

Column: That time Hecky Powell saved Thanksgiving for a Northwestern student and his roommates. ‘That’s Mr. Hecky.’



Hecky Powell stands outside his restaurant, Hecky's Barbecue in Evanston, on July 20, 2005. (David Trotman-Wilkins / Chicago Tribune)

When Hecky Powell fed you, Hecky Powell *fed* you — stomach, mind, spirit.

He was an Evanston treasure, a barbecue legend, a mentor, a teacher and a friend. He was intent on improving every life he touched, and, judging by the stories, he succeeded. He was a perfect combination of energy, integrity and heart.

There are thousands of Hecky Powell stories. In addition to his 37 years at the helm of Hecky's Barbecue on Green Bay Road, he founded the [Forrest E. Powell Foundation](#) (named after his dad) to train and educate young people. He was the president of the NAACP's Evanston branch, the past president of the Evanston-Skokie District 65 school board and, more recently, the smiling face (you can see the smile in his eyes) behind Evanston's mask campaign, which shows him in a cloth face covering under the words, "No Mask, No Sauce."

[Powell died from COVID-19](#) complications on Friday at age 71. The stories have been pouring forth ever since — from elected officials, customers, friends, former employees, young people he mentored, you name it.

Here's another one.

DeMarquis Hayes, 42, completed his undergraduate studies at Northwestern University in the late '90s before heading to Tulane University to earn his masters degree and Ph.D. in school psychology.

At Northwestern, Hayes shared an apartment with three friends. All of their families lived out of state, so when Thanksgiving came around, they usually stayed in Evanston, saving the airfare or road trips for winter break. Their junior year, Hayes and his roommates cooked a traditional Thanksgiving meal together.

“It was awful,” Hayes told me. “We pretended it was good and we ate it and it was awful.”



DeMarquis Hayes, from left, with his roommates Greg Mathurin, Glenn Jeffers and Afolabi Dokun in 1999, their senior year at Northwestern University. (DeMarquis Hayes)

The following year, when they were seniors, Hayes and one of his roommates were at a Northwestern basketball game in mid-November. They were both cheerleaders, and they had finished their gig and were standing around the stadium talking to a third roommate when Powell, who was there to cheer on Northwestern, approached them.

“Mr. Hecky just walked up to us — didn’t know us from anybody,” Hayes said. “He said, ‘Hey, boys. How you doing?’ We said, ‘We’re good, sir. How are you?’ He said, ‘You guys excited about going home for Thanksgiving?’ We said, ‘No, sir, we can’t afford to go home for Thanksgiving. We’re just going to hang out around Evanston at our apartment.’ He said, ‘Well, who’s cooking dinner?’”

They laughed. They told him they might try to cook, but last year’s meal didn’t turn out so hot. He told them to swing by his shop the next morning and he’d have a little something for them. They showed up around 9 a.m.

“This man gave us a full Thanksgiving spread,” Hayes said. “A giant turkey, greens, yams, a tray of mac and cheese, corn bread. It was so much food we couldn’t even really carry it out of the store.”

All of it cooked to perfection. All they had to do was eat it.

“We were college kids,” Hayes said. “We would’ve been happy with a slice of pizza.”

They asked him what they owed him. He waved them away.

“He said, You guys have a great Thanksgiving. I’m proud of you guys — young black men, you’re doing really well and I’m proud of you. Just do that,” Hayes said. “He never even asked us our names.”

Hayes, who runs the psychology department at Texas A&M Commerce, said he knows he and his roommates are but a few of the many beneficiaries of Powell’s generosity and good faith.

“To me, that’s Mr. Hecky,” Hayes said. “Just walking up to strangers and giving them well more than they deserved.”

Hayes said he and his roommates, Greg Mathurin, Afolabi Dokun and Glenn Jeffers, a former Tribune reporter, still get together every so often. They met up at Northwestern’s homecoming game last year — the 20-year anniversary of their graduation.

“And that Thanksgiving story comes up all the time,” he said.

He wishes they’d stopped by Hecky’s while they were in town for homecoming. But it was raining and cold, and Hayes was eager to get his wife and three kids back indoors after a day of touring campus.

And now Mr. Hecky is gone. It’s hard to fathom. Hard to picture Evanston without him in it. Hard to imagine how a city fills a hole the size and shape and magnitude of Hecky Powell.

But I suppose you start with the stories. Share them and hear them and let them fill up a little bit of the space where Hecky ought to still be, and maybe those stories help heal and inspire the rest of us to keep doing the work he started.

The feeding — stomach, mind, spirit.

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hstevens@chicagotribune.com

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