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Headline: Richard Pryor practiced his life's work on Peoria streets

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I grew up less than one block from **Richard Pryor**. We both lived on First Street in Peoria. Spencer Street, now **Richard Pryor** Boulevard, separated our houses. Richard seemed to me to be a very lonely child. He was the only boy in his family and often played alone, except when he visited me. I had 16 siblings, 10 of them boys, so we always had fun and games going on.

It was a treat for me to visit Richard. My father was a minister and, except for my schoolteachers, most of the women I saw wore long white dresses. At Richard's house there was always the chance of seeing women with high heels, ponytails and musical sounding voices.

Once, when we were eight years old, Richard and I were playing cowboys. I always carried a rope and would allow my playmates to tie me up. I prided myself on being able to slip out of knots. However, on this day I tied up Richard. I put him in an old refrigerator and tied a rope around the door (Houdini style). I left him there for over two hours, waiting for him to make good his escape.

When I finally opened the refrigerator door, Richard could barely breathe. I have thought of that incident many times over the years. Each time I'm reminded of how my stupidity almost robbed the world of **Richard Pryor's** comedic genius.

In my opinion, the legacy that **Richard Pryor** leaves behind is his work ethic. He put in many years of paying his dues.

Richard's work ethic blossomed at age 12 when he met Juliette Whittaker, the drama teacher at Carver Community Center. She instilled in Richard the belief that he could be whatever he wanted to be. Shortly thereafter, Richard began to practice his craft with anyone who would listen.

He always had a stand-up routine to practice on everyone he met. Richard occasionally would station himself in front of a relative's pool hall at Third and Sheridan, telling jokes to pool players and passers-by. Frequently people would stop and gather for a half hour or more to hear what he had to say. At night, Richard and I would hang out at State Park working on his routine, joshing around and just being kids until police chased us home.

Sometimes guys would make fun of him and tell him that he wasn't funny, but that didn't stop him. He kept working. When others were playing, Richard was working. When others were criticizing him, Richard was working. He wasn't doing it for the money. He had found, very early in life, what he loved to do.

In those days I became Richard's protector from other boys who didn't like his humor or his style. Because I came from a big family, I could handle rough, threatening situations. Richard, despite his

desire to perform, was at times shy and sometimes withdrawn.

Throughout Roosevelt Junior High we had the perfect friendship. I protected him from danger, and he made me laugh. He could always get a good laugh out of me. Even then, Richard was hilariously funny to me.

I'll miss him, but he'll still be with us. I can clearly see his powerful influence in so many comedians. He did it his way. He left his mark. Perhaps that's the true meaning of eternal life: To leave the best of you for those who come after.

Richard, I'll miss you.

Matt Clark, a Peoria native, is a retired advertising executive now living in Pasadena, Calif.