to sing or tell a story. Artwork was welcomed and local artist Anna Aloí presented Greenbelt’s first public art show featuring nudes. Poetry readings became a regular event. The café broadened its community

activities to include a New Year's Eve party to welcome 1997, hosted special hours for the city's "First Night," and GHI's House and Garden tour, a Halloween show, and a birthday party for Greenbelt's 60th anniversary. Music festivals were sponsored and held in the Roosevelt Center. A number of yearly raucous pie eating contests were sponsored by the café, where the city's mayor, council members, city officials, a local minister, the chief of police raced to see who could eat the most pies, with their hands tied behind their backs, within three minutes. They also had to avoid being hit with a pie in the face.

The Little Engine That Could

Despite its under capitalization, the café stood as "the little engine that could": perseverance, optimism, and the power of self-belief. Volunteer labor embodied the determination that the café's cooperative enterprise would succeed. In 1996, more than sixty volunteers contributed over 2,788 hours of their time to run the café. Following the departure of the part-time manager, the board and other café volunteers managed and staffed the café, oversaw the accounts, and coordinated the volunteers. Between six to ten licensed volunteers managed the kitchen. A volunteer coordinator managed more than 50 volunteers to fill the kitchen's 32 four-hour staff slots per month. When volunteers failed to appear, a quick call for help filled the needs in the kitchen. The weekly volunteer food manager was free to set the menu. The menu expanded to include more than 30 items, with a jaw dropping variety of freshly baked muffins, pies and cakes: cranberry cheesecakes, triple chocolate, carrot and black forest cakes, and a variety of tarts, pastries, and cookies. For those seeking less sugary delights, pasta, fruit, noodle and garden salads, and vegies burgers were offered.

It was inevitable that that exhaustion would set in. The annual meeting for June 1998 recognized the café's persistent financial losses and that the café's original innovators has grown weary. A number of members simply thought the café should close. Volunteer turnover was high but enough persisted to allow operations to continue. The problems echo the discussions and debates that continue to swirl in 2025: the café's poor

visibility, a lack of foot traffic, a changing and multifaceted menu, dietary preferences, and foodstuffs faced problems of spoilage, storage and cost. Some members and patrons had quit because of menu disputes. Repeated fundraising campaigns made many skeptical of the café's management and longevity. The suggested solutions included making the café's environment more cozy, adding background music when bands were not playing, coordinating events with other Greenbelt cooperatives, and offering to cater meals for Community Center events. A new board of directors was elected to reenergize the café.

2000- 2005: The Move to the Front Room of 113 Centerway

Sixteen months later, the café not only survived but gathered sufficient resources and confidence to move from the community center to 113 Centerway in the Roosevelt Center – the café's current location. The new venue was the front room of today's café, as the backroom housed a video store. A two-year contract was signed by Pat Brent, the café's president, with George Christakos, owner of the building, who gave the café two months free rent as renovations were undertaken. Volunteers undertook the physical rehabilitation of the space. The immediate work was for volunteers to rip up the rug and the wall shelving's of the former collectable shop, and repaint and repair the walls. The empty space was filled with a couch, and a few chairs and tables were added, and space was made for children to play. A low, six-inch stage was constructed on the west side of the room where musicians played. On the east side of the room was a counter and a makeshift kitchen but no major appliances. On April 15, 2000, the front room opened, serving breakfast, lunch and dinner and evening music. The café also lent its space to social activities, including a rummage sale and a creative writing group. Because the space was cramped, annual membership "stone soup" gatherings were held at Buddy Attick Park. The café's relocation was met with celebration and pride but it entailed a startling large degree of hubris; as Pat Brent later admitted to the GNR, the café had little money for renovations or capital to purchase equipment.

The café now had a place of its own, where the vision of a community living room could be a reality. Music events continued to be led by Richard McMullin. Music performances were largely limited to weekends and often acoustic. The setting during these years was a lowkey a coffee house as originally envisioned by the founders in 1995, where friends and family could meet could meet as equals, a “Third Place,” separate from work or home. A 2002 Mother Jones Magazine article on Greenbelt called New Deal Cafe, “a homely (as in full of mismatched, threadbare sofas and chairs, and a floor that could use a good scrubbing) coffeehouse ... People are chatting amiably or playing chess or reading the newspaper, while a folksinger from New York is doing a sound check. “

“A Completely Different Ball-Game”

The move to the Roosevelt Center came at a cost: rent was \$1,800 monthly and while fundraising netted close to \$16,000, the café’s debts weighted in at about \$40,000. Ms. Rutledge often found herself “loaning” her paycheck to the café. It was kept afloat by volunteer members, organizations providing no-charge services, and some of the paid staff forgoing cashing in their pay checks. A volunteer accountant negotiated a payment plan of back taxes with the IRS and Maryland tax authorities. By January 2001, Board member Wendy Turnbull explained that moving to the Center “is a completely different ball-game... it’s a full-time job. The work when we were at the Community Center was almost minimal, compared to now. We’re running a small business.” Board member Pat Brent opined that “I’m not sure that this can operate as a co-op. You’ve got to throw in your whole body and soul. The community is wonderful, but it’s hard to fill those huge blocks of time. We get burnt out.”

