

WHEN IT COMES TO KANSAS CITY'S BLACK HISTORY,  
PROFESSOR PELLOM MCDANIELS SAYS IT'S TIME TO  
GET BEYOND THE NEGRO LEAGUES AND JAZZ.

BY CASEY LYONS

# HISTORIAN IN CHIEF



It never takes long for Pellom McDaniels to get the question.

It's the first day of a new semester. McDaniels, who teaches history at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, is standing in front of his 100-level class: American History to 1877. He's wearing a pressed olive-green suit. His head is shaved bald. With his broad shoulders and 300-pound frame, he's a giant compared to the skinny underclassmen.

About 10 minutes into class, he finishes explaining why history demands critical thinking.

"We don't know what the truth is," he says. "That depends on your perspective." He brings his fingertips together in a pyramid over his chest and glides forward a few steps as he asks the 180 students if they have any questions.

A kid toward the middle of the lecture hall raises his hand. McDaniels calls on him.

"Were you a lineman for the Chiefs?" the student asks.

"Were you a lineman for the Chiefs," McDaniels repeats in the soft and slow cadence that he uses when he's thinking or disappointed. He looks out through his half-rim professor's glasses and answers, "Yes, I was. In the '90s — '92 to '98. Any other questions?"

McDaniels has spent more years in a classroom than he ever did in Arrowhead Stadium. An injury forced him out of professional football a decade ago. With his playing days behind him, he turned his focus to academia.

McDaniels had been interested in teaching since attending Oregon State University, where he studied communications on a football scholarship. He was taking an African-American studies course, and the professor, a Southern white woman, was discussing slavery. Because "nigger" showed up in historical documents, she sometimes said the word in class. McDaniels thought she was too comfortable saying it.

"Maybe someone like me needs to be leading a classroom," he thought.

It took him more than 15 years to revisit the idea, but in 2005, he enrolled in Emory University's Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts. By 2007, he had earned a doctorate in American Studies.

The next year, he returned to Kansas City and UMKC with a mandate not just to teach but also to continue the community-service work he'd begun as a Chief. His return surprised some people.

Gary Ebersole, director of UMKC's history department, says McDaniels' background as a professional athlete — as well as a painter and a published poet — made him stand out among other applicants for a tenure-track position in the history department. But, he adds, McDaniels' dedication to Kansas City is probably what keeps him here.

"If he wasn't so invested in the community, I don't think we would be able to compete with the kind of salary he could command nationwide," Ebersole says. "I don't know that you can replace what Pellom does. I don't think lightning would strike twice."

But before he can get to business, McDaniels has to address and dismiss his students' questions about his football past.

"I always get it on the first day," he says as he leads an entourage of grad students through a sunny, humid August afternoon on the walk back to his small office in Cockefair Hall. "Some kid or some kid's parent will recognize my name, but I expect the allure of being a former Chief will wear off quickly."

The students who sign up for his lectures anticipating frequent digressions into locker-room stories and dissections of 4-3 defenses usually drop the class by week three.

McDaniels unlocks the door to his office and sets his leather shoulder bag on the floor next to his double-screened computer. Hanging on the wall next to the entrance is a foam-core board with a quote from black historian Carter G. Woodson: "Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history."

He sets his two cell phones down on the desk, sits in his chair facing the computer, takes a deep breath, and begins to type a lesson plan for his next class.

His present goal: to reshape Kansas City by teaching us our real history.

**B**lack history in Kansas City tends to fall into two categories — sports and music — that combine into one larger category: entertainment.

It's simple, packaged and easy to understand — too easy, McDaniels says.

But that sort of “lazy” thinking, as McDaniels calls it, only cheapens an otherwise rich past. A more comprehensive, nuanced history provides role models with whom people can connect, McDaniels says, and connections mean power.

