



## The Man Behind the Brooms

**Melvin Pickens, 81, the Heights' peerless peddler, deals with illness**

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It's 10 a.m. — late by Melvin Pickens' standards. Years ago, he'd be halfway through his route, but everything takes more time these days. He stands unsteadily, clutching the car door and waiting for Carolyn Palmer, his caregiver, to haul his walker from her back seat. Then Pickens, 81 and legally blind, shuffles into the Ozark Country Restaurant across from the bus stop on Keightley Drive in Little Rock.

The owner, Dan Haase, spots him immediately. "We sure have missed you," Haase says, rounding the counter. "We've had a lot of people ask about you."

"You can tell everyone I'm here, and I got plenty of brooms," Pickens says. He's a common figure in this neighborhood, where most people know him as the Broom Man.

Haase takes in Pickens' hunched figure, swimming in a T-shirt and stone-washed jeans. "You've lost weight. How've you been?"

"I'm OK today," Pickens says. "How many brooms you need?"

Haase doesn't need any brooms. He still has two unused brooms from the last time Pickens was here. But he grins, holds out a \$20 and says, "You're giving me that discount, aren't you? I guess I'll take two."

"Well, it was going to be \$30, but I'm giving you the discount," Pickens says. This is a joke, delivered so flatly, it's easy to miss. Pickens always sells brooms for \$10 each. Customers can pay more if they like but never less.

An employee in a white apron also comes forward, \$10 in hand. "Pull out three, baby," Pickens tells Palmer.

She has retrieved a bundle, a dozen brooms lashed with three mops, from her car. She struggles with the cord. Haase offers a pair of scissors. "He's better at this than I am," she says, nodding toward Pickens.

"He's only been practicing for the past 100 years," Haase quips.

Actually, the Broom Man has been selling for 60 years, which equals about three generations of customers. But he doesn't count years — only bills.

## THE MASCOT

In the Heights, Pickens is legendary — an ambassador from the projects who models an impeccable work ethic for some of Little Rock's most privileged residents.

Decades ago, Jim Johnson, 78, a co-founder of the advertising agency Cranford Johnson Robinson Woods, gestured toward Pickens and told his sons: "There is a good example of somebody that's not going to let the world get him down."

Now the next generation of CJRW — Jordan Johnson, 35, no blood relation — does the same. About four years ago, his son Patterson, then 2, met Pickens outside of Shipley Donuts on Cantrell Road.

"Why is that man there?" Patterson asked.

"He's trying to work really hard, and he's had to overcome some serious challenges in his life .... We need to always do what we can to lift up others," Johnson explained.

Patterson toddled over to Pickens and, unprompted, handed over an entire bag of doughnut holes.

“Never even got one out,” Johnson remembers emotionally.

Now when they see Pickens at Shipley, they get two bags of doughnut holes. “And when we need a broom, we buy them from Melvin,” Johnson says.

It seems the entire neighborhood watches out for the Broom Man. Restaurant owners ply him with sandwiches and, back in his bus-riding days, customers offered rides home.

“Melvin’s such an icon of, ‘doesn’t matter if I’m visually impaired or whatever, I get up and go to work every day.’ He wasn’t stopped by his disabilities. ... I have a daughter with no arms, and she is not stopped by anything,” said Connie Fails, 65, who once organized a Christmas event that sold \$500 worth of brooms for Pickens.

Tracee Gentry-Matthews, 42, always looks for Pickens during her morning coffee stop at Boulevard Bread Co. He likes to hawk brooms from the bench by the door.

“People criticized me because I had an 18-month-old baby, and I was on my own. I quit my interior design job to paint full time .... I believed in myself, and I’ve made a career and supported my daughter. Against all odds, you can do whatever you want to do, whether it’s being an artist ... or selling brooms and making a living at it,” Gentry-Matthews says.

One customer, Sheffield Nelson, always buys the rest of the day’s brooms if Pickens seems tired. Another customer, Lynda Elliot, invited Pickens for breakfast at the Satellite Cafe and wrote about it for a Christian magazine. Afterward, readers sent Pickens cash donations, and one couple showed up at his home with a ham. He told them to keep the ham, because his refrigerator was broken. On the spot, the couple took him shopping and bought him a new refrigerator.