But the little engine that could chugged on and the December 2001 Manager’s Report wrote that “business has grown substantially” and that “people enjoy and value the café as an integral part of Greenbelt.” Sales from 2000 to 2001 increased by 44 percent. Expenses were met, despite owing tens of thousands of dollars, and at least six paid employees. Volunteers remained the café’s operational backbone. Live entertainment and special events

were the most profitable. The report ended as did many future reports: we need to “increase our profits immediately because the cafe has essentially no cash reserves and its operating with a near-zero profit margin.”

In May 2002 the café began thinking about acquiring a beer and wine license as a way to boost sales and profits. The idea was not supported by all, as some viewed it as moving away from a family-orientated community living room to a commercial “pub” setting. In 1996, the Greenbelt city council had rejected a proposal that alcohol be served at the cash strapped community center, fearing public drunkenness. Now, six years later, the café, to show community support to the county’s liquor licensing board, sought Greenbelt’s city council’s endorsement. The ask resulted in a spirited debate among council members. The café quickly presented a petition signed by nearly 250 Greenbelters to show community support. The council moved to support the license by a 3 to 2 vote and by October the license was granted. A few years later, the council approved outdoor sales of wine and beer, within the confines of the café’s perimeter. On Friday nights, Connie Davis served the beer and wine (with the help of her own “Rabbit” wine opener), when she wasn’t washing dishes.

Wine and beer sales produced a modest increase in income as did taking Visa and Mastercard charge cards. The Friends of the New Deal Café Arts (FONDCA) was established October 2002 as a 501(c)(3) organization to support the visual, performing and literary arts presented at the café. FONDCA continues to play a significant financial and artistic role in the café’s activities. [See Appendix A on FONDCA].

Most remarkable was that for eight years, from 2000 to 2008, the café did not have a commercial kitchen. Cooking was limited to the east side of the front room, and consisted of a microwave, a toaster oven, a crockpot, and a hotplate. Hot food orders were sent to volunteer cooks in the community center’s commercial kitchen and “runners” would push a food laden cart back to patrons in the café. Sometimes meals would be driven back and forth in a car. Hot meals then would be warmed up in the microwave. Because there was no dishwasher, paper plates were used. The menu was limited: breakfast eggs cooked on the hotplate, salads, and grilled sandwiches, including the famed Bella-Rella: mozzarella cheese and a portabella mushroom on a sourdough bread, cooked on a George Foreman grill. Another favorite was the vegan chili perfected in the crockpot. Debra Taylor, the chef at the

community center's kitchen, whipped up lasagna and other hot casseroles. Volunteers offered a constant supply of muffins and cookies. The record is unclear how this all passed health regulators.

2005 - The Café Doubles Its Size by Taking the Back Room

By fall of 2004, the café was offering entertainment six days a week and the place was packed! Musicians played on a low platform on side wall while the food service was on the opposite side of the room, and in between, often elbow to elbow, were dancers and diners. The community's enthusiastic response to the new venue, coupled with increasing revenue, sparked such confidence that when the video store vacated the back room in 2005, the café grabbed it. The physical renovation to break through the separation wall was unexpectedly challenging as the Melon Bank was protected by a reinforced concrete ceiling, and a metal wall separated the two rooms, both of which had to be broken through.

The expansion was a boon to business and broadened the sense that the café was the community's living room. Evening musical events moved to the back room and friends, families and various social groups met in the front room. In 1988, the famed Pumpkin Walk began where children and their parents carved dozens of pumpkins and walked through the Greenbelt forest. It rained heavily one Halloween, and the back room opened its doors so the kids could do their work: it was said pumpkin carving splattered everywhere. Everyone was welcome at the café. In 2005 Frank DeBarnardo organized and celebrated at the café the city's first Pride month, choosing the name "You can't spell Greenbelt without GBLT." Fifteen people showed up and Ellen Siegel, the kitchen manager, welcomed them with a special menu item: a guacamole BLT sandwich (GBLT).

