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FEATURED

The philanthropic life of Colonie's 'Chicken Man'

By Angel Gomez
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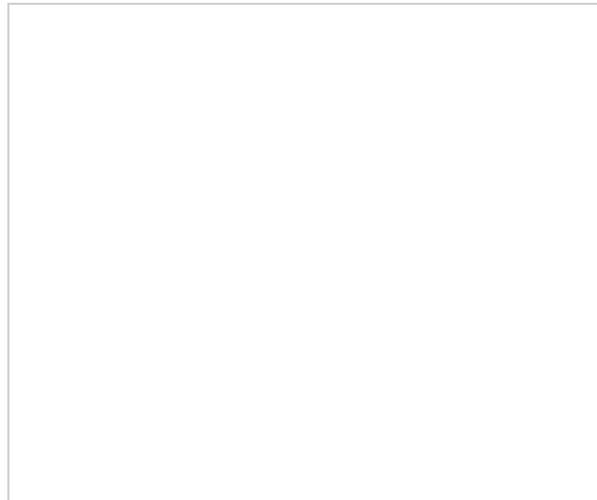
COLONIE — “The Chicken Man ... here comes Jake the Chicken Man,” Carlton Tatum sings out 15 minutes before closing time at BJ’s Wholesale Club in Colonie.

As he does every night, a thin man in his 70s is steering a shopping cart carrying four large cardboard boxes toward the back of the store.

All the store’s employees, including Tatum, expect him at the same place at the same time. Soon they will all be asked if they’d like to take home a treat.

“Would you like a chicken tonight, Aaron?” the shopper asks another employee nearby.

Meet Warren Earnest Cornwell Jr., better known in these parts as Jake “The Chicken Man” — a one-man charity who has made it his mission to purchase unsold rotisserie chickens and deliver them to shelters across the Capital Region.



When you meet Jake, his preferred name, he might stop to tell you a riddle, share a piece of trivia or ask for your three favorite words — and then share his: epiphany, serendipitous and synchronicity. But if you catch him at BJ’s Wholesale Club, he’s more likely to offer you a rotisserie chicken from the dozens he buys every night.

“I didn’t actually realize how much fun it is to give until I started doing the chickens,” Jake said. “Then you’re really giving to people who have nothing.”

Jake’s particular kind of philanthropy began by chance at a Sam’s Club circa 2018, when he saw a shopping cart filled with hot, packaged poultry being pushed toward the exit.

“I asked, ‘Where are you going with that?’ and he said, ‘We’re going to the dumpster.’ And I said, ‘OK, all right, call me, call me.’”

Dumping perfectly good chicken made Jake angry.

Thus began the nightly routine of collecting unsold chickens, first at Sam’s Club and then at BJ’s.

BJ’s deli employee Traci Gardineer says roughly 120 chickens are cooked each day. Without Jake purchasing the surplus at the end of the night for \$4.99 a bird, they’d be thrown away.

After rescuing the chicken dinners from the fate of the dumpster, Jake, 75, drives them in his 2008 Toyota minivan to either the city missions in Albany or Schenectady; Albany’s Emmanuel Baptist Church; or Ballston Spa’s Christ Episcopal Church.

“I try to alternate,” Jake said. The specific destination for his “chicken runs” is not always planned, but Jake is the kind of man who likes to keep things loose.

“Sometimes they’ve got 12 [chickens], then I get here an hour later and they’re all gone. I like to call ahead of time, but occasionally I’ll come in to socialize. That’s the highlight,” he said.

A Colonie native, Jake wears many hats in the community. At All Saints Episcopal Church, he’s an altar server, a lay eucharistic minister and a clergy member. When not picking up and delivering chickens, he owns and runs Cornwell Appliance, an appliance repair and retail business his father started in 1948, two years before Jake was born.



He belonged to St. Michael's Episcopal church in his formative years, which Jake says gave him his first taste of giving.

"We would take gifts to people's houses, leave them on the front step, and then ring the bell and run," Jake recalled.

Now, he leaves chickens.

On the recent evening, with the chickens loaded into the cardboard boxes, Jake exits the store and pushes the loaded shopping cart toward the back of his gray minivan. Minutes later, the Toyota is filled with the unmistakable aroma of rotisserie chicken.

The haul this evening is not as much as he'd hoped, so he swings by his former childhood home, which is also the current Cornwell Appliance headquarters, to pick up some cold chickens.

“This is the home of origin,” he said, pulling into a driveway that leads to an appliance graveyard of refrigerators, ovens and washing machines.

During the colder months Jake uses his garage for poultry storage.

“Mother nature’s been holding the fort for me,” he said, picking up four more cooked birds.

Twenty minutes later, he’s en route to the City Mission in Schenectady with 25 chickens in the back.

“Hey, Siri,” he says. “Call Schenectady.” A worker, Lawrence, picks up the phone.

“I’ve got some chickens for ya, are you interested?”

The answer is yes. Minutes later, Jake is backing up the minivan to the doors of the City Mission. “I don’t have a big load today,” he tells Lawrence.

“It’s OK, everything’s appreciated. ... If you had one chicken, I’d be happy to see ya,” Lawrence replies.

The chickens are brought out of Jake’s van and onto a trolley lined with Chiquita banana boxes. His own boxes stay in the trunk to be reused for future runs. He says goodbye to Lawrence with a hug and a “see you tomorrow night.”

Delivery complete.

Following another successful chicken run, Jake heads home to his partner of 35 years, Bonnie, and their two Irish Setters. He will do it all over again the next day.

Gladly. For the thank you's, for the feeling of community and for the personal rewards.

"This one guy," Jake recalls as he drives home toward Bonnie, "came out and grabbed a couple of boxes of chickens, and as the door was closing he said, 'thank you.' But his voice was so sincere. It wasn't just 'thank you,' it was 'Thank you.' His tone of voice was powerful. I can't even tell you that story without feeling the same energy I had the night I received that."

Jake said he long ago gave up the idea that he could save the world. But he has learned that everyone can make a difference in their own little patch of the it, and for him that's the Capital Region.

"If at my funeral people show up at the church and want to say a few words, all they're gonna be able to say is 'He gave me a chicken!'" says Jake. "'Everybody who got a chicken from Mr. Cornwell, please just raise your hand. We don't have time for all of you to come on and say the same thing over and over again.'"

Angel Gomez is a University at Albany journalism student participating in the SUNY Institute for Local News initiative.