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Gardner translates 'Pursuit of Happyness' fame into advocacy

HONOLULU (AP) — Chris Gardner is still pursuing happiness.

Despite being a best-selling author, a sought-after motivational speaker and having a bank account as big as his beaming smile, Gardner says he's unhappy — fed up, actually — with how the poor, homeless and veterans are treated in America.

Gardner, whose struggles as a homeless single parent and rags-to-riches journey was depicted by Will Smith in the film "The Pursuit of Happyness," said he wants to use his "15 minutes of fame," to bring change.

"These folks are just folks," he said. "Everybody that's poor or homeless are not all alcoholics or drug addicts. These are poor people, and in many cases, working people."

The film, to be released March 27 on DVD, has brought attention to a problem that affects every community and possibly offered hope to those who need it most. It also introduced Gardner known to millions of people.

Gardner, who did some homeless advocacy while in Hawaii on vacation last week, said he just finished a proposal for a second book, which is expected to be released this fall.

While in Honolulu, he met with Republican Gov. Linda Lingle, social workers, public housing officials and a few homeless people. He also addressed a national convention on homelessness in Washington by videoconference on Wednesday.

Sharply dressed and sporting a well-trimmed, graying goatee, Gardner said wealth hasn't changed who he is, even though he went from being driven out of filthy restrooms to driving a Ferrari.

"When you have an experience like this, not just being homeless, but homeless with a 2-year-old baby tied on your back — that becomes part of who you are forever," he said.

Gardner is a millionaire who says, "we" and "us," when referring to poor folks.

"You know we've got to do with poor folks and working folks? We've got to market ourselves maybe a little better," he said. "It might come down to something as simple as that."

The most important survival skill Gardner learned when he was homeless in the early 1980s was to keep going forward.

"Baby-steps count too," he said. "You add them all up, one day you're living next door to Donald Trump."

He speaks from experience.

The 53-year-old Milwaukee native now owns multiple homes, including a condo in Trump Tower in New York. He is the CEO of the Chicago-based brokerage firm Gardner Rich LLC.

Caroline Soaladaob, who has been homeless with her 10 children for nearly a year, was in tears while listening to Gardner's stories of struggle and sacrifice.

"I get emotional because I see living proof of it every day," said Soaladaob, who lived on a Hawaii beach for months before moving into a new state-funded shelter in October. "Sometimes you have hard and rough days that you kind of think in the back of your head that you might not want to make it."

Soaladaob is among the many homeless in Hawaii that work but still can't afford a place to live because of the high cost of housing. The median price for a single family home on Oahu is above \$600,000, making homeownership virtually impossible on a low-paying job. But now she has hope.

"He's living proof that we can make it," she said.

Gardner's odds weren't that good either. He grew up with an abusive stepfather and never went to college. He said his mother, however, provided him with "spiritual genetics."

"The spirit of who you're going to become as a person, I believe you can make a conscious decision," he said. "I could've embraced the spirit of my stepdad and I could've become another alcoholic, wife beating, illiterate, child-abusing loser."

He said the younger generation doesn't truly appreciate their parents and the lives they have, including his own children.

"My kids are like the chocolate Kennedys," he said. "They've got a highly evolved sense of entitlement. We're working to adjust that."

Gardner has a 21-year-old daughter, Jacintha. Christopher Jr., whose character was played in the film by Smith's son, Jaden, is now 26 years old and pursuing a music career.

It wasn't Smith who was robbed of an Academy Award, but the actor's young son, Gardner said.

"Jaden Smith kicked Will Smith's butt everyday," Gardner said. "Will's a funny guy. ... Think about it: No. 1 movie star in the world. Two-time Oscar nominee. Third best actor in his own house."

Gardner had doubts when he learned he would be played by Smith.

"We all think of Will as big, blockbuster, science fiction, outer-space extravaganza," he said. "This movie is about inner space, not outer space."

But Jacintha set Gardner straight.

"She looked at me and said, 'Pop. Don't worry about it. If he can play Muhammad Ali, he can play you.'"

Gardner remembers taking Smith for a walk in the notorious Tenderloin area of San Francisco after midnight without any security guards. He told Smith, "The Calvary is not coming, brother."

"That's part of the message I try to share with people every where I go. The Calvary isn't coming. You got to do this yourself."