97th St. Greenmarket

I managed the 97th Street Greenmarket from Feb. 2005-Dec. 2006. I had started working with

Greenmarket in April of 2004 as a market manager and in the winter of 2005, found myself a bit underemployed as a first-year position is seasonal. However, come February they needed

coverage at a few markets and I happened to be available.

So on a cold February day I took the subway for a long ride from Brooklyn up to 96th st. to make the rounds and do the report at the infamous 97th street market. Several of my coworkers at Greenmarket (Gabrielle Langholtz, Ken Wiss) had managed 97th in previous seasons and had

raved about how great 97th was and how it is a favorite market. But on that day, this

supposedly great market was actually miserable. It was gray, freezing cold and seemed more

than a little pathetic. The wind whipped down through the corridor between apartment

buildings and it felt really brutal. (It is often a full 10-15 degrees warmer at Union Square where the sun hits the plaza for most of the day and it is not nearly as windy). This market looked more like 5 desperate farmers on an iceberg! I didn’t get it. What was the hype about?

However, from that day forward 97th became my new assignment and I was the manager there

for the next two years. As the seasons changed, I watched the market literally transform week

by week into something that can only be described as remarkable. By September, the market

would become a colorful, bountiful, vibrant, space, with genuine aspects of community warmth

and grace.

Jeff Bialas came back the second week of May with spring greens, Merry Kernan from South

Jersey with strawberries and sweet potatoes, Chip Kent of Locust Grove who has been selling

his family’s apples to literally, generations of customers, Ray Bradley with his excellent alliums, Pam at Ronnybrook seemed to know everybody, Allen at Bakers Bounty. The lineup and selection was/is terrific and customers seemed to know it. 97th even had its own Jazz band, a group of outrageously talented musicians that had real chops and loved to play pick up for a

few hours on Friday mornings at the market. On some days, it was magical.

And when the weather warmed above 60 degrees, Karen Hess would roll out with her walker,

barefeet and birkenstocks. She was unmistakable. I had learned about Karen when Bob Lewis

gave an impromptu eulogy for her husband John Hess at the Greenmarket Annual Meeting in

2005. That winter, I dug deep into John’s work and discovered Karen as well. The Taste of

America is essential reading for anyone who cares about good food and farmers markets. In

fact, John and Karen are considered the “god-parents” of the Greenmarket, as their work

inspired the founder, Barry Benepe to actually start a farmers’ market in New York City. The

story goes that Barry told John he was inspired by his writing and was going to study farmers

markets. John told him he did not need to study markets, he needed to start farmers markets!

And so he did. And we are so thankful.

97th is a phenomenal market. It is a weekday market that supports an outstanding line up of producers and products, second only to Union Square Wednesday (for a weekday market). It booms from 8am to noon and then is over by 1pm at the latest. Farmers love it because they could get home in time to re-load for the big Saturday markets. But also 97th is/was a very special, only in New York, community. A community that cooks, and values freshness and the relationships they develop with the folks who grow their food. It was such a wonderful experience to work that market. I wish I could gush some more, but the deadline is near, and I am happy to at least contribute this bit. So glad you are celebrating this gem.

June Russell