But just as the café's future was looking up, 2007 saw the beginning of a nationwide economic crisis that culminated in the global financial crisis of 2008. It pushed the café further into financial debt. In April 2007, the cafe announced that if the café could not pay its overdue and pending bills, it may have to close. Members rose to the occasion in the café's support. Karen Wallace volunteered to overhaul the café's nascent web-site, first coding the

site by hand and eventually adopting WordPress. Eighteen years later, Karen continues to be the café's web master, creating its content, posting all non-calendar events, and assuring the emails are forward to board members. It's a weekly chore that keeps the community informed today. Another group of individuals that coalesced into action and remains part of the café today is Reel and Meal. They came together to join the community over films and meals and financially support the café. Reel and Meal volunteers cooked and served meals while the films played, and the money raised went directly to help pay the café's rent. For the past 18 years, Reel and Meal have hosted a documentary film every third Monday of the month. [See Appendix B on Reel and Meal].

But debt still bore down on the café. So acute was the financial peril, that by September of 2007, the board presented to membership the options to declare bankruptcy to pay off about \$100,000 in debts; create corporations where individuals would purchase stock shares to pay off the debt; or, sell the business to a private business. At a special meeting, members rejected the idea of closing the café and pledged \$15,000 in loans to the café, reduce the hours of operation, and FONDCA applied tax deductible donations to the café's rent and utilities bills.

Slowly, the café witnessed a positive cash flow and rent and payroll were covered. Overdue utility bills were paid on instalment plans. Belt tightening included the board dropping its Directors and Liability insurance to save on the premium costs, operating hours were shortened, and lunches were eliminated for Thursdays and Fridays. Membership loans and donations had plugged the financial shortfalls. All this proved the community's mettle to keep the café alive, but just how long the café could stave off creditors was unnerving. Generous donors were providing financial breathing room but that couldn't last forever. The fall of 2008 brought the acknowledgement that the café's survival required a professional, full-time restaurant manager. Most of all, the café needed a real commercial kitchen. A search committee was formed to find a restaurateur.

The decision to seek a private vendor for the kitchen marked a decisive turning point in the café's history. For the first time in the café's nearly 20-year history, membership agreed to divest membership control of its restaurant operations and turn it over to a private party. It was an admission that the café co-op could not successfully be run solely by a

volunteer board of directors who had no or minimal restaurant experience and often had full-time jobs elsewhere. From thereon in, the board and its members would have dominion over the music and arts events while kitchen management, menus and the café's day-to-day operations were the providence of a private, profit-making business. It was a joint enterprise, working together, but with one side obligated to continue the ideal of the community living room, while the newcomer was a business entrepreneur seeking financial success. Just how the two parties negotiated these two competing interests shaped the contours of the café's history ever since.

2008-2016: Chef Karim Kmaiha, the Café's First Private Vendor

In 2008, Peter May, the café's president, invited Karim Kmaiha to the café to see if he'd consider becoming the café's vendor. Karim heralded from Lebanon and it just so happened that he came on the night that Middle Eastern music and dance (Raqs Sharqi or belly dance) were featured. The performance and the warm welcome he received clicked him to become the café's first restaurant vendor. He was an executive chef at Lebanese Taverna, a restaurant in the metropolitan area, and his wife Maria Almeida, originally from Portugal, was formerly a head chef for the Brazilian embassy in Norway. Karim worked fast to pull the café out of its tailspin. The immediate need was a commercial kitchen, so Karim helped fund its creation. Rodney Roberts, who was then, and remains, a Greenbelt city councilperson, spearheaded the efforts. He, with other volunteers including Andy Carruthers, Joe Harris, Peter May, and Bill Wilkerson installed a grill, a griddle, four commercial sinks, and smaller appliances. Roberts reconfigured walls and ceilings and installed a necessary fire suppression hood over the newly purchased secondhand commercial stove. The kitchen renovation costs that normally would amount to over \$100,000 totaled about \$30,000 due to volunteer labor and purchasing secondhand equipment. The bathroom floors were tiled. Frank Gervasi built the bar in the back room for free and the \$800 for materials was paid through a fundraiser. Someone purchased a kegerator (it keeps the beer keg cold) in exchange for free beer. Patio fencing permitted

outside service. The galvanized steel pipe table that sits in the back of the café is Frank's handiwork too. Members donated a second kitchen freezer and \$4,000 worth of new chairs.

