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The Record-Eagle, Traverse City, Mich.

The End of an Oryana Era: Sarah Christensen to replace Steve Nance as CEO

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Dec. 6—TRAVERSE CITY — Steve Nance is proud of his work leading the Oryana Community Cooperative to becoming the largest in Michigan and a gold standard for co-ops across the country.

But he's even more excited about the future.

Nance is ready to hand the Oryana reins over next month to Sarah Christensen, who for the past 20 years has served as the CEO of the Green Tree Co-op Market in Mount Pleasant. Christensen was the Oryana board's unanimous choice to fill Nance's large shoes after his 14 years leading the 50-year-old cooperative.

"To be honest, Sarah's been on my radar for a long time," Nance said, noting that Christensen helped grow Green Tree from one of the smallest co-ops in the state into a new location that opened two years ago that's four times the size of its previous location. "They were small, but operationally they punched beyond their weight."

Nance and Christensen have been professional colleagues for more than a decade, working collaboratively through an informal association of Great Lakes co-ops stretching from northern Indiana to the Upper Peninsula. They've followed and learned from each other's operations through newsletters, social media and in-person store visits over the years.

"For me, I've been a fan of Oryana for a long time, having watched them grow to two stores and watching the growth of their Tenth Street store," Christensen said. "I'm impressed with all the work they do and all the impact they have...it felt like being drafted by your favorite sports team."

Christensen is the board president of the National Cooperative Grocers Association, a nation-wide organization of co-ops where she's served on the leadership board for six years. She also serves on the Michigan Small Business Development Center (SBDC). Nance said the many hats she's worn leading Green Tree Co-op Market — including organization and construction management, financial oversight, human resources and community outreach — will serve her well in her new position. She's a native of Lake Orion and a graduate of Central Michigan University. She and her husband, Peter, raised their three grown children — two sons and a daughter — in Mount Pleasant.

"I'm excited to get to know your local farmers and producers," she said. "I think that's one of Oryana's greatest strengths, the support for those local producers that they provide and the collaboration they do with those folks."

Nance, who will turn 69 in February, was born in Evanston, Ill. and grew up in the Detroit area. He first moved to Traverse City in 1974 and graduated from Northwestern Michigan College with his wife Robin. He then went to work for General Motors and worked on both the east and west coasts during the 1980s, before fulfilling their desire to return to northwest Lower Michigan.

"Traverse City is a special, special place," he said. "There have been a lot of changes, but for the most part I think we've done an amazing job of keeping the character of town."

Nance worked at the Cone Drive Operations plant on Twelfth Street for a decade before he made the transition into the grocer world. His wife joined the Oryana board and he later became a board member, and eventually took over the general manager's role 14 years ago, replacing Bob Struthers.

"I'm a very unintentional intentional grocer," he said. "I'm really happy to turn it over to a professional grocer for the next 50 years."

Oryana's experienced tremendous growth under Nance's guidance. The store totaled around \$8 million in annual sales when he started — a figure that's expected to reach \$35 million in 2023, which marks the 50th year of Oryana operations. It's the largest co-op in Michigan and in the top 20 of all grocery store sales in West Michigan. The co-op boasts 11,000 member/owners, and employs 205 staff members. He also guided the co-op through the opening of its second location called Oryana West in the former Lucky's market in Garfield Township. The co-op acquired the market through a U.S. Bankruptcy Court in the spring of 2020 for \$760,000, and maintained all 62 jobs while keeping the market open throughout the bankruptcy process.

Nance is quick to credit the Oryana board, his management team and the employees for the organization's sustained growth. He's most proud of the organization's community efforts, including as a founding partner of Food Rescue of Northwest Michigan, its leadership in promoting alternative transportation, its strong connection with local farmers and producers, and more than \$1 million in annual discounts for co-op members.

"It's just a great group of people to work with," he said. "Being a co-op, we're a community asset and an engine for economic good."

Nance will leave a 60-hour, 6-7 day work week at Oryana but isn't worried about staying busy. He and Robin have many retired friends and he's also been reading blogs and articles about how to stay busy in retirement. He figures he's got plenty of work he can do at his aging home on Webster Street, stay active with his volunteer work at TART Trails and the recently organized North Boardman Lake District neighborhood group, and travel with Robin to visit their adult daughter in Boston and son in Atlanta.

"After 50-something years of working a lot of hours, all of a sudden I'll have this void that I can figure out how to fill," Nance said. "I'm pretty excited about what the next phase of our life is going to be."

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