Without a firm footing in history, ideas from the past get carried forward, such as the idea that opportunities are limited, especially east of Troost. Most black school kids, he says, view entertainment — being a professional athlete or a performer — as the only form of success available to them. McDaniels sees history as the key to breaking the cycle of poverty and opening a wider future.

“I know if I can get these [UMKC] students into the classrooms and high schools to educate kids about their community, they will go to 18th and Vine, they will go to the library, they will see themselves differently,” he says. “We can kind of change the culture, and if we change the culture, we can change the opportunities or the possibilities. If you change the possibilities, people see themselves differently. You change the community then.”

Before 1920, 25 percent of Kansas City's African-American population lived in one of four racially mixed neighborhoods; the largest, called Lincoln-Coles, was home to 1,634 African-Americans in 1900.

That neighborhood, which encompassed the area known today as 18th Street and Vine, housed the more affluent African-Americans. Among those living on the 2600 block of Highland Avenue were physician Dennis Madison Miller, who was the superintendent of General Hospital's Colored Division; a Republican Party leader and newspaper editor named Nelson Crews (who was named city clerk in 1904); and James Holbert, the Board of Education's attendance officer.

In 1900, Lincoln-Coles was 20 percent African-American. By 1920, the neighborhood's population had reached 5,423 — three out of four of the neighborhood's residents were black.

The influx of new residents made for some of the densest living conditions in the city. Homeowners and their boarders filled the small apartments over street-level shops.

Racial tensions enforced the neighborhood's borders. White Kansas Citians established no-go zones; between 1924 and 1930, bombs destroyed 18 homes occupied by black families in what were considered the wrong neighborhoods.

The forced density in Lincoln-Coles gave rise to racial solidarity and a raft of new social, religious and entertainment organizations. In 1917, the pioneers of Kansas City jazz organized into the Musicians Union Local #627. In 1914,

the Paseo YMCA, a four-story brick dorm connected to a multitiered gymnasium with an elevated indoor track, opened at 19th Street and the Paseo; in 1920, that building hosted the meeting that formed the Negro National Baseball League, in which the Kansas City Monarchs established a legacy of greatness.

Part of McDaniels' lifework is to reintroduce Kansas Citians — all Kansas Citians, regardless of their race — not only to the famous entertainers but also to the historic black middle class.

**M**cdaniels chases ghosts. Going back in time through books, photographs and microfilm, he brings people back to life, detail by detail.

He has published several articles on race and sports in scholarly journals; curated exhibits such as UMKC's *They Came to Fight: African-Americans in the Great World War*; written a book of poetry titled *My Own Harlem* while playing for the Chiefs. One book is close to going to press; he has several others in the works.

