

# How local legend Rosa Wims transformed Thanksgiving

## Trailblazer's dinners fed hundreds annually

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Thanksgiving in Rochester won't be the same without Rosa Wims.

Wims was a trailblazer and community pillar who left an indelible mark on Rochester through her lifelong dedication to the community, including her famous Thanksgiving dinners, which fed hundreds annually.

From humble beginnings as a nurse's aide to becoming the first Black licensed practical nurse at Rochester General Hospital, Wims inspired countless people through her career and philanthropy. She died Sept. 23, 2023, at the age of 100.

### Trailblazer in health care

Wims pursued her dream of becoming a nurse despite significant obstacles. In the 1950s, she took a cleaning job at Rochester General Hospital, where her supervisors recognized her potential and recommended her for the hospital's nurse's aide training program.

Wims became the first Black nurse's aide and later the first Black licensed practical nurse at the hospital. After a 28-year career, she retired in 1984.

Shortly after retiring, Wims founded the Faith Community Health Awareness Center on Genesee Street, which was later renamed the Rosa Wims Family Wellness Center.

### Pre-Thanksgiving Dinner

Wims' legacy includes her beloved Pre-Thanksgiving Dinner, which began in the 1970s with a modest turkey dinner for 25 people in an old storefront on Jefferson Avenue. Over the decades, the event grew to serve hundreds annually, with doctors, nurses and volunteers



**Rosa Wims founded and donated her time to the Faith Community Health Awareness Center on Genesee Street. It was renamed the Rosa Wims Family Wellness Center.** ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE STAFF FILE PHOTO 1989

joining forces to distribute meals. Eventually, Foodlink partnered with Wims to expand the event.

For Wims, the event was about more than food — it was about community and gratitude. “I saw a need,” she said in a 2016 Democrat and Chronicle interview, simply explaining the motivation behind her actions. In most interviews, she deflected credit, praising God, who she said used her as a vessel to do good.

Wims was honored multiple times for her contributions, including being presented with the W. Burton Richardson Lifetime Achievement Award in 2015 and having Nov. 6 proclaimed “Rosa Wims Day” by former Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren.

### Passing the torch

Even as Wims approached her later

years, she remained active, frequently “retiring” but always finding her way back to the dinner table for the pre-Thanksgiving meals.

In 2020, at age 97, she declared she was stepping back for good. “I’ve retired, and I’m letting the young people take over,” she said in a 2020 interview with the Democrat and Chronicle.

That year, due to the pandemic, marked the first time in 35 years that the Pre-Thanksgiving Dinner was canceled.

Wims attributed her longevity to staying active. “I never had a chance to sit down and be sorry for myself,” she once said. “Focus on your mind, and pass what you know onto your children.”

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