

## NEWARK

# City didn't forget restaurateur's generosity when COVID-19 hit

**Rebecca Panico** *For The Star-Ledger*

Walter "Willie" Green gave out free food from his new BBQ restaurant last summer as a last hurrah before he thought his business would close during the coronavirus pandemic.

"I was gonna lose my restaurant, but I knew I had to give back to the community," said Green, who owns Uncle Willie's Wings at 945 Frelinghuysen Ave. in Newark.

It turns out that last-ditch attempt at giving back wasn't the end for the Uncle Willie's Wings, which opened weeks before the pandemic hit New Jersey.

People took notice of Green's generosity. And after an outpouring of support, his business is starting to gain steam again.

"If that's the last thing we do, we'll go out with a bang," recalled Kere Thomas, one of the co-owners of Uncle Willie's Wings. "But it really was a spark."

Newark Working Kitchens, a food delivery program that began around April last year, partnered with the restaurant. Audible, which moved its headquarters to Newark in 2007, launched the program last year and began paying restaurants for meals that are then delivered to those in need of food.

The program received even more funding, including \$2 million from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, a \$500,000 grant from the city of Newark and donations from PSE&G and the New Jersey Devils.

The program celebrated 1 million meals delivered earlier this month.

Newark Working Kitchens is what kept Uncle Willie's Wings afloat after Green came down with the coronavirus and the restaurant closed for three months. He was making anywhere from 1,000 to 1,500 meals a week for the program.

He bought a used van with more than 130,000 miles on it to make food deliveries, too. "The Today Show" in Decem-

ber took notice of his work and gifted him with a brand-new truck.

The program is also what enabled him to give back to Newark residents in an even bigger way this past Saturday, one year after he thought his business would end. Instead of giving out food from his storefront, he got a larger venue to throw an even bigger barbecue.

Green worked with the city to get permits to set it all up in the parking lot near the Training Recreation Education Center on Ludlow Street. He had a bouncy castle, games, face-painting, music and health screenings in addition to the free food.

South Ward Councilman John Sharpe James celebrated the second annual barbecue by presenting Green with a city resolution at the bash, honoring him for using his own resources to feed residents last year.

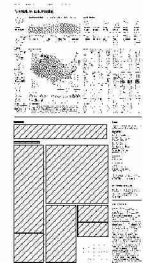
"We need to show support for people who have heart and love for the community," said James.

Uncle Willie's Wings was created out of Green's love for cooking after he got out of the Army and moved to Newark from Chicago. But it was also about creating financial independence for himself while giving back to Newark.

"Anything we do, we want to be focused on the community," said Derrick Wright, who was Green's landlord before he became a co-owner in Uncle Willie's Wings. "We want to show, 'Hey, here's a bunch of entrepreneurs who want to give back to the community.'"

That's the focus, even as the restaurant continues to grow and expand.

The Newark Community Health Center on Ludlow Street was on site Saturday to give health screenings and let people know where they could get COVID-19 vaccines. Primerica, an investment company, was also on hand to promote financial literacy.



Saturday was the first time Uncle Willie's Wings showcased its new — albeit, used — food truck. It was so new that it still had the words “Latin-Asian on the go” written on its side from the previous owners.

The truck will help bring the Chicago flavor in the restaurant's chicken and waffles, fried catfish filets and mac 'n'

cheese to other parts of the city soon.

“I'm gonna do this every year I get,” Green said in between setting up sanitation stations and starting up the grill in his food truck.

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**Walter “Willie” Green, left, stands with South Ward Councilman John Sharpe James, right, and Uncle Willie's Wings co-owner Derrick Wright, center, at his second annual barbecue in Newark on Saturday. *Rebecca Panico, for The Star-Ledger***