In March, Karim and Maria threw a dinner for the community, showcasing a mixture of Mediterranean, Middle Eastern Portuguese and Brazilian options. The café's Middle Eastern offering attracted a wide swath of new patrons as did the music performances and evening events.

Within the year, however, a contract dispute between Karim and the café erupted that grew increasingly acrimonious. It was centered on the extent to which Karim was obliged to pay the café's past debt, when he was also obliged to pay the rent and utilities. Honest disagreements existed. Bookkeeping on both sides was lackadaisical. Compromises were sought. Lawyers got involved. Negotiations failed and in a startling move, in May 2009 the café's board, at the direction of its lawyer, summarily locked the café's doors, prohibiting Chef Karim from entering. The act split the membership and about 40 people appeared for an impromptu meeting in front of the closed doors of the café. A vigorous on-line campaign called for its re-opening. Some called for the board's resignation. While negotiations between the parties continued, the café reopened with volunteer help and a supply of pizzas from Generous George. An emergency meeting was held where members introduced a six-point motion that sought to resolve the impasse; however, when word got out that the parties were nearing a settlement, the motion was withdrawn by a vote of 30 to 28. That it passed by only two votes underscored how hotly contested was the dispute. Shortly thereafter, a new contract was signed that reduced Karim's fees to the café, waived some of his debt and granted the café the right to bar's proceeds. Karim returned to the kitchen and meals and events resumed. Born out of this clash was the audit committee, tasked with monitoring the café's financial and budgetary dealings and adherence to the café's bylaws. Its founding members were Ed James, Dorian Winterfeld and Michael Hartman.

In the following years, the café emerged as a center place of Greenbelt activity. The café as a music venue had gained prominence first under the leadership Richard McMillin and then Joe Harris, who expanded musical events from weekends to weeknights. The musical repertoire was broadened from acoustic folk music to include jazz, blues, rock and Americana. Groups that played two or three times a month now saw their appearance

reduced, as new musical groups sought to play at the café. An open kid's mic was added on Saturday. Joe also oversaw the bar, slinging beer and wine and teaching volunteers to do likewise.

In January 2011 Amethyst Dwyer became the music director and, based on the foundation McMullin and Harris had built, her 10 year tenure witnessed an expansion of well-known music performers. One reason for that was Amethyst's tough sale on convincing patrons to tip the musicians generously. Some musicians quietly called the café the "raw deal" as many left with little in their pockets after a hard night of performing. Amethyst and staff members aggressively pushed the tip jars, with great success. And as word got out that the tips were worthwhile, more recognized bands came to the café. Grateful Dead cover bands were a frequent performer, leading Tom Constanten, a keyboardist who played with the Grateful Dead, for which he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, to play a 2012 solo piano performance at the café. Stary Olsa, a Belarus band, dressed in medieval folk dress and blended traditional Eastern European folk music with classic rock, twice played at the café. One of the most memorable events was not a musical performer but when the wildly psychedelic colored Further Bus, Ken Kesey's iconic bus, visited the cafe in 2014, as part of his son's 50th Anniversary Further Bus Tour. The bus featured prominently in Tom Wolfe's 1968 book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and parked in the Roosevelt Center's parking lot.

In the fall of 2016, financial disagreements arose between the café and Chef Karim, causing the termination of his contract and him removing the kitchen appliances and equipment that he had purchased in the prior eight years. A lottery win in October 2016 at the nearby Center Way Mini Mart gave him and his wife some startup money for their own restaurant. He opened the Ceders of Lebanon, a stone throw's away from the café, two years later.

2016 – 2018: The Return of an All-Volunteer Café

Karim's departure caused the kitchen to be closed for four weeks as it acquired new equipment. For the next 17 months, the café self-managed the kitchen's operations. Someone

observed this period was like building an airplane after it had taken off and is already in flight. The first kitchen manager left after about two months on the job. Jeremy Ehrenreich and Lisa Brodsky followed, overseeing food purchases, prep work, menu items, and whipping up from scratch homemade desserts. Cooks came and went. Finally, Carrie Megginson, an experienced chef with a business background, was hired to manage the staff and to create and cook various menu items. A light breakfast and lunch were offered, a Sunday brunch and evening dinners. Musical events continued unabated. Amethyst ran the bar. But all the café's business demands, such as paying the rent and utilities, federal and state taxes, and administrative duties were the responsibility of the café. Profits began to lag. A fundraising call went out and \$16,000 was donated in one month. But by April 2018 the café confessed it did not have the capacity to manage all the business operations and make a profit. The café owed \$200,000 to members and banks for purchase of restaurant equipment and materials. Its doors remained open on loans and gifts. Efforts began to find a private vendor.