## SIX DAYS A WEEK

Customers are quick to recount certain details: For most of his life, Pickens has worked six days a week, taking the bus and navigating traffic alone, brooms slung over a shoulder. And he did this, despite seeing only shapes, never details. He’s a deacon at his church. He’s perpetually cheerful. He put his sons through college selling brooms. This is, of course, oversimplification. First off, only one son went to college, and tuition was largely covered with grants and a track scholarship.

And like everyone, Pickens has a private life. In the car with Palmer, he recalls young adulthood — downed pitchers of beer with a woman in a cafe, how they stopped for gin on the way to his house. How, afterward, “that girl told me I was the best friend she ever had.”

Sometimes Pickens grows frustrated, muttering a single obscenity over and over again as he shambles through his misty, walker-aided world, where everything — asphalt crack, stairs, slope, welcome mat — poses a lethal threat.

He’s a master salesman, assertive and manipulative, underestimating profit when convenient and nagging potential customers, even if they bought a broom — or 10 — yesterday. “Don’t you have any relatives you can call, see if they need a broom?” he’ll say.

But these bits aren’t mentioned, because they don’t belong to the Broom Man. They simply belong to the man.

## BEYOND BROOMS

For years, Pickens represented his complex on the Metropolitan Housing Alliance’s Resident Advisory Board. He lived in the South End, a neighborhood demarcated by railroad tracks, Interstate Park and Roosevelt Road and characterized by iron bars and planked windows. But half a century ago, kids charged through yards and skirted adults, all of whom were at liberty to dole out “whuppin’s” as needed.

“It was everybody raised everybody,” says Pickens’ son John, 49.

And everyone knew his father. Pickens would feed any child who came through his door, but he wouldn’t tolerate disrespect. Smart mouths were met with a knuckle-grind to the scalp.

John describes Pickens as a “disciplinarian” — a title he comes by honestly, since Pickens terms the grandmother who raised him “a behind mechanic.”

Pickens’ father wasn’t around, and his mother died in childbirth. His grandmother died the day after he graduated from Henry Clay Yerger High School in Hope. A few years later, he moved to Little Rock and enrolled in the Arkansas School for the Blind. In the mid-’50s, many blind students sold brooms. Pickens became the Broom Man primarily because he outlasted the others.

In 1957, he married a tiny, fiery woman named Dorothy Mae Cane. She had a music degree from Arkansas AM&N (now the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff) and played the piano for local churches. She was completely blind.

The Pickens boys — Michael, Chris, James and John — were raised in public housing. But according to John, they never realized they were poor. They had music and good food. Pickens did the cooking, and he was a whiz with fried chicken.

“I never worried about wearing my brother’s clothes because Daddy couldn’t buy me no new clothes. If I said, ‘Daddy I need this,’ he said, ‘All right, baby.’ Nine times out of 10, I got what I asked for,” he says.

Sometimes Pickens supplemented the brooms with other jobs, such as working at Goodwill Industries or Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind. Early on he developed a system he still uses today — he buys “seconds,” or slightly flawed merchandise, at a deep discount from Little Rock Broom Works and sells it at roughly 70 percent profit.

The Pickens family attended church multiple times a week. “The most important value to Daddy is his Christianity ... ‘For me and my house, we’re going to serve the Lord,’” John says.

But second baseman Jackie Robinson ranks too, albeit several notches below the Lord. “I’m a Dodgers man, and I’ll tell you why,” Pickens says. “That was the first team that admitted blacks.”

The older sons, Michael and Chris, were constantly in trouble. James was the golden boy, a track star who graduated from Ouachita Baptist University and worked as a detention officer for Pulaski County. John, the baby, was a homebody who worried over his mother.

Now only Chris and John are left. Michael died of a gunshot wound and James of an illness. In 1982, the Pickens brothers met Irma Jean, their half-sister, fathered before Pickens married Cane. Pickens also has about a dozen grandchildren and anywhere between 27 (according to his wife’s 2012 obituary) and 40 (according to John) great-grandchildren.

“It’s been all right. It could’ve been worse,” Pickens says, summing up his eight decades.

