

"Pick's Glasses" authored by Carol Backman

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Recently, I found a pair of my father's old glasses hidden away in my night table drawer. The sight of them brought back a rush of warm memories of my father who had such a great impact on my life. His name was Isaac Pickell, but everyone except my mother called him "Pick." She endearingly called him, "Izzy," his Jewish nickname. The glasses are brown with oval frames and bifocal lenses. I remember Pick wearing them when he was printing pictures in his dark room, cutting wood on his power saw, or working on his Commodore when computers were still a novelty. A practical man who didn't go to doctors much, Pick found them at a garage sale and bought them for a dollar or two.

Pick graduated at sixteen from Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn, New York. From his school yearbook, I learned he was in the amateur radio club, chemistry club, geology club and a member of the honorary, Arista. He was also known for getting 100% on the state geometry Regents exam. It listed his theme song as, "I only have 'ayes' for you." After high school, Pick earned a degree in mathematics from Brooklyn College and moved to Washington, D.C. for a job with the government.

There he met and married my mother, Florence, when she was twenty-one and he was twenty-three. She was a waitress at Rubin's, her father's kosher deli on 7th and M Streets in D.C., and he was a handsome young man looking for a home cooked meal. Engaged to someone else at the time, Florence broke her engagement and married Pick, because he wasn't interested in taking over the family business. I was born a year later during World War II, and Pick worked as a machinist at the Washington Navy Yard and served as a neighborhood air raid warden at night.

Later on, Pick became the manager of Sun Radio on 10th and E Streets, across the street from Ford's Theater. He sold radios, televisions, and stereo equipment and also installed home sound systems for customers who could afford such luxuries. Pick got to know many local business owners and celebrities who came to the store to buy high quality stereo equipment. In

appreciation for his service, they sometimes gave him movie passes or invited the family to eat in their restaurants.

Pick worked six days a week, and on weekends he went to garage sales and worked on his many hobbies. He was an amateur radio operator with call letters W3PPQ, talking to people all over the world from his basement workshop. He built an electric organ from scratch and learned to play it with no previous musical training. He built several grandfather clocks, cutting and staining each piece by hand. He also collected cameras like the Minox, and became an expert at enlarging the tiny photos, some of which were featured on the cover of the Minox magazine.

In spite of his busy life, my father always had time to explain a difficult math problem or help me with my homework. In eighth grade Pick helped me do a science project on plants under the microscope. I made slides of various plant cells, and he showed me how to photograph them through the microscope using a camera on a tripod. I won first prize in botany in the D.C. science fair that year. In high school, Pick took me on my first airplane ride to Los Angeles to visit my uncle and his family. It was a dream come true for me to fly to California and to visit Disneyland and Hollywood. When I got engaged to Sam Backman, an ardent photographer, Pick gave him a Nikon camera as an engagement gift.

At sixty-eight Pick had chest pains and a serious heart attack right in the doctor's office. He was rushed to the hospital and treated with a new clot busting drug that saved his life. When he got home, he told me how interesting it was to watch the drug breaking up the clot in his artery on a television screen. Despite his calm demeanor, my sister Beverly and I knew he was scared. For the first time, he began to tell us how much he loved us, which was unusual behavior for my father. Coming so close to death had rearranged the priorities in his life.

When Pick was diagnosed with cancer in 1990, he went for radiation treatments without a fuss, not wanting to frighten anyone unnecessarily. Instead of asking his doctor how long he had to live, he asked the oncologist if he could order a one year subscription to *Life* magazine. Pick's on-going humor, even when facing death, is how I remember him. When his pain became unbearable, the doctor ordered morphine which knocked him out. My husband stayed at the house and helped take care of him until he was

moved to the hospital. Even the paramedics who took him in the ambulance told us later that he was joking with them on the way.

Looking at Pick's glasses, I remember his wit and courage and what a positive view he had of life. Every experience was a challenge, and every glass was half full. Following his example, I earned a certificate in secondary math and taught high school mathematics for twenty-five years. My son, Jordan, chose a math major at the University of Virginia and became a lawyer. My daughter, Stephanie, uses computers daily in the mortgage business, and married an educator who taught calculus. Everywhere I look around me, there is a thread running through our family that leads back to Pick.

About Carol Backman

Carol Backman was born in Washington, D.C. and moved to Silver Spring, Maryland in the eighth grade. She graduated from Northwood High School where she was the editor of ***The Red and Black***. Carol earned a B.A. in American Studies and a Ford Foundation fellowship for an M.A. in teaching from George Washington University. She is married to Sam Backman, a retired logistician, and they have two grown children, Stephanie Savir and Jordan Backman. The family accompanied Sam to Heidelberg, Germany where Carol taught for the U.S. Army. Carol is retired from Fairfax County Schools, and this is her fifth year of leading the Memoir Writing Group at the JCCNV. Carol and Sam live in Springfield and enjoy being grandparents to Yitzchok Shlomo, Pinchos Yoseph, and Shoshana Savir.