2018 - 2020: D.C. Vegan

In April, 2018, D.C. Vegan Catering, a local business, took over the kitchen under a three year contract to offer "plant-based Italian/American comfort food" and its catering business. The café kept control over the bar and music. The kitchen was briefly closed for renovations and Generous Joes and Beijing of Greenbelt offered its services in the interim. Community support for the transition, and the effort to reduce the café's debt, was witnessed by the \$16,000 that was donated in June. The restaurant started strong and vibrant evening music performances supported the café's evening business. Raul Baptiste, who had been working at the café since 2017, joined the staff. But Vegan soon found itself struggling, due in part to the limited clientele for vegan meals, a changing menu, and poor morning customer demand. Weekend brunches underperformed so were cut. Their proposal to open from 5 p.m. on weekdays and 11 am on weekends was met with vigorous protests from membership. The result was the initiation of "Bring Your Own Café" – also known as the "Community Living Room"-- where on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays the restaurant

closed but patrons could bring their own food and drinks to the front room and use the free wi-fi until late afternoon when restaurant and bar services resumed.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the January 2020 treasurer report showed the café was in the black, with \$45,000 in the bank and about \$15,000 in outstanding bills. The income was derived from donations and strong wine and beer sales, driven by nightly musical performances. Amethyst Dwyer rallied stellar musicians to the café, winning in 2020 on the café's behalf the D.C. City Paper Readers' Choice award: 1st place Best Place to Experience Local Music, 3rd Best Music Venue, and 3rd Best Place for Dinner and Live Music

The Covid pandemic brought the café to a stop. Food service ceased, the bar closed, and in-person music events cancelled. Eventually, D.C. Vegan offered contactless pickup and delivery for four hours from Tuesday to Sunday, but the bar remained closed, and monthly expenses amounting to \$7,000 continued to pile up. By July 2020, wine and beer sales were permitted outside but live music was still prohibited. So once again, the café's members and the community rallied in support. The music group ilyAIMY performed virtually for a fundraising concert. Joe Harris continued to host monthly Open Mic events by zoom. Each event typically hosted two artists – musicians or poets – followed by a question-and-answer period. In a time of isolation, the event helped keep the community connected to one another and to the cafe.

In September 2020 Arlene Kaminsky's effort to recruit volunteers and donors for an auction netted more than \$14,000 in sales. An auction usually takes nine months of planning but she put it all together in a few. But the Covid closure continued to impose financial hardships and in November 2020 the café ended its relationship with D.C. Vegan. The café closed on December 1st, the month it celebrated its 25th anniversary, and a search for a new food vendor began.

2020 – 2021: On the Road Again

The café's closure offered a unique opportunity for renovation and improvement. Former board member Nancy Melandry spear headed the effort that renovated the original

terrazzo floors, replaced the ceiling tiles with new acoustic tiles, replaced and upgraded the ceiling lights, installed track lighting, and repaired the walls and refinished the bar. Scott Stark put together the current sound system and stage lighting and Frank Gervarci built JBL speaker cabinets that are now mothballed in the basement. It cost about \$25,000 and was funded largely through Covid-related government loans and grants. At the same time, about \$300 a week was raised by selling the wine and beer stock at a 50 percent discount. The search for a vendor continued, with input from a membership survey that reported the wish for wholesome, varied food at affordable prices that would support a welcoming community living room. The search committee reviewed about 70 applicants and held numerous interviews but no one candidate was agreed upon. In the end, a neighbor was chosen to be the café's next vendor.

2021-2024: Dan Gillotte and the Co-op Supermarket

In June 2021, the café and Greenbelt Co-op Supermarket and Pharmacy (formally known as the Greenbelt Consumer Cooperative – GCC) announced that the GCC would take over the café's restaurant and bar management while the café would continue to operate the music and arts events. Dan Gillotte, general manager of the GCC, had 20 years of leading food co-ops. He would now have two hats, managing both co-ops. The café's influence over the restaurant and bar operations was limited to advice, membership feedback and suggestions. With Covid restrictions now lifted, the café slowly opened with a menu of coffee, smoothies and bagels in the morning and daytime hours. By October, the bar reopened, music was back, and an evening menu offered. Patrons were required to show an updated Covid vaccination cards to be let in the back room. Raul Baptiste, left D.C. Vegan's new location in D.C., and returned to the café as a supervisor and soon, expanded menu items were offered. Menu items expanded to include breakfast sandwiches, pastries, in the morning and soups in the afternoon and baked or fried chicken, vegan lasagna and salmon in the evening. Amethyst Dwyer announced her retirement on November 2021, after having served a hardy 10 years as the café's music director. Caitlin Gompf was hired as the new music coordinator three months later.

