

RESTAURANTS

'Just get up each day & fight one more round': Barry's Cheesesteaks finds a new home

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Restaurant owner Barry Washington is a man who knows struggle. But he is also a man who doesn't give up.

"Just get up each day and fight one more round," said Washington, the owner of Barry's Cheesesteaks, which sells traditional Philadelphia-style cheesesteaks and fries.

In mid-December, Barry's Cheesesteaks opened a new location at 5408 Valley Station Road. Previously, Washington ran locations of the restaurant on Preston Highway, Bardstown Road and Oak Street. These locations have all since closed due to health and financial problems Washington incurred.

Currently, Washington is planning an expansion of Barry's Cheesesteaks with some investors into the St. Matthew's area.

"I have been around and watched Barry work hard, struggling at times and get back up again," said Bob Hauselman, a minister from Sellersburg, Indiana who has known Washington for 25 years. "He's the real deal. He has a great heart to help others."

In the late 1970s and 1980s, while living in the Philadelphia area, Washington was in the throes of a drug problem.

"I just lived a wild abrupt life, you know, I was into a lot of trouble, a lot of violence," he recently told The Courier Journal.

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By December 1995, Washington's struggle with cocaine and heroin had him at his wit's end. He recalls going to a prayer group and praying for the Lord to heal him. He has been sober since.

"I know what that prayer did for me. I'm still here today, drug-free," Washington said.

His faith in God is what ultimately led Washington to Louisville. In 1997, he packed up and came to the metro area to attend seminary at Southern Baptist. Washington surrounded himself in ministry, preaching regularly and volunteering at a homeless shelter.

It was at the homeless shelter where Louisville first got a taste of Washington's cooking, which pays homage to Philadelphia, the place he first learned to cook.

"His faith motivates him. He knows what it is like to go hungry," said Scott Wesley, one of the investors helping Washington. "He gives back to help others in need."

The Courier Journal sat down with Washington to talk all things Barry's Cheesesteaks. His answers have been edited for length and clarity:

Besides the classic Philadelphia cheesesteak, what other items are on your menu?

Barry Washington: Well, we got your classic Philly, we have mushroom cheesesteaks, we have chicken, you can get different types of peppers on your sandwiches, we even have like a veggie (sandwich) with broccoli and spinach, and some other things in there.

We got ... one of our key sandwiches, it is called the Big Barry, and the Big Barry comes with sausage, bacon, steak, peppers, onions, two types of cheese, and pepperoni. That sandwich really takes it to you!

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We have what's called a Barry Bowl. These are like french fries that you can get some steak on there with two types of cheeses. Or you can take it to another level, you could get a Big Barry Bowl.

What is your favorite item on the menu and why?

Washington: One of my favorite sandwiches is a mushroom cheesesteak with hot peppers. I get extra cheese. I love hot peppers. I love mushrooms. Whenever I eat one of those sandwiches, I just kind of sit there and have the happy dance going on in my head. Another favorite of mine is the B-Rite Chili Cheese Fries. They're spicy, your nose starts running, and then your eyes running, but you just won't stop eating it.

What makes your restaurant different from others in the city?

Washington: I think what makes us ... different is just that attitude of love and trying to provide good service and ... do things to help communities. You know, one year we did over 6,000 free meals. Each year, we help serve help at least 300 families for Christmas. We turn around and do another 250 families for Thanksgiving.

Barry's represents putting in the hard work, but yes, there will be some rewards. But the greatest reward is knowing that you gave somebody something that was dear to you.

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How have your customers reacted to the move to Valley Station?

Washington: They've been so happy, but now there are some that are mad at me. But I kind of explained that it came to a time when we just weren't doing a lot of good business. And then the people of Valley Station just opened up their arms and loved on me and welcomed me. ... It's still hard ... but over here in Valley Station we see a little bit of hope. We're just praying for some greater feats to start happening.

What is something you're looking forward to most at this new location?

Washington: One of the things I'm looking forward to is my birthday (on) June 9. I'm looking forward to shutting down the restaurant, putting the grills out there, bringing the music out ... and just celebrating my birthday with the community, and giving them free food and having hot dogs, ribs, whatever. We just want to have a great time.

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