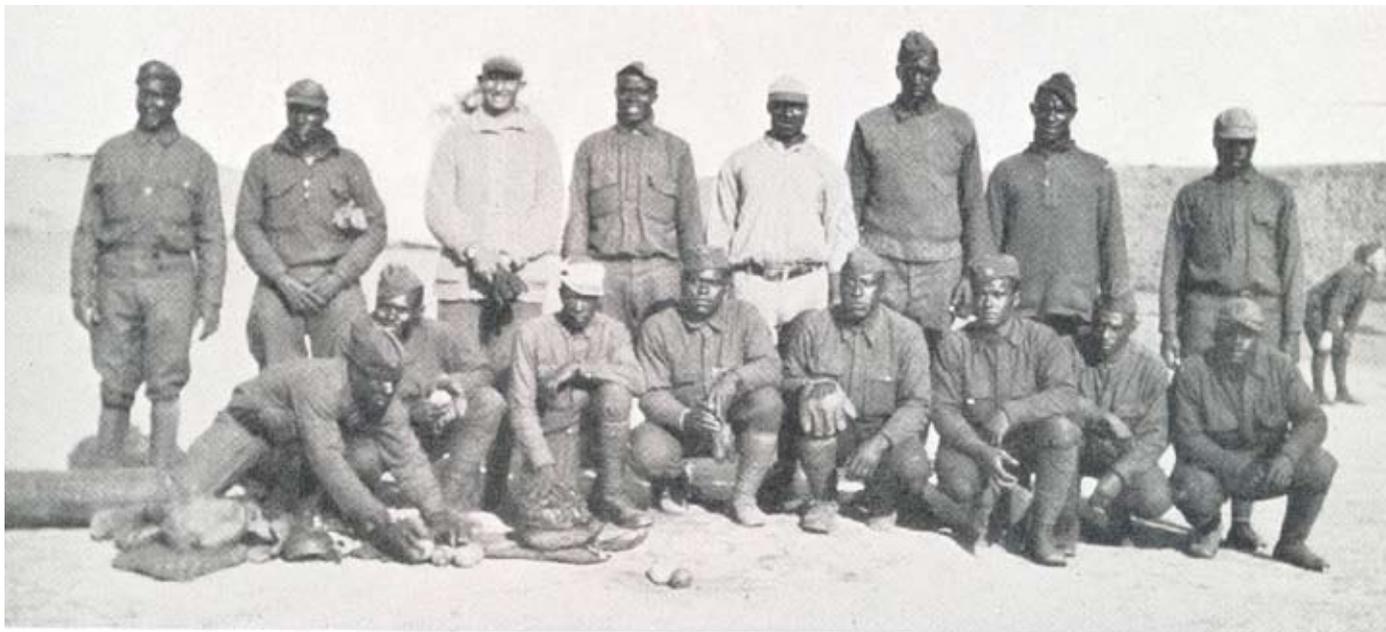
He was researching the role of black sol-

discipline and teamwork while serving in the war; back home, they used those skills to formalize and maintain the first baseball league for black players.

Blackburn, McDaniels discovered, was one of the player-fathers of the Negro National League. He pitched, left-handed, for the Kansas City Monarchs' inaugural team.

A few pages after the Bearcats picture, McDaniels flipped to another photograph of uniformed men: the 805th regimental band. There, again, was the still-serious Hugh Blackburn.

When he returned from foreign battlefields in 1919, Blackburn settled at 1212 East 16th Street (near today's Manual Career and Technical Center) and later at 718 Independence Avenue, according to city records. He almost certainly would have strolled the humming streets around 18th and Vine. On 18th Street between the Paseo and Highland, he would have walked past six physicians' offices (several of them in the Lincoln Building, which still stands); two dentists; a pair of druggists; eight restaurants; a couple of photographers; and a handful of cobblers, tailors, shoe shiners,



In this 1919 picture of the 805<sup>th</sup> Pioneer Infantry baseball team, Hugh Blackburn is fourth from the right in the front row.

diers in World War I when he came across a book written by Maj. Paul S. Bliss titled *Victory: History of the 805th Pioneer Infantry, American Expeditionary Forces*, about a “colored” labor force of ditch diggers, undertakers and railroad mechanics. Scanning the appendix, he saw a picture of the 805th regiment's baseball team.

And Hugh Blackburn's serious, unsmiling face.

“Son of a gun,” McDaniels said to himself. The black-and-white photograph of the Bearcats was the first time that he'd seen a link between World War I and baseball.

When the fighting was over, the soldiers of the 805th went to work filling in the trenches that scarred the French countryside. Line by line, they turned the battlefields back into farms.

And then, something quintessentially American happened. Someone looked at those pastures and saw baseball fields. Men like Blackburn, who had barnstormed before the war, organized into teams.

That, McDaniels says, is partly how the Negro National League came to be. Men learned

barbers and candy shops.

Then in 1921, Blackburn disappears from the city directory.

McDaniels thinks that Blackburn stayed in the area for the job prospects, but crossed the Missouri River and set up in Kansas City, Kansas. McDaniels hopes to find a relative or more evidence of Blackburn — a uniform, a stack of letters, a baseball glove — so that he can bring Blackburn to life again as a role model for kids who think they come from nothing and are destined for the same.