These efforts met with success, as in 2022, the café was awarded first place in the Washington City's Paper's Best Place to Experience Local Music and Best Place to Have Dinner with Live Music and third place in Best Jazz/Blues Venue and Best Music Venue. Community groups continued to rely on the café. A group calling itself The Wigglers was formed to divert the café's food waste and create vermicompost. The return of the Jazz Festival in the Roosevelt Center boosted sales, followed by the café hosting the Crazy Quilt Music Festival that entailed an eclectic array of drums, folk, bluegrass, blues, world, brass party grooves and classic rock. The Reel and Meal film program reappeared as did the Utopia Film Festival. Dan Gillotte brought Honk! Situation to Greenbelt and his merry band delighted the crowds at numerous festivals. The Open Mic event – that began in the café's community center days – continued to bring in business, as did other evening events. The Comptroller of Maryland Peter Franchot presented the café with an award in recognition from its beginning as a vague idea in 1994 to becoming a premier music and art venue.

Fractured Atlas, a charity that acts as a fiscal agent for charitable donations to nonprofit arts groups, was retained, making the café eligible to receive grants and donations. Volunteers formed a grants committee to develop grant proposals. FONDCA continued to raise money on behalf of the café. Still, the café' debt remained deep.

The aftermath of Covid continued to dampen business, as restaurants nationwide faced labor shortages and high food costs while consumers continued to rely on takeout food and delivery as they watched their streaming services at home. A surge of the Omicron virus in Maryland saw a drop in business and music events were cancelled for a while. The effects of Covid remain today. As of February 2024, the National Restaurant Association found that Maryland's restaurant employment was still 9% below pre-pandemic levels, one of the slowest recovery rates in the nation.

This roiling economy exacerbated nascent tensions between the GCC and the café. The rationale for the merger that rested on the expectation of mutual financial benefit began to fray. The café had been in dire economic straits and agreed that in return for turning over the café's restaurant and bar operations to the GCC, the café would receive a share of the expected profits GCC would make. The GCC was clearly the financially dominate partner; the café stood as a new market to which it could sell its foodstuffs. The GCC grocery store

possessed, as the GNR explained, “significant buying power for ingredients and disposables that results in discounts far beyond the scale of those accessible” to the café. It was anticipated that the GCC’S lower purchasing costs would result in the sale of more lower-cost menu items at the café and the grocery store. Sales also would be helped by the grocery store’s refrigeration capacity, an amenity the café lacked. The GCC’s access to the café’s fully equipped commercial kitchen, which the GCC lacked, promised to expand the GCC’s offerings of prepared foods and carryout meals. At the heart of the agreement was for GCC to pay the café’s rent and utilities, the café’s largest financial burden, from the proceeds from the café’s food and beverage sales.

The café’s costs were directly related to its music program: licensing fees, band meals, the music coordinator’s salary, the sound technicians’ salaries, taxes, and debt service. These costs were to be paid from the profit-sharing arrangement. But the GCC found itself losing money and saw paying the café’s costs as the primary cause of its deficit. There was no profit-sharing, so the café was relying on donations, grants and fundraising its expenses. An October 2023 “Masquer-Aid” fundraiser for the café brought in \$27,000. Yet as impressive as that effort was, it did not cover the café’s expenses, and the café was eating through its financial reserves. In April 2023, the contract was renegotiated where the GCC continued to run food and beverage operations, but the café would pay the rent and utilities. It was later agreed that the café would receive a four percent surcharge on the café’s sales. The new terms also included a 90-day termination clause that allowed either party to exit the contract. The café’s financial situation grew increasingly untenable, and the café terminated the contract and a search committee for a new vendor began.

2024 – to the Present: Kenny Hillard

Kenny Hillard represented the most dramatic change in the café’s history. In less than eight months, he had transformed a venue whose front room had the ambiance of a brightly lit “rec room” into a comfortable and relaxing lounge, topped off with new, appetizing foods. The front room was repainted and the back wall was wallpapered in a distinctive palsy

pattern. Within weeks, the back room was remade into a distinctive music venue. The walls were painted black, and some fixtures were added. The café's status of a coffee house was eclipsed by that of a restaurant.