## HANGIN' WITH MR. PICKENS

These days, Palmer, 56, spends more time with Pickens than anyone. She considers him family.

"I've been his driver, his buddy, and he's been my daddy. Boy, I just love him to death," Palmer says. "God don't ever put nothing on you that you don't want. God just put us together."

Palmer arrives downtown at Cumberland Towers around 8 a.m., makes breakfast and, when he feels like working, chauffeurs Pickens around the Heights. "Being up there in the high rise ... there's a lot of death and that's kind of depressing. So we came up with, let's do this just to get out of the building," Palmer says. She has been driving him for a year and half.

They have a routine: Palmer pauses at a restaurant door and helps Pickens set up the walker. Then she parks and lugs in the brooms. At Pickens' insistence, they stop at nearly every building, even if sales are unlikely. If there's an obstacle that Pickens can't navigate, such as high steps, Palmer goes inside and says, "I've got the Broom Man in the car. He wants to know if anybody wants to buy a broom."

When Pickens becomes fretful (on a recent day, he was convinced that John had his missing wallet), she distracts him. When he gossips about "low-lives" at Cumberland Towers, she changes the subject. When he grumbles about his children, she defends them: "That's my brother you're talking about, now Dad."

On a Friday morning, Pickens and Palmer wait at a Mc-Donald's drive-through. He needs a coffee before they try to offload some brooms. She orders for him, two creams and six sugars.

"You want me to pay for it?" Pickens asks.

"I gotcha," Palmer says, digging change from her purse.

"Thank you, baby. I'll dance at your wedding," Pickens tells her.

"I'm not getting married, though," Palmer says. "I'm going to stay single like you."

"Now, I would get married, if I could find the right somebody .... I love married life. But like I said, I don't want any thing," he says. Pickens and Cane had been married 43 years when she died of cancer.

“So he’s looking for a wife!” Palmer teases. “I’m going to dance at your wedding, then. I’m going to sing, too.”

But in recent months, neither of them has done much dancing. Around Valentine’s Day, Pickens got sick. Doctors removed his gallbladder and treated him for a urinary tract infection. He left the hospital weak, with the walker. He didn’t feel up to selling, and after a few months, his customers started worrying.

## WHERE IS THE BROOM MAN?

On July 18, Gentry-Matthews posted on Facebook: “I haven’t seen the gentleman that sells brooms and mops on Kavanaugh in MANY MONTHS... Does anyone know anything about him?... He is such a wonderful person and has walked the streets of the Heights for many many ‘as long as I can remember’ years selling brooms and I believe he is sick ... I miss him and want to help him ... ”

Her post received 25 comments and 40 likes. Subsequent posts about Pickens garnered more than 30 comments and 100 likes.

Gentry-Matthews feels a faith-based connection to Pickens. “It’s just a light around Melvin ... He’s just like sunshine to me. It’s like, you just want to be quiet and listen to everything he has to say. He’s quoting Scripture. He’s giving you wisdom,” she says. Nelson saw the post and contacted Gentry-Matthews. They took a gift basket to Pickens’ apartment and discovered that the Broom Man had been bedridden. Gentry-Matthews decided that, if Pickens couldn’t come to the Heights, she would bring customers to him.

She spread the word online, took orders and went by Cumberland Towers to pick up merchandise. She sold about 75 brooms and mops and encouraged other customers to visit and buy their own.

Pickens says he chose the Heights because “that’s where the money is.” He can’t summon his customers by name, but he recalls them in details. He speaks of the Christmas sale and a man who, decades ago, used to come to the South End and give his children gifts.

In the past month, there have been good days and bad days. Pickens had another urinary tract infection and a bout of walking pneumonia. Once while selling, he got overheated and fainted, frightening Palmer enough to call an ambulance.

Pickens says his strength is returning: "It ain't full-full. But it's coming. It's going to take time."

John describes his father as proud. "He's not asking for a handout. If you give him a handout, that's fine, but he's not asking ... and he don't really want people in his business."

John is proud, too. "My daddy is one of the top salesmen in the world. He can sell you something, even if you don't want to buy it. ... He asks everybody, 'Do you need a broom?' I'll say not everybody wants a broom, why don't you leave those folks alone. But then they've done bought a broom."