“It's not that I'm trying to resurrect the dead, but he mattered,” McDaniels says. “He mattered! He connects other people to the city. He connects this idea of baseball, jazz and the war that we somehow think need to exist separately. He connects it all together.”

**W**hen he's on the trail of people like Blackburn, McDaniels can go as fast as his interest carries him, which is fast.

But his headstrong pace doesn't always

work in the city's boardrooms.

McDaniels volunteers on the boards of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum (where he is president-elect), the National World War I Museum, the Midwest Black Archives and many other community organizations.

One of his biggest challenges today is helping shepherd the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum through “life after Buck” as the current era is known around 18th and Vine. Everyone loved Buck O'Neil, the chairman of the museum's board of directors and its public face. But that love came at a price, as would become clear after his death in October 2006.

Last year, McDaniels led the search committee that selected Greg Baker as the museum's new president, instead of Bob Kendrick, who had served as O'Neil's go-to guy. Baker's hiring signaled a shift in the museum's focus: While the priority had been building the \$18 million to \$20 million John “Buck” O'Neil Research and Education Center in the old Paseo YMCA, now it would be on “strategic planning.”

Some people in the community were furious. *The Kansas City Star's* Jason Whitlock wrote that Baker's selection was “bizarre,” “irresponsible,” “borderline unethical” and “a slap in the face to Buck.”

Mamie Hughes, the board's secretary at the time, says some board members felt excluded from the decision — forming subcommittees, as McDaniels had done, wasn't something the board did regularly. Hughes left the board shortly after Baker was chosen.

The backlash caused some people to write off the museum as failing in the post-Buck O'Neil era. But in the six months since Baker started a

drive for new members, the museum's membership is up 66 percent — from 900 to 1,500. The goal, as Baker explains it, is to recruit 14,000 members and, once those people are in place, to expand the building to serve more people.

“First things first,” Baker says. “We've got some other issues we need to take care of or we won't be around to talk about a Buck O'Neil Research and Education Center.”

These sorts of issues are also the topics of discussion in a windowless room above the American Jazz Museum in July.

At this meeting, McDaniels sits at the head of a conference table with his laptop open in front of him. On one side sits Baker; on the other side is Greg Carroll, the jazz museum's CEO.

Carroll begins describing his museum's planned exhibit about black Latino men who used to play jazz and baseball in Mexico. He offers that Baker might be interested in this.

“Wait,” McDaniels says, cutting him off. “You said *might* be? *Might* be of interest to the Negro Leagues?”

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point. McDaniels called this meeting to build connections, to create “the cohesive environment [that] the district has been missing for a long time.”

The two museums at 18th and Vine can be provincial with their subject matter. McDaniels thinks that they can do a better job of working together. He wants them to share information and planning in a way that can turn single-museum events into neighborhood blowouts.

For Memorial Day 2011, he’s helping organize an event stretching from 18th and Vine to Penn Valley Park and involving a war remembrance, a marching band and baseball games set up against a backdrop of jazz and barbecue.

Cooperation, the men believe, is one way to meet their shared goals of making history relevant and interesting to locals as well as out-of-town visitors.

When the meeting ends, McDaniels walks down the stairs and out the glass doors. He crosses 18th Street — dead at this hour — bound for the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum’s board of directors meeting in the Gem Theater.

He ascends the steps to the second floor and enters a small conference room where Negro Leagues stars Don and Bob Motley, Kansas City Sports Commission President Kevin Gray and former Mayor Richard Berkley wait for the meeting to begin. They share a knowing chuckle over McDaniels’ reputation for starting on time.

As he leads the meeting, discussion comes up about the Negro Leagues Legacy Awards. Board member Betty Brown pushes to curb discussion and vote. In the measured voice that he sometimes uses with students, McDaniels says, “Ms. Brown, if we are not all informed about certain issues — not just for the Negro Leagues Museum but for the community at large — sometimes when we vote, it makes it spontaneous. Sometimes, it’s based on personal feelings.”

