

## Arthur Pickoff's greatest hits: A musical medical career in six tracks

Phil Neal

### Track 1: *Fame*, chemistry, and the cultural center of the world

For a bright, artistic child, being born and raised in the heart of New York City is about as good as life gets.

"It's incredible," Pickoff said. "To grow up there with the museums and the theater and the art."

Building on his childhood passion for the arts, as a teenager Pickoff applied to study piano at the High School of Performing Arts. The school was the inspiration for the 1980 movie *Fame*, but unlike the characters in the film (and many of his classmates), Pickoff didn't have a driving determination to succeed as a performer. In fact, his experience at the school inspired him to consider an entirely different field.

"I went there because it seemed like a fun thing to do, and it totally was," he said. "Then I went to chemistry class and sort of liked that... (The teacher) noticed that I was slightly interested in what he was saying, which for him was remarkable, because, clearly, none of the other kids in the class who were four-plus artists could care less about it."

With support and encouragement from his teacher, after graduation Pickoff enrolled in Queens College as a chemistry major. He enjoyed his classes and began pondering careers combining chemistry and mathematics, but medicine didn't strike him as a realistic option.

"I never thought I was smart enough to be a physician," Pickoff said, "and then it dawned on me that I was doing as well in class as everybody else who was clearly thinking they were going to go into medicine, and I said, 'Maybe I could do this.'"

### Track 2: Rock and roll residents wailing on Wall Street

Entering the Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University, also in New York, Pickoff didn't leave his love of music behind. Despite a demanding course of studies, Pickoff and several other students found the time to form a rock band. Pickoff played drums and bass, and he wasn't the only member with serious musical experience. Another band member, the former guitarist for the group Sha Na Na, had played at Woodstock just before Jimi Hendrix.



Arthur Pickoff, M.D., is chair of the Department of Pediatrics and the Department of Community Health for the Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine.

“We played all over New York City,” Pickoff said. “One of the great parties we played was for the Wall Street crowd. It was on the South Street Pier on a boat, and we were just playing, and those sounds were echoing through the tall buildings of the New York skyline.”

In between gigs, Pickoff thrived in medical school and anticipated a specialty in nuclear medicine. Once again, however, his initial plans soon changed.

“Careers evolve dependent upon the people you meet along the way,” he said. “I really think if you meet the right

mentors... you could be surprised what you can be talked into as an area of interest.”

In Pickoff’s case, the influence of respected faculty members led him to focus on pediatrics, and then to explore a subspecialty in pediatric cardiology.

“It just fit,” Pickoff said of his new focus. It was “something that was intriguing, the kids, their problems, how they’re diagnosed, how they’re treated.”

After graduation, Pickoff stayed in the city as a pediatrics resident at Mt. Sinai Medical Center. Residency made it difficult to fit in concerts, but the band still played occasional gigs. When Pickoff finished his residency and prepared to begin a fellowship at the University of Miami Medical Center, though, his tenure as a rock musician officially ended.

“I didn’t know what to do with the drums,” he said. “They were at the hospital there, and I said, ‘Aw, just give them to some kid.’ That was the last I saw of them.”

### **Track 3: “Southern sojourn,” or “the comforts of country living”**

Pickoff enjoyed his cardiology training so much that he finished his fellowship and accepted an offer to stay on at the University of Miami as a faculty member. Before long, he received his first grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), establishing a trend that would continue throughout his career.

“I think the vast majority of my years as a pediatrician/pediatric cardiologist, I’ve had some degree of NIH funding covering my work,” he said. “Maybe all but two or three of my years as an academician... That’s not bad.”

Miami offered more than an opportunity to develop his clinical practice and follow his research interests, though. It’s also where Pickoff met a critical care nurse

named Carrell, who was head of the ICU at nearby Jackson Memorial Hospital and would eventually become his wife. Among other shared interests, the couple became certified scuba divers and enjoyed exploring the underwater riches off the southern Florida coast.

In 1987, Pickoff accepted an offer to become the Director of Pediatric Cardiology at Tulane University. He, Carrell, and their daughter, Shana, then just under three years old, left Florida and headed for the excitement of New Orleans.

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At Tulane, Pickoff and his colleagues set and steadily achieved several very ambitious goals.

“We established a strong clinical program,” Pickoff said, strengthened the “research programs, and we developed the first training program in pediatric cardiology ever to exist in the state of Louisiana.”

After six years in New Orleans, Carrell decided she was eager for a change of scenery, and Pickoff, despite being a lifelong city dweller, was willing to give it a try.

“We moved about an hour away out to a farm,” he said. “The going bet was that I was going to be miserable out there, and I loved it. The country, the darkness, the lack of noise, the fishing pond where you could catch bass — it’s just extremely relaxing.”

Carrell embraced the country lifestyle and began raising and breeding quarter horses, a pastime she was able to share with Shana. Once again, Pickoff and his family had found the perfect fit.

