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Man behind rags-to-riches story of "The Pursuit of Happyness" still inspires

Chris Gardner, the man who inspired the Will Smith character in the movie, recently spoke in Oak Lawn about the questions he thought Martin Luther King Jr. would want answered if he were alive today

By Alena Scarver, TRIBUNE Reporter



Christopher Gardner, owner and CEO of Gardner Rich LLC, tries to solve a Rubik's Cube given to him by D'Angelo Wilson during a Martin Luther King Day celebration last week at Advocate Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn. Gardner's rags-to-riches life is depicted in the book and movie "The Pursuit of Happyness." (Alex Garcia, Chicago Tribune / January 26, 2011)

Chris Gardner, the man who inspired the Will Smith character in the 2006 movie "The Pursuit of Happyness," recently spoke in Oak Lawn about the questions he thought the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. would want answered if he were alive today:

"Why are so many of our children killing each other? Why does a politician have to be shot in order for the gun violence issue to be addressed?"

"Why isn't there national attention when a 14-year-old boy gets shot in the head while he is sitting at home in his living room playing video games given to him by his mother who probably bought it to keep him out of the streets?"

Gardner's questions brought one mother in the audience at the Martin Luther King Jr. Day event to tears. But the upbeat message of Gardner's true rags-to-riches tale permeated his motivational speech last week at the King celebration at Advocate Christ Medical Center Auditorium.

Gardner, the successful owner of a stockbrokerage in Chicago, once struggled with homelessness in the early 1980s while raising his young son. At the King Day event, a clip was shown from

"The Pursuit of Happyness," a scene in which Smith gives his son, played by Smith's young son, Jaden, the important lesson of never allowing anyone to tell you what you can't accomplish.

With laughter from the audience, Gardner took the time to reflect on the difference between the book, the film portrayals and his life. He expressed astonishment on how Hollywood spent \$70 million to reproduce what he did with absolutely nothing.

"Many people don't know that at this time in my life, my son was actually 14 months old," Gardner said.

When Gardner and his son made an appearance on "The Oprah Winfrey Show," his son was asked what was the most significant moment he took away from the experience of being homeless, in spite of the fact that Chris Gardner Jr. was unaware that they were homeless.

His response was that every time he looked up, his father was there. Gardner recalled those words as something that made his soul smile.

Though the film portrayed that era of Gardner's life as a rags-to-riches story, Gardner called it a love story between a father and a son.

D'Angelo Wilson, 10, a student at Covington School in Oak Lawn, attended the event with his mother, Patricia Wilson. He said Gardner's speech was very inspiring, especially when Gardner said he always wanted to excel at his own life goals.

The quote resonated with D'Angelo because he plans to have many careers, including lifeguard, scientist and gym teacher.

"I like the part of the presentation where Will Smith in the movie told his son to never let anyone stop him from doing whatever he wants in life," D'Angelo said.