She pretends to hurl something at him.

Before the meeting ends, McDaniels pads over to Brown, kneels on the carpet next to

her and starts whispering into her ear. Her lips are pursed. She stares straight ahead — annoyance incarnate.

As he whispers, the tendons in her neck begin to relax. She starts to nod slowly to whatever McDaniels is saying. By the time he envelops her in a hug and smooches his face in her hair, she’s grinning.

Egos are a delicate thing around 18th and Vine, and it’s not always easy for an intellectual bruiser such as McDaniels to avoid stomping on them.

“There’s a sense of comfort that people have gained over time that when you introduce new ideas, they don’t really want any part of it,” he says, “because they realize it may change their status within the organization and, therefore, within the community.”

If McDaniels’ efforts to educate the entire city are hit-and-miss, his results in the classroom are consistent.

**A** few years ago, Rashonda Smith sat mesmerized, in the front row, listening to McDaniels field questions from a long line of students.

She sat there until everyone was gone. McDaniels, who had been asked to lecture about Joe Louis for a 100-level American history course as part of his job interview at UMKC, turned to her and said, “Did you have a question?”

She had a million questions, but nothing short and concise that she could put into words.

McDaniels’ lecture had spoken to her on some new, deeper level. He helped her make a connection to her past in a way she had never felt before, and she was savoring it for a minute.

On her way home, the lecture stuck with her. Like Louis, Smith is a descendant of sharecroppers. Until McDaniels’ lecture, she didn’t really know what that meant.

“[Louis] was a nobody, really,” she says now, “and most people are nobodies who become somebodies. But he was like *really* a nobody and the reason he decided to box — it kind of inspired me to go for my dreams.”

The next semester was McDaniels’ first on the UMKC faculty. Smith signed up for both of his classes: a history of sports and a history of masculinity. She wasn’t a history major and



**The 1500 block of East 18th Street in 1940: Among the businesses there were the U.S. Post Office, Isidore Bernstein’s pawn shop, Haley’s Beauty Shop, physician Franklin A. Radford, dentist James D. Richey and notary Nanette Bruce.**

she didn’t even like sports.

After each class, she returned to her home near 59th Street and the Paseo and talked all about what she had learned in class. She talked things up so much, she says, that today her relatives can probably hold forth about historical figures such as Louis or the writer Alice Walker.

Around 14,800 students attend UMKC, more than 9,600 from the Kansas City metropolitan area. Of these students, 11 percent identify themselves as African-American.

This fall, McDaniels is teaching three courses and 200 students, which means he has 200 chances to make his students care about their pasts. For his most successful students, like Smith, those lessons continue to expand outside the classroom.

Smith began digging into her own family’s history, teasing out stories. She learned that a distant relative — her aunt’s cousin — worked for Harry Truman as a cook.

“It changed my sense of purpose,” she says. “I’ve always respected my elders, but if I could, I would tell every single one of them ‘thank you.’ I’d give them a kiss on the forehead, give them a kiss on the hand, because I started to realize I stood on so many people’s shoulders — and it’s local.”

At the same time, though, she felt pressure from her family to start earning money.

“I went in his office one day,” she says of McDaniels, “and I was really giving him a heads-up that I probably wouldn’t be there the rest of the semester because I was going to enroll in nail school,” she recalls.

“He’s like, first off, always, ‘Why?’” Smith says. “Then I tell him, and my answer’s never good enough. It’s like, ‘No, you’re gonna do this again because of X, Y and Z.’ He always has a good reason why.”

She walked out of his office understanding his reasons. “The next day, I changed my major to history,” she says.

**O**n a weekday afternoon in September, McDaniels and Raymond Doswell, vice president of curatorial services for the Negro Leagues museum, take a walk around 18th and Vine.

