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Businessman Chris Gardner, author of the Pursuit of Happyness, speaks during the Black Business Summit luncheon in Halifax on Thursday. Gardner's book was made into a movie starring Will Smith. (PETER PARSONS / Staff)

The Real Chris Gardner

His journey from homelessness to Wall Street made the big screen. But this CEO says his greatest accomplishment is being the dad he never had himself.

By BRUCE ERSKINE Business Reporter

CHRIS GARDNER made it big on Wall Street but says his greatest accomplishment was being a stay-at-home parent, even when he was homeless.

"This is the story of every father who ever had to be a mother, every mother who ever had to be a father and everybody who ever had a dream and would not quit," said the successful stockbroker and bestselling author of the autobiography *The Pursuit of Happyness*, which became a smash 2006 film starring Will Smith.

Mr. Gardner, who was repeating comments made to him about his life story by the poet Maya Angelou, was the keynote speaker Thursday at the Black Business Initiative's 2008 Black Business Summit luncheon at Casino Nova Scotia in Halifax.

The tall, goateed businessman entertained and moved a full house, including Premier Rodney MacDonald, with the story of his struggle to make it in the highly competitive world of finance while raising his young son by himself.

That struggle included nights when they were forced to sleep in train stations and shelters because Mr. Gardner, who worked for very little pay while training to be a broker, often couldn't afford to pay for a roof over their heads.

"I was one of those little boys who grew up without a father," he said. "I promised myself at five years old: 'When I grow up, become a man and have children, my children are going to know who their father is.' "

Mr. Gardner was born in Milwaukee in 1954. According to his website, his childhood was marked by poverty, domestic violence, alcoholism, sexual abuse and family illiteracy.

Inspired by his mother, he joined the navy after high school and later worked in San Francisco as a medical research associate and for a medical supply distributor.

In 1981, as a new father, he decided to pursue a career in finance, despite having no related education or experience, and applied for training programs at different brokerages. He eventually earned a spot in the Dean Witter Reynolds training program, but the effort cost him his marriage and led to periods of homelessness when he couldn't make ends meet.

Mr. Gardner subsequently became a top earner at Bear Stearns & Co. Today, he is the owner and CEO of Christopher Gardner International Holdings, a brokerage firm with offices in New York, Chicago and San Francisco that makes debt, equity and derivative products transactions for some of the largest institutions, public pension plans and unions in the United States. The company also operates internationally.

The Pursuit of Happyness became a New York Times and Washington Post bestseller and the film, which received Academy Award, Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild nominations, has grossed more than \$300 million worldwide.

But despite the many accolades and awards he has received for his story and for his extensive community work, Mr. Gardner, who also has a daughter, said his most significant achievement was always being there for his children.

"The most important thing I've ever done in my life is to have broken the cycle of men who were not there for their children," he said to thunderous applause.