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Bridgeton athletes at Wagner help Staten Island recover from damage from Sandy

By JASON MAZDA, Staff Writer



Dominique Williams was in a bagel store in Staten Island, N.Y., on Nov. 2 when a man noticed his Wagner College football gear and started a conversation.

The man told the senior running back from Bridgeton how his family still had no power in their home after Hurricane Sandy.

“He and his wife and his two children were actually freezing,” Williams said in a phone interview Wednesday. “But the last thing that he said in that conversation was, ‘Bring Staten Island some hope.’ And that stuck with me.”

Williams used that story in a pregame speech to his team the next day. Then he helped the Seahawks roll to a 30-0 win over Albany, the 18th-ranked team in the Football Championship Subdivision coaches’ poll.

Wagner (7-3 overall, 6-1 Northeast Conference) now needs only to beat Duquesne (5-4, 3-3) in its season finale next weekend to clinch the NEC title and an automatic berth in the NCAA Division I Football Championship Series tournament. The Seahawks beat Holy Cross 31-30 in a nonconference game Saturday.

Staten Island was one of the areas hit hardest by the hurricane. Williams said Wagner’s campus had trees and power lines down, and his dorm room was without power for about four days. The football team missed only one day of practice, but when they came back they had to dress in the dark.

The damage on campus was not bad compared to other neighborhoods on the island, where homes were destroyed. Nineteen of the deaths attributed to the storm occurred on Staten Island.

“It’s been devastating to see a lot of these people in this community who had everything just taken away from them that fast,” Williams said. “I walked down one street where there was a pile of debris taller than me, and I’m about 5-(foot)-9.”

Williams and several other Wagner athletes, including basketball player and fellow Bridgeton resident Josh Thompson, have volunteered in the relief efforts. They bring supplies and help clean up — from helping residents pack up bags to removing heavy objects such as refrigerators and laundry machines that were ruined by flooding.

“People are doing a tremendous job of building themselves back up,” said Thompson, a St. Augustine Prep graduate who grew up down the street from Williams in Bridgeton and has been close with him since childhood.

The volunteer effort has turned into a team activity, but it started with players taking the initiative.

“Everybody wanted to volunteer,” Williams said, “so whenever we all had holes in our schedule with practice and classes, we took the opportunity to go down to the areas and actually help out.”

Sports often help in the recovery process, and the Wagner athletes are aware of what their success could mean.

The Wagner football team lost its first three games of the season but has won seven straight. The Seahawks never have qualified for the NCAA tournament, but now they control their own destiny.

“It would be huge to bring an NEC championship to this city, because it’s never been done before,” Williams said. “And a lot of people on Staten Island haven’t even heard of Wagner. But now with the recognition and everything, it would bring some positive energy to the island.”

Williams, a redshirt junior running back, has rushed for 1,064 yards and nine touchdowns in 10 games. He also has caught 20 passes for 218 yards and two TDs.

Williams ran for 1,982 yards in his first two seasons, but he said he has taken his game to another level.

“I’m not just in the backfield now,” he said. “I’m motioning, becoming a decoy. I’m in the slot catching passes. Even if I’m not catching passes, I’ve become effective to the point where I can take a defender off the next guy. I can be effective as a decoy or a blocker.”

Thompson and the men’s basketball team start their season Wednesday at Delaware State. The Seahawks were picked third in the conference’s preseason coaches’ poll and also have their eyes on an NCAA tournament appearance.

“Over these last two to three years, I’ve really seen this community come out and begin to support Wagner and begin to make Wagner their own,” said Thompson, a senior forward. “To know that people are watching, and for people to see us really be personable and reach out to people who are in need, it’s something to feel good about. I think it would be a great thing if we could (make the tournament).”

All of Wagner’s teams have dual purposes now, though. Winning is good, but the players plan to continue to help with the relief efforts, too.

“We’re focused on these next games and helping the community out as much as possible,” Williams said.