The terms of Kenny's contract were like all three prior vendors: he was responsible for rent and utilities, staffing, and food and bar supplies and would reap all the benefits of food and beverage sales. The café would receive a four percent surcharge on all sales. Business interests pushed out some comforting but now ill-fitting activities, such as the front room's child area and the chess club. The introduction of large television monitors in the front and back rooms was startlingly to many patrons, prompting Kenny's assurance that the café would not become a sports bar. Membership opinion of the change ranged from discontent alienation to joyous embracement. Members applauded the new menu items, but some were taken aback by the higher food and drink prices. It was a time of adjustment. Yet Kenny's Kale, the succulent salmon, the rosemary lamb chops, and those toasty tatter tots kept bringing customers back. As did the always smiling face of Renea, the bartender. Music events have always kept the café thriving, and Liz Spring's hire in January 2024 to be the music coordinator, continued the energy. A member of the Built 4 Comfort band, her knowledge of the regional music scene, matched with her aggressive social media advertising, continued the café's award-winning music programs.

Having started 30 years ago with weekend presentations of acoustic guitars and vocals at the community center, the café currently hosts music events seven nights a week, including some afternoons. Each performance often brings in a separate following, allowing the café to serve a diverse audience. The café today also hosts, in addition to its regular Thursday to Sunday night band performances, the Reel and Meal, ASL Brunch, live band karaoke, the pub quiz, Eleanor's New Deal Cabaret, French conversation group, the Drum Circle, non-fiction book club, open mic, poetry readings, Camp Fire sessions, Saturday's Jazz Jam, "Name that Tune," a clothing swap, the Utopian Film festival, Grateful Sunday, Fez Tones, and most recently, the Greenbelt Resistance Network. This assortment of groups and interests have found a welcoming space in the café's living room. And that is the way it's been for the past 30 years.

What the Future May Hold

In 2025, with the dramatic downsizing of the federal government and persistent inflation, the café may face economic challenges like what it faced in 2008 recession and during Covid dislocations. The not-always-compatible interests of the vendor and the café's membership will have to negotiate how both can survive in the coming years. At the heart of the café's existence has been its members and their fundamental commitment to see the café survive. As a financial enterprise, the café ought not to exist. From 1995 to the present, the café has confronted near bankruptcy triggering financial debt, but year after year, its members have rallied to save it, by volunteering their labor and money. On behalf of the New Deal Café, members have taken out home mortgages; maxed out their credit cards; provided tens of thousands of dollars of gifts and loans; and agreed to be the sole signatory on the Café's \$100,000+ Small Business Administration loan. During one fundraiser, Peter May said an elderly woman he never saw before put a \$100 bill in his hand, urging him to keep the café going. When the café was seeking funds to pay for the material to build the bar, another stranger gave him \$220.20 (he said he was a mathematics professor and liked the number two). Likewise, for 30 years, dozens and dozens of members have volunteered their time to serve on the board that demanded exhausting hours of debate and café management, while many, many others volunteered their time to join the many committees that keep the café running.

This readiness to volunteer was part of a culture that arose during FDR's New Deal social programs. It engendered the post-World War II working class ethos where the profit-making was eschewed for co-operative businesses, decision making was a collective effort where everyone had an equal voice, and volunteerism was the unifying principle for Greenbelt's numerous social groups. The café's spontaneous founding by a gathering of Greenbelters was "how people in Greenbelt approach everything," explained historian Cathy Knepper, author of *Greenbelt, Maryland: A Living Legacy of the New Deal*. "When they see a problem or want to start something new, they call a meeting and they organize. The remarkable thing is that they've kept it up for more than 60 years," explain Knepper to *Mother Jones* magazine in 2002. It's now been going on for more than 80 years.

But the willingness to organize for the café was also a deep, often personal, commitment to the ideal of community. Members repeatedly admit they support the café because they love it. The move from the community center to the front room, and then then the back room, was based on “blind hope.” The café’s future success is based on the dedicated belief that it will continue. The café is a vital social space to share stories, experiences, thoughts, hopes, sadness and happiness. A place to share a meal, a song and a dance, a drink, and maybe get a little tipsy. It’s become a home.

Appendix A

FONDCA History

Friends of New Deal Café Arts (FONDCA) was started in March 2003 by Barbara Simon, Ray Stevens, and Richard McMullin. It is a non-profit 501 (c) (3), non-stock corporation whose mission is to provide financial and other support for the performing arts, visual arts, and cultural activities at the New Deal Café, in Roosevelt Center, and in the surrounding community.

