

CHICAGO

2020 CHICAGOANS OF THE YEAR



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARCUS SMITH

The Nurturer

Erick Williams

BY JOHN KESSLER

Erick Williams says his work ethic is more that of an ant than a honeybee. Bees are tireless in their commitment to the task at hand but find themselves in decline in this changing, inhospitable world; ants, on the other hand, “do an incredible job as a team digging deep and always preparing for the worst-case scenario.”

When COVID-19 shut down in-person dining in March, Williams, the chef-owner of Virtue, the Hyde Park restaurant serving refined updates on Southern classics, dug deep. “We woke up one day and realized the pandemic is at our front door, and this industry is going to have the highest rate of employees being furloughed,” he recalls. For his 30-some team members, who hail mostly from the South Side, their jobs at Virtue have been a boost to their careers, but that stability was at risk.

To keep as many employees as possible paid, with benefits, the James Beard–nominated Williams made a hard pivot. He began selling to-go family meals to the public (and gave free ones to workers in the restaurant industry), to the tune of 320 to 600 meals per night. He stocked the cooler with free groceries for staff members to take home and started a crowdfund so he could offer them forgivable loans. “I reached out to many of my friends and supporters and pretty soon we raised \$36,000 on GoFundMe.”

A friend on the medical staff at UChicago Medicine took note of the relatively inexpensive meals (a \$48 feast fed three to four people) and bought out several nights’ production for the medical residents. Soon the beverage company Southern Glazer’s Wine & Spirits wrote a check to subsidize a night of meals for first responders at the hospital.

Then came Common, and with him a major PR boost. The rapper and actor, working with the dating app Bumble, tapped Virtue to feed about 80 essential workers at the John H. Stroger Jr. Hospital of Cook County. Williams added 300 meals from his own fundraising—and soon after began making daily deliveries to UChicago Medicine and twice-monthly drops to Stroger. Williams stopped offering takeout for the general public and devoted himself to serving only essential workers with the money from his GoFundMe page. Another \$20,000 poured in.

Williams delivered more than 10,000 meals between April and the end of July, and has continued to quietly deliver food to UChicago, albeit on a smaller scale, even as Virtue reopened its patio. “Virtue,” he says, “means maintaining a high moral standard and treating people with kindness and hospitality.” For Williams, that means marshaling resources to keep front-line workers feeling safe, healthy, and well fed.

