

This chef could live anywhere. Here's why he chose Lawndale

By Ari Bendersky March 18, 2016

Six or seven days a week, Erick Williams leaves his two-story, red-brick single-family home to head to his job as executive chef of **MK restaurant** in River North, the kind of place that hosts estate wine dinners and offers \$79 tasting menus. He gets there in his new Chrysler 300, driving by a mix of restored graystones and empty lots where dilapidated homes sat before they were demolished by the city.

This is Lawndale, one of the city's poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods. It's also where he lived until he was 9.

Williams, 41, knows that his neighborhood, which he returned to in 2007 and where he bought a home as well as nine rental properties, is dangerous. But he says he minds his own business and people tend to leave him alone. He has seen fights break out on the street, but the violence generally is directed only at the people involved in the fight.

Lawndale is a food desert, so he and his wife, Tiffany, the principal at Catalyst Maria Elementary School in Chicago Lawn, do most of their grocery shopping elsewhere. His car has been vandalized and, yes, he has a home security system. They have a nice backyard and, when Williams fires up the barbecue and his neighbors are outside, he'll invite them over for some food and drink.

"I could move anywhere I want, but if everyone who has resources leaves the neighborhood, it wouldn't have any resources," Williams says. "My wife and I are successful, and I think it's necessary for people who are successful to be in the environment to help **offer a glimmer of hope.**"

For a time, it did not appear Williams would be successful. When he was a teenager living in Austin 5 miles northwest of Lawndale, he sold drugs, had brushes with the police and was arrested. He declines to give details other than to say his parents feared they were losing him to the streets. He emerged from that five-year period with a desire to change his path and began taking classes at Wright Junior College.

But it was one day in 1996 that changed his life. He was walking down the street when he passed a man sweeping in front of Hudson Club in River North. A voice inside his head told him to ask if they were hiring. He kept walking, music pulsing through his headphones. Williams heard that voice two more times before turning around to inquire about work. He met the owner, interviewed and got a job at the now-shuttered restaurant. For two years he worked the salad and appetizer stations, competing for a chance to work the pizza station. After a brief stint at the Hyatt Regency, he landed at MK, where owner Michael Kornick gave Williams a shot. That was 1998.

"I used to be hesitant to talk about my past because I didn't want to give people the room to think all people of color had a blighted past," Williams says. "I didn't want to be categorized, but then I started to notice that my own agenda was hindering a bigger agenda—to show kids they could avoid obstacles. I wanted to help kids so they could hear stories they could relate to."

Williams gives back by working with the homeless and with local kids, showing them they have the potential for a better future.

"I came from a hostile environment and had to pay attention to everything around me every day," he says. "It was loud and chaotic, like a kitchen. I learned how to take life skills and turn them into knife skills. That's the connection between me and these kids. It has to do with your thought process when you're under pressure. That's where success really gets tested. No one nails it every time, especially these kids. I feel like it's my job

to get the damn story out.”

That mission led Williams to start working with Embarc, a local high school program that helps inspire low-income kids to strive for high school and college success. He also worked with kids from **CSW Career Academy** when it was in Lawndale (it has since moved to the Loop), enabling them to spend time cooking in the MK kitchen. Then a group from Englewood approached him to mentor their kids as well.

So one day in 2013 Williams invited 40 students from Englewood to MK for a meal of roasted chicken and potatoes, sauteed spinach and Caesar salad prepared by the eight CSW kids from Lawndale. The Englewood group leaders told Williams he couldn't have kids cross gang boundary lines, but Williams didn't buy it.

“We took kids from two very similar neighborhoods, from two sides of town, provided a meal and, at the end, those kids were hugging each other and posting Facebook pictures of each other,” Williams says. “Each side realized where the other was from. They asked (each other) about what schools they went to, (and) boundaries started getting lifted. They told them the food was good, thanked them, and that turned things around. The tension was absorbed through the action. There is nothing that can't be solved over a meal if you have the patience to solve it.”

That experience led Williams and his wife to chaperone 16 kids from **Embarc** on a trip to New York last year, where they visited the Empire State Building, United Nations and the 9/11 Memorial. They ate at nice restaurants and attended a forum at the Black Entertainment Television offices.

“The trip to New York was an amazing journey that has helped me understand the definition of success,” said Karolina Peza, 16, a student at Chicago Academy High School in Portage Park. “(Williams) inspired me to work hard in school and (made me see) that I can do anything I want in my life. He explained how he stayed dedicated to what he loves. That motivates me to follow what I love.” The Williamses will lead another group to New York in April.

“Folks like Erick are telling kids they belong,” says Imran Khan, CEO of Embarc. “It's a very important statement, especially in the current political climate. (Adults) take the time to spend with them. That message of value, and belonging and wanting is the most important thing to be said to our kids.”

Beyond working with kids, Williams donates money and time to Franciscan Outreach and Israel Mission Temple Church to help feed the homeless.

He donated some of his winnings from an appearance on Guy Fieri's “Guy's Grocery Games” on the Food Network to help the church, which inspired regular diners at MK to make donations to the church and help feed the homeless.

“When (many people) hit a level of success, they leave their past behind; Erick always knew he would stay put,” says former restaurateur Ina Pinkney, a friend.

Williams, whose wife is expecting, says he's committed to staying in the neighborhood, where the median household income is about \$23,000, according to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

“There's beautiful architecture (and) amazing parks that have **recently been restored**. The rec centers are pretty awesome,” Williams says. “So even though the funding in the community isn't like in other places, people recognize what's in place and they're committed to helping rebuild the neighborhood,” he says.

He continues, “It feels like I have a purpose every morning when I wake up. I don't know if I would get that same response in a community that is overflowing with resources. I love (Lawndale's) grit, not the violence or the social discomforts, I mean grit—that despite people not having access to things that are readily available in other communities, there are a lot of people who work their asses off to give their kids the best they can. With the same energy, they could pick up and move, but they choose to stay.”