

Chris Gardner Rises to the Occasion

A self-made stock broker, millionaire, philanthropist, and the real-life inspiration behind Will Smith's "The Pursuit of Happyness," once-homeless Chris Gardner is a role model to many, especially those pursuing a career on Wall Street. But when first approached to appear at March's R.I.S.E. forum, Gardner says he was hesitant. "Let me see if I've got this right: You want me to spend an entire day in Dayton, Ohio?" he jokes. "But when [Dr. Bob Froehlich] calls, it's kind of like a Jedi mind trick, where you think, *Yeah, okay, maybe I do want to do that.*" Gardner eventually signed on to be a keynote speaker, a decision he's come to appreciate. "To be around so many bright young people from around the world—and to push a button and close markets from Dayton to Dubai—that was huge," he says.

It also gave him the opportunity to speak more about people and less about numbers. "We were able to talk to the students about human capital," he says. "We all talk dollars, euros, interest rates, and returns, but there's something called human capital, and many of those young people were first-generation college students, so their folks had really invested in them."

Gardner applies this humanist perspective to nearly every facet of U.S. life. "Look at what's happened at my old firm [Bear Stearns]," he says. "For me, it's like watching the house you grew up in burn to the ground and there's nothing you can do about it—it's very painful. And I've had some discussions with people and they just want to talk about the fat cat bailout. You know what? The people I'm concerned about at Bear Stearns are the secretaries who've been with the company for 30 years and [are going to lose money on their stocks]. There's a human cost here that I haven't heard one of these talking heads mention ever mention."

When asked if a change in the White House will help turn a slowing economy, Gardner simply pointed to the need for more federal focus on the working class. "A recent survey found that 41% of Americans consider themselves to be part of the have-nots," he says. "How do you raise your children when you believe that? We have people in our country today that are food-challenged, meaning they have to make a decision between purchasing prescription medication and purchasing food. And these are working people. [The candidates] have been giving everybody sound bytes when all people want is a bite to eat."

His outspoken charisma has made him a sought after guest for speaking engagements and talk shows, and Gardner, ever the entrepreneur, has capitalized on this by starting Chris Gardner Inc., a company focused on building his brand through books, CDs, and a television show currently in production with Will Smith. Prior to his current fame, Gardner worked his way up Wall Street through Gardner Rich & Co., the Chicago-headquartered brokerage firm he started with \$10,000 and a single piece of furniture. The name "Rich" was added in honor of Marc Rich, the controversial commodities trader who, though not an actual partner in the company, was an important role model for Gardner. "[Rich] was the best in the world at what he did, and I also wanted to become world-class at something," he says.

On the road to becoming a household name, Gardner plans to focus much of his energy on helping those without "political juice" or business connections. "Place-ism still exists in this country," he says. "On my first day at Bear Stearns, I got a phone call from [a colleague] who told me that Bear Stearns was not built by people with MBAs, it was built by people with PSDs: poor, smart, and the desire to become wealthy. How many places like that still exist? I don't know."