McDaniels holds an old map of the district, drawn from people's memories. His mind's already racing with an idea. "Why not have a podcast?" he says to Doswell. "Why not have a walking tour? Why not come over, load up your iPod or whatever, get your map, and walk out and listen to it?"

"I think that's an excellent idea," Doswell comes back, "and it's a challenge for a place like the Black Archives."

"No, it's not," McDaniels says. "No, it's not. I think it has to be someone who functions independently." He means an autonomous researcher who wouldn't favor or prioritize any one of the three homes of black history over another. "When you have one entity doing it," he says, "it gets really myopic in scope."

Doswell and McDaniels walk to the intersection of 18th and Vine — the heart of the historic district — where bricks from a brand-new condominium are grafted to old ones. Construction crews lay down carpets in the new but vacant ground-level storefronts.

The now-demolished Shannon Building was in this spot. Joe Louis used to spar and practice here for his next boxing match.

Stopping at the intersection of 18th and the Paseo, Doswell says the Street's Hotel, which housed the original Blue Room and a shoe shop, among other things, used to be right here. "I remember Buck O'Neil saying because the hotel didn't have air conditioning, you could go, on summer nights, and sleep out in the park," he says.

In those days, despite segregation, people had power, McDaniels says. They were able to make choices and take action against the idea that they were the underclass. "There were the strivers who created the middle-class culture. They refused to believe what people said of them; they refused to believe that they had to aspire to 'less than.'"

They cross 18th Street and walk up Vine toward 19th Street.

"That parking lot is relatively new," Doswell says, looking across the street. There's a sign for Elnora's, which was a famous café in the district, though not in this spot. Behind the plywood sign is a brick façade. Behind that, air.

When they reach the intersection of 19th Street, every old club, shop and store is covered with boards. It looks as though a vagrant has been living in the entryway of the old Mardi Gras Club.

"There are so many memories attached to physical spaces," McDaniels says, surveying the block of façades. "I think we do ourselves a disservice by erasing these types of structures from the landscape, even though it may seem feasible to do something new using I-beams."

Across the street, Ol' Kentuck' Bar-B-Q, the cradle of the Gates family barbecue dynasty, is entombed behind maroon plywood. The country's first African-American-owned car dealership, opened by Homer Roberts in 1923, gets the same treatment. A rat skeleton sheds its fur and bleaches in the tiled doorway. "That was a big rat," McDaniels says.

They walk down 19th to the Paseo and stop at the old four-story YMCA. A sign out front declares that this is the Future Home of the John "Buck" O'Neil Education and Research Center, but the bricks falling from one section, like a



ANGELA C. BOND

**After taking McDaniels' class, Rashonda Smith followed her dream of becoming a historian.**

widening bedsores, declare something else.

Construction work continues at the Paseo YMCA building. In early October, a demolition crew filled a Dumpster with blankets, plastic bottles, panes of glass, and other evidence of squatter tenants.

Big, looping graffiti mars the building's north side, but the cornerstone, dated 1914, looks like it was laid yesterday.

That stone and a couple of nearly fallen façades are the few remainders of life beyond baseball and jazz — what McDaniels calls "the social history of the entire area."

Right around the corner, six boarded-up houses on Highland Avenue are probably the best physical remnants of life during segregation. They are one or two stories of clapboard siding and front porches — humble by today's standards but grandiose by history's.

Barbed wire is supposed to block off the houses from the sidewalk, but a sagging fence suggests that someone found a way in. Even with plywood over the windows, the houses are under attack and aging.

It can be said with historical certainty that Hugh Blackburn walked these streets 90 years ago, but today it's almost impossible to imagine him amid the bustle of what once was the commercial and social heart of Kansas City's black district.

McDaniels can almost see him there now: a war veteran, musician and ballplayer who thrived despite the prejudices of the time. And one of many forgotten Kansas Citians who could help erase the lines that divide the city today.

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