





# BROOM MAN

**BY ERIC FRANCIS**

*TBQ Contributing Writer*

His name is Melvin Pickins. Many of his most loyal customers don't even know that.

To them he's the Broom Man. Or the Broom Guy. Or Mister B.

"They call me B, but it should be P," he says with a laugh. "But I'll answer to that."

We'll stick with Mister B, then.

Six days a week, Mister B steps off the No. 8 bus on the Central Arkansas Transit Line at around 8:30 a.m., where it stops outside the Ozark Family Restaurant, just north of the intersection of Mississippi Street and Cantrell Road in Little Rock. He shoulders his bundle of brooms (and the occasional mop),

shuffles across the street into the restaurant, and at every occupied table he makes his pitch.

"I'm selling brooms to support the partially blind. Do you need a broom?"

Monday through Saturday, two hours a day, he makes his rounds on foot and by bus, from Cantrell Road to Kavanaugh Boulevard, stopping in at restaurants and retailers and asking everyone if they need a broom.

Sometimes they say yes. Far more often they say no.

Rejection, however, does not quail him, because after selling brooms on and off for

45 years, if Mister B knows one thing it is this: Keep trying.

"To be successful in life, you gotta never quit," he says.

And that, as far as he is concerned, is that.

Today at the Ozark Family Restaurant, nobody seems to be in a buying mood. They're happy enough to see Mister B, though, and talk about baseball – he's a Dodgers man, our Mister B – or whatever else is on their minds.

"I can't buy any more brooms, Dan (the restaurant owner) went up on milk to \$3 a cup," says one of his regulars, local realtor Val Hansen, drawing an appreciative laugh from



the broom seller. “You ask my wife; I think I’ve got more brooms in my garage than you do, Mister B.”

Sharing Hansen’s table is fellow realtor Mark Linde, who gets earnestly serious after a couple of friendly quips. “That man is an inspiration to me,” Linde says. “I’ve known him for 30 years. Rain or shine, he’s always there.”

There is unanimous agreement around the table that Mister B could teach the most ardent contestants on TV’s “The Apprentice” a thing or two about work ethic.

Such praise is all fine and good, but what Mister B really needs is someone to buy a broom. Like so many other people – be they entrepreneurs, business owners, workers – he’s feeling the pinch of the financial crisis. Yet even in the face of sales he says have tapered off for more than a year, he remains optimistic.

“I’m affected bad by the economy,” he said. “But I’ve got God in my life. If I go out there and sell one broom, I’m just as grateful, because I could have not sold any.”



### CONSIDER MISTER B’S LIFE:

He is 76 years old, and partially blind. He is a son of Hope, where he was raised by a grandmother who instilled him with love and respect for the Lord, and who died the day after he graduated from high school. He came to Little Rock then, in 1951.

He met and married his wife Dorothy 50 years ago, and they had five children. Three are in the Little Rock area – a son who is a painter, another who works in security, and a daughter who works in concessions.

They have outlived two sons, one who was a deputy sheriff and another who had served in the Army but died in an accident just as he was re-entering civilian life. Two of their kids have been through college – the daughter and the son who’d been a deputy.

Dorothy was a musician, a pianist. She earned a music degree at the Agricultural, Mechanical & Normal School in Pine Bluff (now UAPB). She made her living playing in churches, though now she’s too sickly to work, Mister B said. They have lived in Cumberland Tower for three years, and he

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has served as a representative to the Little Rock Housing Authority for 34 years. He is a cancer patient, still seeing Dr. Gail Jones at CARTI. He is an ordained deacon at his church, New Hope Baptist on Wright Avenue, where he has served as president of the usher board and superintendent of Sunday school.

#### CONSIDER MISTER B'S PERSON:

His hands are soft, with slender, almost graceful fingers, ending in nails that are long and neatly clipped. Salt-and-pepper stubble adorns him cheek and jowl. His hair is black, curly, close-cropped. His broad nose holds up a pair of impressively thick glasses. On a late April day, with a bit of chill yet in the air, he's wearing a dark brown suit coat and trousers over a knit shirt, topped with a blue knit cap. He moves in a determined shuffle.

#### CONSIDER MISTER B'S WARES:

His inventory varies from day to day, but usually consists of six to eight brooms. Sometimes they're traditional straw brooms, like the one manufactured in Mexico for the Chickasaw Broom Mfg. Co. of Memphis, Tenn., with its blue wooden handle; or the red-handled Original Air-light from the Little Rock Broom Works, with its "100 percent broom corn fiber, no stalks." Sometimes they're contemporary numbers, with nylon bristles cut into a wedge shape meant to better get into corners. Always, they are held together by two straps made from old bicycle tire inner tubes, tied into loops.

#### CONSIDER MISTER B'S ATTITUDE:

"Life has been good to me," he says. "I like people. Everybody's good and I'm so grateful to all these merchants who let me come in."

And he says this: "Everything's going to be all right."

And this: "When you have God in your life, you can accomplish anything you want."

Selling brooms is not the only work Mister B has tackled. Over the years he's worked variously at the Lighthouse for the Blind, Goodwill, and Helping Hand. But the brooms have been a constant.

Asked about his first sale, he lets loose a

loud laugh. "No! That was a long time ago!"

It was at the School for the Blind that Mister B was encouraged to take up broom selling. "That's what they would do," he explained simply of the rationale. "After I got out of school, a lot of fellas were selling brooms."

Now he's the last. What kept him at it? "I just needed the money," he said with a smile.

He sells his brooms for ten bucks apiece



these days, but it wasn't always so, especially not when he started.

"The best broom you could get was a dollar and a half back then," he said. "Every time the broom store went up, I'd have to go up on the brooms."

Mister B won't put a number on what constitutes a good day for him. In fact, he says there's really no such thing as a best day or worst day from all his years.

"That's something that would be hard to determine," he says. "Some days you might sell nothing. Some days you might sell many."

But all the mess on Wall Street has trickled down to the streets Mister B walks. He hears his customers talk frequently about how bad the economy has gotten for them.

"I know lots of people who have been laid off their jobs because of the economy," he says. "But it's just something you've got to deal with."

That's why, day in and day out, Mister B and his brooms stop in at places like the Ozark Family Restaurant, Shipley Do-Nuts, Leo's Greek Castle, Wordsworth Books, Pulaski Bank, U.S. Pizza and Satellite Cafe.

Steven McKnight, general manager of Satellite Cafe, says Mister B has been a fixture the three years he's worked there.

"He's pretty consistently in here week-days," McKnight said. "People in here ... are used to seeing him. People give him rides. They buy him drinks or breakfast sometimes."

And occasionally they buy brooms. McKnight says the cafe has bought its share, though not lately.

"We seriously probably have 20 brooms downstairs," he confides.

This April day, Mister B carries awhile at Satellite Cafe to take part in a photo shoot. He's gracious, but it's easy to tell he'd rather get on his way. After all, time is money and he has buses to catch.

At the end of the session, Mister B has just one question for the photographer: "Do you want to buy a broom?"

And there it is, his mantra in action: *To be successful in life, you gotta never quit.*

His load lightened by one, Mister B shoulders his bundle once again and slowly makes his way down Kavanaugh, looking for the next sale. **TBQ**