

‘I’m blessed’: Beloved SCDPS vending operator lost his vision at age 47 — but found much more in years since

After losing his vision in 2018 at the age of 47, Willie Patrick could have wallowed in self-pity and waited for someone to come along and help him. But recognizing that he had a wife and three kids to provide for, Patrick decided to help himself, and now operates a vending facility serving the headquarters of two South Carolina state agencies.

“I thought, ‘Why me? Why not the next person? What did I do?’” Patrick recalled of losing his vision in 2018 to diabetic retinopathy. “As time passed, I realized that my life had changed, and I had to accept that. Even if it’s temporary, I have to accept it right now and make the best of it.”

The anger, grief, and isolation he experienced after losing his vision are now distant memories for Patrick, who says he is doing even better today than before he lost his vision. When he came to the SC Commission for the Blind (SCCB), it was determined that Patrick was a good match for their Business Enterprise Program, which trains people who are blind or low vision to operate their own vending business. Today, he operates The Market, a convenience stand serving the Blythewood headquarters of the SC Department of Public Safety and the SC Department of Motor Vehicles.

“To do what you enjoy doing — for me, that’s success,” Patrick said one weekday morning as a steady line of customers left his store with their purchases. “Some people take time off, but when I’m here, it’s like I’m going on vacation. I enjoy coming here every single day.”

Patrick is one of 61 licensed vendors currently operating 83 vending facilities across the state, according to Ryan Skinner, Business Enterprise Program Director. The program is made possible by the Randolph-Sheppard Act, which was enacted by Congress in 1936 and gives preference to people who are legally blind for the operation of vending and concession services on government properties.

One of the core principles of the program is that it trains eligible individuals who are blind and low vision with the skills they need to engage in full-time work and earn a livable income, said Skinner. Individuals who successfully complete the BEP training may be awarded a stand (if available). SCCB then helps the vendor outfit their stand with any needed equipment and provide an initial inventory and supply.

“The goal is that these individuals earn remunerative income that gives them financial independence,” Skinner said. “Once they start generating profit from the setup cost that we cover and are successfully running the business, the profits are all theirs.”





South Carolina Commission for the Blind

While SCCB trains these entrepreneurs on the ins and outs of running a business, some traits they may already possess.

“Willie is very smart,” Skinner said. “He’s likable, respectful, and polite. He provides great customer service, which is one of the most important qualities to have when running a successful business.”



Patrick’s customer service experience preceded the loss of his sight: He spent 20 years working in fast food management and carried that customer service philosophy to his new career.

“If you choose to come in here, you deserve the best service,” he said. “When people come through that door, I want this to be a place where they can forget about the stresses of work, even if it’s just for a few minutes.”

Since opening The Market in January 2024, Patrick has added a variety of products to his inventory, which now includes premade sandwiches and salads, microwavable lunch items, candy, snacks, and cold drinks. He also has breakfast biscuits from local restaurants, and recently added a coffee machine, which customers can use to create a custom coffee, tea, or espresso beverage.

In the process of adjusting to his new way of life and becoming a business owner, Patrick said he has picked up some new skills — and some new ways of doing things that sighted people might take for granted. Some devices and software help with counting money or inventory. An app called Be My Eyes connects a user who is blind or low vision with a volunteer via video chat to help the user read a label, locate an object, or navigate an unfamiliar area.

While Patrick is indeed a success story, he says there is more progress to be made. Only 44 percent of people who are blind or low vision are employed, compared with 79 percent of those without disabilities, according to statistics from the American Foundation for the Blind.

“A lot of jobs are repetitive — any blind person can do it,” Patrick said. “But people assume we’re going to be a liability instead of an asset, so they don’t take a chance on us. How can we move forward if we’re not given a chance?”

As with any endeavor in life, running a business has its inevitable mistakes and losses. Patrick said that is the most difficult thing about being a business owner. But, as with learning how to walk after losing his sight, he says it all begins with taking the first step.

“It’s trial and error, and you can’t beat yourself up about it,” he said. “I treat The Market just like everything else. You can’t be afraid to make a move, because then you won’t go anywhere. Once you take that step, it may work or it may not. But you have to go for it.”