The vision of FONDCA is to help create a vibrant center for the arts and for the community in Roosevelt Center in cooperation with government entities and with other arts and community organizations. This vision is manifested is across artistic disciplines. FONDCA sponsors the visual arts exhibit space (the Barbara Simon Gallery) at New Deal Café, working with an art coordinator to schedule exhibitions and hosting artist receptions. It sponsors poetry readings and other literary events at New Deal Café and maintains the Poetry Moment Box outside the café. Finally, it supports the music program at the café by providing funds for lights, speakers, monitors, and hardware for equipment repair, as well as carpeting for the stage. FONDCA has also provided monies toward licensing and other fees associated with the music program.

In addition to these activities inside New Deal Café, FONDCA has helped sponsor the Jazz Festival and the Greenbelt Blues Festival, both of which are in their 22nd year, as well as the Crazy Quilt Festival, which was held annually for 20 years. These festivals take place in Roosevelt Center during the summer and fall.

FONDCA is able to carry out these activities thanks to donations from supporters in the Greenbelt community as well as grants from the City of Greenbelt, Greenbelt Community Foundation, and Prince George's County Council.

Appendix B

Reel and Meal History

Helping the Café Survive and Engaging the Community on Pressing Issues
Susan Barnett and Donna Hoffmeister

The New Deal Café is best known for its music scene—that’s really what put it on the map. But for the past 18 years, it’s also been home to something a little different: the Reel and Meal series. Every third Monday since September 2007, the Café has hosted documentary films or theatre performances that dig into issues of social justice, the environment, and animal rights. Most evenings feature a guest speaker, a lively group discussion, and concrete action steps for the audience.

The film series has covered an impressive range of topics. Some have taken on big challenges like the climate crisis, civil rights, immigration, income inequality, and gun safety. The focus has often extended beyond the U.S., highlighting struggles in Afghanistan, Israel, Iran, India, South America, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and the Philippines. Others have celebrated the beauty of our national parks, traced the history of the Greenbelt News Review, or brought lighthearted fun with *Ernest Borgnine’s Road Trip*. Music lovers have enjoyed films honoring folk legends like Faith Petric, Ola Belle Reed, and Pete Seeger. And in one memorable screening, the spotlight turned to psilocybin—a naturally occurring psychedelic mushroom with a fascinating cultural and scientific story.

So how did it all begin? Back in the summer of 2007, a small group of volunteers met at the Café with two goals: bring the community together over films, meals, and conversation, and help keep the New Deal’s doors open during that rocky economic time. The very first screening, “The Power of Community,” couldn’t have been a more fitting start. During the first year, volunteers cooked and served meals; the money raised went directly to the president of the New Deal Café Board of Directors, Peter May, who immediately used it to pay the café’s rent—literally keeping the Café’s doors open. Fueled by a strong sense of

community, the committee poured their energy into making sure the community's living room would last and grow.

In those first years, volunteers like Susan Barnett, Maggie Cahallan, Lucy Duff, Donna Hoffmeister, Steve Kane, Cam MacQueen, Jean Newcomb, Barbara Stevens, and Deborah Taylor kept things running. Local groups such as Beaverdam Creek Watershed Watch Group, CHEARS, Greenbelt Climate Action Network, Global Consciousness Press, the Green Man Festival, and Prince George's Peace and Justice Coalition got behind the effort, too. Later, Green Vegan Networking joined in.

Over the years, food managers have changed and the "Meal" part of Reel and Meal has taken different forms—buffet style, volunteer-prepared meals with proceeds donated back to the Café (Dec. 2017-Dec. 2018) and more recently restaurant-style ordering. No matter the setup, the food has always been part of the experience. From the start, the goal was to serve healthy, plant-based meals that aligned with the program's focus on social justice, the environment, and animal rights.

Today, Reel and Meal is still going strong. It's now a joint effort of Beaverdam Creek Watershed Watch Group (BCWWG), Prince George's Peace and Justice Coalition, and the Utopia Film Festival, often joined by other groups like the Greenbelt Bahá'í community. The audience changes from month to month depending on the topic. During COVID the screenings were virtual from April 2020 through October 2021. Since then, the program has been hybrid—offering both in-person and virtual attendance. Over the years, Reel and Meal has offered a meaningful 'pay it forward' opportunity—raising funds for the causes featured in the films as well as for the community groups that sponsored them. Each screening introduces new people to the Café and keeps alive the spirit of community that started the whole thing back in 2007.

Rex Wingerter. The materials for this story were derived from the Greenbelt News Review, a true gem of Greenbelt, and the monthly minutes and reports of the Café's Board of Directors meetings from 2001 to the present. Several of the café's participants agreed to personal interviews that gave insight and meaning to this narrative. Any mistakes, misjudgments or other blunders are wholly mine.