

# Reader's Digest

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## MONEY MAKERS

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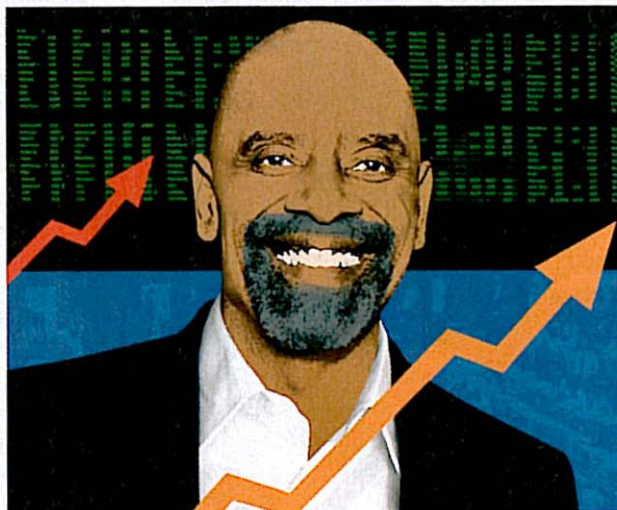
## From Jail to Wall St.

His life may not be a rags-to-riches fairy tale, but it's pretty darn close

**H**OLLYWOOD couldn't have done a better job at imagining Chris Gardner's life. All the ingredients for a hard-luck story were there: absent father, abusive stepfather, time spent in jail, a year on the streets with his toddler son. But so was an unquenchable desire to make something more of his life. That desire led to success as a stockbroker, business owner and bestselling author. The kicker? This month, his life really will be showcased in a major motion picture.

Chris Gardner's unlikely road to riches started in the parking lot of San Francisco General Hospital in

1982. Then age 29 and the father of year-and-a-half-old Christopher, he was barely making ends meet as a medical equipment salesman. He was about to get into his car when he saw a red Ferrari searching for a parking space. Impulsively, he waved the driver over and said, "I'll give you my spot, but I want to ask you two questions: What do you do, and how do you do it?"



Maria Bartiromo is host and managing editor of the syndicated program *The Wall Street Journal Report*, as well as host of CNBC's *Closing Bell*.

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN RITTER; (PHOTO) COURTESY CHRIS GARDNER

The Ferrari's owner said he was a stockbroker. Gardner asked what the job paid. At the time, the top salespeople where Gardner worked

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were making \$80,000 a year. "This broker was making \$80,000 a month," Gardner recalls.

The two men hit it off. Over occasional lunches, the broker explained how the business worked and how to break into it. He even gave Gardner a list of referrals.

Gardner began knocking on doors—but had them slammed in

his face. "At the time, brokerage firms were starting to require MBA degrees," he explains. "I didn't even go to college. It wasn't racism. It was place-ism. I did not have a college degree. I did not come from a politically connected family. I had no money. So who was going to do business with me?"

After ten months of pursuing fruitless leads, Gardner found someone willing to give him a shot. He quit his job and showed up for his appointment, only to discover his contact had been fired. No one knew who he was or why he was there.

It was back to the beginning, but without steady employment. "I was doing everything I could that was

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legal to take care of my family—cutting grass, cleaning basements, hauling rubbish. I learned roofing. I did house painting. And I continued to pursue a career on Wall Street."

But life remained precarious. After an argument Gardner had with his girlfriend, someone called the police. A routine check of his license plate number turned up a backlog of unpaid parking tickets. And that led to ten days in jail.

To make matters worse, while he was incarcerated, his girlfriend took their son and moved out. "I was devastated. I grew up without a father, and I had promised myself that I would never leave my son in a situation where he wouldn't know his father. Those were the most terrible

days of my life. I was in there with murderers and rapists, and all I could think about was, Where is my child? Will I ever see him again?"

Before landing in jail, Gardner had lined up an interview at Dean Witter, the brokerage firm. Unfortunately, the interview was scheduled for the day before he was to be released. "I begged the guard to let me make one phone call to reschedule."

Once out of jail, Gardner went to the interview wearing all he had—the Windbreaker and bell-bottom jeans he had been arrested in. The interviewer glanced up and said, "Deliveries in the rear."

Gardner decided to take a desperate chance. "I could not think of a lie bizarre enough, so I told the truth. I

said, 'I just got out of prison on a parking ticket charge, my ex left me, and I don't know where my child is. But I am here because I believe I am supposed to be in this business.'" The interviewer had been through a couple of divorces and could sympathize. Gardner won a place in the training program. Now he had to do well enough to be offered a job.

Months later, Gardner's ex showed up at his boardinghouse. She didn't want to take care of Christopher anymore. It was his turn. "I said, 'Absolutely.'" But the boardinghouse didn't allow children, and Gardner couldn't afford an apartment on his stipend. He and Christopher took to homeless shelters and the streets.

"We would leave the shelter in the a.m., my son in his stroller, my duffel bag with all his clothes and diapers, my briefcase, one suit on my back and one in a bag. Many nights we slept in bathrooms in transit stations or under my desk at work."

Father and son, then two and a half, were walking through North Oakland one day when Gardner noticed a dilapidated building with a rosebush climbing up the wall and a man tending it. Yes, he told Gardner, there was an empty apartment. The man rented it to him on the spot, and Gardner and Christopher slept on the floor that night.

The next morning, they got ready to head out for the day. For nearly a year, Christopher had seen his father pack up all their possessions every morning. Now some were being left

behind. "Dad, we need to take our things," Gardner recalls him saying anxiously. "I told my son, 'No, boy. We have a key now. We are home.' We skipped to the train that day," Gardner says. "Me and my baby and the briefcase skipped to the train."

Gardner took to the trade and, within a few years, fulfilled his dream of working on Wall Street. In 1987, he opened his own brokerage firm, Gardner Rich & Co., in Chicago. And he bought his own Ferrari.

Gardner doesn't see his story as a rags-to-riches fairy tale. Rather, he says, "mine is a story of how to empower yourself and beat the odds stacked against you. My life could have been easily derailed by domestic violence and homelessness, but I made a choice to not let those things sink me. You can break the destructive cycles that ensnare you. Be smart, have a plan and hold on to the people you love."

Got a money question? Write to Maria Bartiromo at [moneymakers@rd.com](mailto:moneymakers@rd.com).

### AND FYI ...

- Chris Gardner tells his own story in his bestseller, *The Pursuit of Happyness*. The misspelled title refers to a sign he saw at the day-care center his son attended during their dark days on the street.
- Read our Face to Face profile of actor Will Smith on page 88. Smith stars as Chris Gardner in the movie *The Pursuit of Happyness*.
- Want to be a millionaire? Go to [rd.com/millionaire](http://rd.com/millionaire).