

## Groups feed hospital workers — and support restaurants, too

By Dan Rosenzweig-Ziff

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Sichuan Jin River head chef Kevin Fan waves to Grace Shi, 22, center, and Cathleen Shi, 13, as the sisters finish loading meals outside the Rockville restaurant to be delivered to health-care workers at Suburban Hospital. (Amanda Voisard/for The Washington Post)

Inside Sichuan Jin River, a Chinese restaurant in Rockville that would normally be buzzing with customers on a Friday evening like this one, head chef Kevin Fan stood in the suburban Maryland restaurant's empty dining room, leaning over a white plastic table filled with 20 boxed dinners.

Fan, wearing a blue polo that matched his mask, explained to Grace Shi in Chinese which meals were spicy — the kung pao chicken — and which were vegetarian.

Shi then drove the meals to Suburban Hospital in Bethesda with her 13-year-old sister, Cathleen, handing off two large cardboard boxes filled with steaming rice and fragrant vegetables, chicken and beef to a nurse for the hospital's covid-19 unit.

The delivery was the second one by [Woks for Washington](#), a group Shi, 22, founded in June to raise money to buy meals from Asian restaurants, then donate those meals to hospital workers on the front lines of the pandemic. The group's first delivery, on July 24, was 20 meals to Adventist HealthCare Shady Grove Medical Center in Rockville.

Shi, an investment banker, began the initiative to promote and spread Asian American culture — initially through food and later, she hopes, through education in schools — amid a pandemic that has exhausted medical workers and slashed revenue for restaurants.

She said she was inspired to begin the work after seeing the racism Asian Americans experienced at the beginning of the pandemic — as Republicans made blaming China for the virus [a political strategy](#), and as President Trump [continued calling](#) the novel coronavirus the “Chinese virus” — in addition to the nationwide protests calling for racial justice and police reform after the killing of George Floyd. “Following covid and following all of these racial crises, it's important to think about how we come together as a country and how to learn more about each other and appreciate that diversity,” Shi said.

Meanwhile, pandemic restrictions and shutdowns have hit restaurants hard. Tens of thousands of restaurants across the country have shuttered because of the pandemic, and more could be on the way. Just this summer, [nearly 30 D.C.-area eateries have closed](#), according to Eater.

Even those that have reopened with outdoor seating or reduced capacity indoor seating are experiencing significant revenue cuts — as has the [food truck industry](#), whose reliable downtown foot traffic has dried up.

Some restaurants, like Sichuan Jin River, have struggled to pay rent.

“It’s very hard. We’d been closed for three months,” said Sichuan Jin owner Judy Yu, who provided the meals to Shi’s group at a discount — but said the extra business still helped her restaurant keep up with its expenses. “I am so proud to help out. I am so proud of these young girls.”



Cathleen Shi picks up meals at Sichuan Jin River in Rockville. (Amanda Voisard/for The Washington Post)

Woks for Washington has raised over \$3,000 since July 3, when it first started soliciting donations from individuals — enough to increase the group’s deliveries, Shi said.

In addition to the twice-monthly deliveries from Sichuan Jin River, Woks for Washington is planning monthly ones from Neisha Thai Cuisine in Fairfax County to give to workers at Virginia Hospital Center. The initiative also plans to donate meals to Promise Place, an emergency shelter for youth in Capitol Heights.

“It’s such a blessing,” said Siphra Mukoro, the unit nurse in charge at Shady Grove Medical Center when Woks for Washington delivered the meals late last month. Mukoro said her unit’s nurses have been so busy that they often don’t have time to eat, so donated food that is easily available to them is especially welcome.

A similar initiative was started in March through a Montgomery County Facebook group called Support MoCo Restaurants, which has nearly 20,000 members.

Julie Sapper, a running coach and county resident, started posting in the group in March. Within days, the group had raised thousands to buy meals from restaurants to donate to hospital workers at Shady Grove Medical Center. Sapper and the group raised \$54,000 by the beginning of June, buying meals from seven restaurants, which fed workers in every department at the hospital.

“Everyone wants to do something to help,” Sapper said. “Everyone feels so much is not in our control. It’s really easy as a community to do something in our control,” and raising money was what they could do, she said.

Early in the pandemic, Heidi Gertner bought 30 boxes of pizza for hospital workers — but later, with the help of fellow Montgomery County residents Adam Isaacson and Claire Milam, started the group [Feeding the Frontline](#), which raised \$52,000 through the Support MoCo Restaurants Facebook group and other outreach, supporting over 70 local restaurants and providing twice-daily meals for months to workers at Suburban Hospital.

“At a time when everybody felt so helpless, people just wanted to do something,” Gertner said. “It’s remarkable how kind and thoughtful people were.”