“From then on,” he said, “I decided I would never live in a normal neighborhood where you’re right next to the people. I’ve done my city time.”

### **Track 4: Discovering the delights of a dark, dirty town**

Although happy at Tulane, Pickoff was open to other opportunities, and in 1998 he heard about a medical school in Dayton, Ohio, seeking a new chair of pediatrics.

“I decided to take a look,” Pickoff said, “really not thinking I would consider it a fit.

“I didn’t know what to expect really. I had a mental picture of this... dark, dirty, steel-producing, automobile-producing town.”

Happily surprised on all counts, Pickoff said, “I came back from a first visit saying, ‘I like the people, and I like the place.’”

Some colleagues suggested he look into more established programs at larger schools, but Pickoff felt that at Wright State he “could make a dent here and do something constructive.”



Among many other hobbies, Pickoff is an avid digital photographer. In this image, a girl flies a kite at Omaha Beach in Normandy, France, where Allied forces attacked on D-Day (June 6, 1944), in a costly but vital battle that served as a turning point of World War II.



“I really didn’t know what a community-based medical school was,” Pickoff admitted. “It was very interesting to me, because I come from traditional academic health science centers. The attraction here was the children’s hospital (and) this young medical school, which is very different than the ancient ones I came from.”

With the support of his wife and daughter, Pickoff accepted the position. His appointment began in January, just in time to experience the worst a Midwestern winter has to offer.

Pickoff came to Ohio by himself at first, with Carrell and Shana planning to follow six months later. He arrived during an intense snowstorm, he said, “which was culture shock coming from the south. It was a cruel introduction.”

Since that first trial by ice, Pickoff has found the Dayton area much more enjoyable.

“It’s turned out to be a completely delightful place to be and to live,” he said. “Personally a great move, and professionally a great move too... I’m very happy here.”

“I took a chance here, and I’m not disappointed,” he added. “I have no regrets.”

## **Track 5: Good people gearing up for growth**

As the new chair of pediatrics, it didn’t take Pickoff long to “make a dent” and begin helping the program evolve. Over the course of nine years, Pickoff and his colleagues have expanded the size of the faculty, strengthened numerous specialties, and created a hospitalist group.

In addition, he said, “From a research point of view, we’ve gone from a department that almost never published an abstract or a paper, into a department that is very well represented at national meetings and is publishing well.”

“When I got here,” he added, “there was basically no federal grant support, and we now have about \$3 million of external federal support, both from the Department of Defense and from the National Institutes of Health.”

Pickoff has also enjoyed assuming a leadership role with the Children’s Medical Center of Dayton, strengthening the connections between the school and the hospital.

“I have become a member of the board of trustees of this hospital,” he said, “a member of the senior management team, and a member of the executive committee of the hospital.”

“It’s been fun watching the institution evolve. It’s grown by leaps and bounds.”

His initial impressions about the medical school and its faculty have also proven true.

“What I have enjoyed at Wright State is the teaching culture,” he said, “the culture of education as a primary mission, the evolving culture of research. And the quality of the people here has been second to none.”

### Track 6: Musical chairs and crystal balls

A few years ago, while playing tennis with Robert Reece, Ph.D., then chair of the Department of Community Health, Pickoff learned of his friend’s upcoming retirement. Attracted by the department’s research and educational programs, Pickoff applied — and was eventually selected for — the position.

The department was in solid shape, but Pickoff worked to build on Reece’s accomplishments by forging a stronger sense of community among the faculty, enhancing several of the programs, and charting a clear course for the future.

Serving as the chair of two departments, in addition to his clinical duties and role in hospital administration, keeps Pickoff busy, but he still makes time to stay involved with the American Heart Association. In fact, he just finished a term as president of the Great Rivers affiliate, which encompasses five states. Somehow, he also manages to fit in volunteer work at Reach Out of Montgomery County, a clinic for underserved and uninsured patients.

“I’d like to do more of everything,” he admitted. “I’d like to work more with the students and the residents... (and) there are lighter times during the academic year when I think I might have just one more NIH grant in me that wants to come out.”

The time crunch has also taken its toll on his hobbies. After more than a decade, he said, “I have stopped riding motorcycles. I have decided that I will certainly stop after I get hurt, so why not stop before I get hurt? ... I just thought I could sort of look into a crystal ball and say, ‘You know what? Let’s quit while we’re ahead on this here.’”

He won’t entirely rule out another ride or two out west, where he and Carrell are building a home in Colorado, but for now, his motorcycle is up for sale.

Pickoff still plays piano, although he focuses on Beethoven sonatas rather than rock anthems these days. It’s difficult to find more than a few hours to practice each week, but he can’t quite bring himself to rule out a return to the stage. He quickly dismisses the idea, but it’s easy to see a hint of the old rock and roll spirit lingering in his eyes.

“Well,” he finally admitted, “You know what? It would be fun to have a faculty or student-faculty band.”

