

# CHICAGO JOURNAL

NEWS OF SOUTH LOOP, NEAR WEST AND WEST LOOP

## Scholarship program helping students with school and style

DRESSED FOR SUCCESS

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Christopher Gardner, whose life inspired the self-written best seller *The Pursuit of Happyness* (adapted into a film by the same title starring Will Smith) met with participants of an Illinois Education Foundation program called *Suited for Success* on Saturday at the Standard Club. Photos by J. GEIL/Staff Photographer

William Mendez is just 18. But he's gone through tribulations many adults will never have to face — like spending the last four years in periodic homelessness.

“My top priorities had always been homework and school,” he said, “And then my top priorities had to become shelter, being warm, eating and finding a place to stay for the night.”

Then the Illinois Education Foundation named him one of their community college scholarship winners. Now, he's a first-year student at Harold Washington Community College and lives with friends at an apartment in the Little Village neighborhood.

“Before I heard about this scholarship, I didn't think that college was an option for me,” Mendez said.

He credits the foundation with beginning to provide not only the academic but also the social tools for success.

The social aspects were on display Saturday at a workshop on professional dress, “*Suited for Success*,” held at The Standard Club downtown.

“They gave me a suit, and a nice one, which is actually pretty awesome,” Mendez said. “I have one suit now, which I wear every time I have to dress up.”

*Suited for Success* highlighted the foundation's strategy of directing resources to scholarship winners and focusing on cultural barriers to achievement.

The event featured Brooks Brothers outfitting 41 scholarship recipients, inspirational words from Chris Gardner — whose rags-to-riches story was portrayed by Will Smith in *The Pursuit of Happyness* — and tips from fashion designer Julie Watson.

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“The way you present yourself will affect your credibility and career,” Watson, of juliewatsonstyle, told the nattily attired students at the swanky Standard Club banquet hall.

The Loop-based Illinois Education Foundation started in 2006 with the mission to “empower high-potential, low-income community college students to achieve their degrees and embark on their careers.” It has so far raised more than \$3 million, the majority of which has come from corporations and other private foundations, with about 15 percent from state government.

The money has gone to support 250 community college students with not just tuition money but also tutoring, academic advising and workshops. Jessica Besser Rosenberg, advocacy and outreach manager for the foundation, said successful applicants (in 2010, they were 800 applications for 32 positions) are mostly low-income and, like Mendez, face extraordinary challenges.

Rosenberg pointed out that community college is an increasing part of the U.S. education system and economy.

“Almost 65 percent of students in higher education are enrolled in community college,” Rosenberg said. “A lot of the job creation and development are in areas that require vocational degrees from community colleges.”

Gardner, who made millions on Wall Street and is CEO of the brokerage firm Gardner LLC, described community college to the students as “one of the big steps you take in going forward.”

He spoke of his own struggles as a poor, black man trying to fit into the world of high-powered finance. “I had two suits that that I had to wear for my first year — a blue one and grey one,” he said. “The joke from the office started, ‘Oh, that’s Chris Gardner, he’s re-enacting the Civil War. Some day’s he’s with the north; some days he’s with the south.’ That wasn’t funny at the time.”

Mendez, who wants to get into business, is optimistic that the foundation’s scholarship program will provide “a set of skills needed no matter what career or field of interest.”

Khrysta Hendricks, 23, also at Harold Washington, said the program has helped her succeed in school while she works full-time at a nursing home.

“They’ve really helped me with time management,” said Hendricks, who’s interested in both fashion design and non-profit work. “I’m in the process of looking for a new apartment and I work full-time and I need to have a social life so just balancing everything is really challenging. But I’ve felt like I’ve managed well, especially in my circumstance.”



George Lowery is fitted for a suit by Brooks Brothers tailor Alex Jasiak.  
Photos by J. GEIL/Staff Photographer