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'Happyness' author Gardner hopes we're each our own champ

By Rich Freedman



Chris Gardner (right) joins actor Will Smith on the set in 2006 during the filming of "The Pursuit of Happyness," based on Gardner's similarly titled memoir. (Chris Gardner Media)

As Chris Gardner tells it, the University of California at Berkeley had a short list of potential speakers for its upcoming commencement - Oprah Winfrey, President Obama and him.

Not surprisingly, the first two choices didn't return the call.

Gardner did. And of those three," he said, "I'm the only one who can get to Berkeley on public transportation."

And if anyone knows public transportation, it's Gardner. The subject of Will Smith's 2006 film, "The Pursuit of Happyness," Gardner spent many homeless nights either riding a bus or sleeping in one.

It was the ride to the top, however, that he relishes as the owner and CEO of Gardner Rich LLC, a stockbrokerage firm with offices in New York, Chicago and San Francisco.

The amazing tale of Gardner's life has been translated into more languages than Gardner knows in more than 25 countries. His second book, "Start Where You Are: Life Lessons in Getting From Where You Are to Where You Want to Be" was just released and will likely be one of the topics when Gardner appears in conversation with former State Assembly Speaker and San Francisco mayor Willie Brown at the Marin Jewish Community Center on May 21.

His book, "Pursuit of Happyness," spent 20 weeks on the New York Times best-sellers list. He's had one of the world's most popular actors give an Oscar-nominated portrayal of him.

But Gardner, 55, insists he's not a rags-to-riches story. Not when it was all about his son, Chris Jr., whom Gardner cared for during those destitute times. A second child, Jacintha, was born just after Gardner started working on Wall Street.

"The movie has nothing to do with rags to riches or success or money," Gardner says by phone from Chicago. "The whole thing was a love story between father and his son. It's about a father who never knew his father and made the decision his son would never be able to say that."

Initially, it was difficult for Gardner to sit through some of the more uncomfortable scenes in the motion picture. In the world premiere in Rome, however, a woman sitting next to Gardner clutched his arm five minutes into the film and wouldn't let go. "I had to see the whole thing in Italian. It gave me such a different perspective in a language I don't understand."

Gardner's just-released book was written, he said, "because I'm determined to show people they can be totally broke and still, through the lessons in the book, not only recover but eventually thrive if they are willing to do what it takes. But if people are looking for how to get rich quick, this isn't the right book for them."

It's about being inspired, and not from a movie star, athlete or anyone else but that person in the mirror, Gardner says. "You've got to inspire yourself. Be your own champ," he says. "You can draw inspiration from others, but what happens when there ain't nobody else there? You have to be there for yourself. Take responsibility of where you are."

As for Gardner's own pursuit of happiness, he's pragmatic. "I'm healthy. I've seen two children become special. I'm in a position to do work that reflects my values. Does that mean everything's perfect? No. But I'm being blessed."

IF YOU GO

What: Chris Gardner in conversation with Willie Brown

Where: Marin Jewish Community Center, 200 N. San Pedro Road, San Rafael

When: 7 p.m. May 21

Admission: \$12

Info: 444-8000; marinjcc.org