Meet Katie Novak, Outreach Manager for Green Top Grocery food co-op in Bloomington, Illinois.

I sat down with Katie last week to ask her one very tough question. “What is a food co-op?”

According to Katie, that question is one of Green Top Grocery’s biggest challenges, as food co-ops are a relatively new idea in the Midwest and not widely understood by the general public. So Katie lays out the basics: A Food Co-op is community-owned grocery store supporting local farmers and the local economy by sourcing primarily locally grown foods from surrounding producers. It creates good jobs that pay fair wages, puts a focus on healthy people and a healthy environment, and keeps money in the community. What’s not to love about that? Currently the store is still in phase one of their development plan: Organization. There are now 330 owners and a Board of Directors in place, but 500 owners are needed to move forward to the next stage, which will consist of financing and site development decisions that will be discussed and voted on by the owners. The final stage will consist of construction and opening preparations.

Katie explains that Green Top Grocery has been in the works for almost two years now. Originally, it was Elaine Sebald, a resident of Normal who organized the Downtown Bloomington Farmer’s Market for years, who got the ball rolling. During her tenure working on the Market, she saw that the farmers needed a more permanent place to sell their produce and make a living. After visiting the thriving Common Ground Food Co-op in Urbana, Illinois, she decided that a cooperative grocery store (co-op) in Bloomington-Normal was exactly what farmers — and consumers — needed, and the Green Top Grocery idea was born.

So how did get Katie get involved with Green Top Grocery?

A Bloomington native, Katie was always interested in local food, but it wasn’t until working in her sister’s non-profit restaurant in Colorado that she realized how food could change lives and that she wanted to be a part of that change.
The restaurant, one of the first non-profit restaurants in the United States, functions as you might expect any normal restaurant to function. It provides fresh, wholesome locally sourced meals to everyone that walks through the door, with the exception being that there is no cash register. You can pay for your meal through a donation of whatever you are able or willing to give, or alternatively, you can volunteer to work at the restaurant in exchange for your food. In that way, literally everyone can afford to have a healthy meal.

“I was helping out with my sister’s non-profit restaurant, called SAME — So All May Eat— when my sister pointed out a man who was working there. I didn’t recognize him, but then my sister reminded me that he had come in a month or so ago. He looked completely different from the bedraggled person I remembered before, and it was then that I realized how much of an impact a simple, healthy meal could have on someone’s life. When I came back to Bloomington, I knew I wanted to continue to help people through food.”

And that’s when Katie found Green Top Grocery, and she’s been working hard to make the Green Top Grocery dream a reality ever since.

“Green top Grocery is a great organization,” says Katie, “and we need more owners to keep moving forward.” Founding Owners, the first 500 to purchase their ownerships, will play a direct role in deciding the future of Green Top Grocery by voting on important issues such as values, goals, benefits, and the products, programs, and services to be offered. Along with the pride of being part of a community-owned grocery store that supports sustainable farming and healthy living, owners additionally have the ability to promote their local business through the Green Top Owner Business Directory, and access to 200 place settings of shared tableware for parties and events (to prevent plastic waste).

Katie is confident that the community will come together to support Green Top Grocery and she is happy to be a part of such a worthy cause. She says that her favorite part of working for Green Top Grocery is meeting like-minded people that feel the same way she does about healthy food and green living, and of course, being able to provide a grocery store with access to fresh, local food for all!

If you are one of those like-minded people and you want to meet Katie or get involved with Green Top Grocery yourself (and I highly suggest you do) learn more by:

Visiting their website: [http://greentopgrocery.com/](http://greentopgrocery.com/)

Becoming an owner: [http://greentopgrocery.com/take-action/become-an-owner](http://greentopgrocery.com/take-action/become-an-owner)

Spreading the word by liking them on facebook: [https://www.facebook.com/BNCoopGrocery](https://www.facebook.com/BNCoopGrocery)