

WEALTH OF FEELING: Chris, 52, may have made it to the top but is committed to helping the homeless and funding education for the poor



My quest to

Chris Gardner grew up with a violent stepfather and as a teenager he was raped. By the age of 28 he was living on the streets of a ghetto, selling his blood to feed his two-year-old son, and determined to train as a stock-trader. Now a rich businessman, his story has been made into a film starring Will Smith

IT IS one of the most remarkable stories ever told. A rags-to-riches tale that started for an abused child in the gutters of San Francisco and ended in him making millions on the money markets of Chicago. Now the true story of Chris Gardner has been made into a Hollywood film. *The Pursuit Of Happiness*.

Chris's story of being down and out in the richest country in the world is both harrowing and inspirational. A single father, dispossessed and living on the streets with his young son, he overcame huge obstacles to become a multi-millionaire with homes in New York, San Francisco and Chicago.

That journey was long and uphill but not once did Gardner, himself from a horrifically fractured home, waver in his singular pursuit of creating roots for his child. However, he had grave doubts that someone like heartrob actor Will Smith could get to the core of his suffering and determination.

"Then my daughter, Jacinta, who has my mother's wit and wisdom, helped me understand it when she said: 'Poppa, don't worry! If he can play Muhammad Ali, he can play you.'"

The role has won Smith a Golden Globe nomination. The two met at Smith's Los Angeles home and connected immediately, but it was when the actor wanted Gardner, now boss of his own Chicago-based brokerage firm, to take him around the ghettos of San Francisco where he'd lived with his two-year-old son, Christopher that he knew he could trust him with his story.

With no madders and no entourage, Gardner took him in to the neighbourhood known as The Tenderloin. "Think *Obetto* on steroids. I asked him to imagine being on these streets with his son Jaden and that is when it really affected him and Will Smith started to become Chris Gardner."

In the film the plot is given added poignancy by the fact that Jaden, eight, does play Christopher. Ironically

find true Happyness

EXCLUSIVE

By Pauline McLeod

the real Chris Gardner had never intended to write his autobiography. Its title is taken from the misspelling of happiness, scrawled on the wall of a daycare centre where Christopher would play while his dad was on a brokerage training programme and mum, who'd decided she'd had enough of motherhood, had disappeared.

When a TV documentary featured 52-year-old Gardner and his claim on the American dream, Hollywood was never going to be far behind. Aside from allowing screenwriters to elaborate on that broadcast, Gardner also decided to paint the entire canvas, to point out that nobody needs to live their life as the victim.

Although the book is avuncular and relaxed in tone, writing it, he admits, was one of the most painful things he had ever done. "A lot of stuff which I had not forgotten but had suppressed came out."

In the opulence of New York's Waldorf Astoria, a few blocks from his apartment in Trump Tower, Gardner acknowledges that his dogged refusal to become yet another statistic stems from his traumatic upbringing.

His mother Bettye Jean was abandoned by Chris's father before he was born. They lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which is where she met Chris's stepfather, Freddie Triplett, by whom she would have two daughters. Even now, years after Triplett's death, Gardner can barely bring himself to utter his name. "I was one of those boys who heard almost every day: 'You ain't got no daddy! I ain't your daddy!'" and a few other choice words thrown in.

Chris, his mother and sisters were used as punchbags by the drunken, illiterate Triplett who often threatened them with a shotgun. Chris lived in fear that his mum would be murdered. "He nearly did kill her. One time in particular, which I will never forget, was seeing the inside of my mum's skull when I was six years old," he says quietly.

Bettye Jean had had enough. After Triplett tried to cave in her head with a plank she set fire to the house while he was still inside. He reported her to the police and she was jailed while Christopher was put into foster care.

When he was a teenager, he was raped by a neighbour. The catalogue of abuse until he joined the Navy at 18 was nothing if not constant. "My stepfather helped to show me everything in the world not to be, which in his case was an alcoholic, wife-beating, child-abusing, illiterate loser."

Eight years down the line and Gardner, now out of the Navy, was a medical research assistant in San Francisco. His marriage to a childhood sweetheart fell apart when he had an affair with another woman, Jackie. By the time Jackie was pregnant, this relationship was also rocky. So volatile in fact that Jackie would taunt him: "How on earth can you be a father? You've never had one."

That was only the half of it. Some time after Christopher was born, she disappeared with him, for four months. "I was devastated. To have that compounded by her phoning, saying nothing but letting me listen to him scream and cry and then hang up, was beyond agony," says Gardner. Then, she was back briefly. She popped by the rooming house where he was living, and where children weren't allowed, to drop off their son permanently.

BY NOW Gardner had long since had his Red Ferrari Moment, an epiphany of sorts, after he spotted a stockbroker who, it turned out, was making £41,000 a month, alighting from said car. "He took me to a Wall Street trading room and the moment I walked into that room, I knew that this was where I was supposed to be."

His own Ferrari and fortune would come eventually but his family would be stretched almost to breaking point as he faced the most challenging 12 months of his 38 years, learning his chosen profession on a trainee's slim salary and eking that out to look after Christopher. No, he says crisply, it



FATHERS AND SONS: Chris and his son Christopher, left, are played by actor Will Smith and son Jaden, right. Smith has a Golden Globe nomination for the role and is also tipped for an Oscar nomination



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was my opportunity to break the cycle. People will say, 'We understand. He's from that neighbourhood, that kind of family, no father in the house,' and so the child perpetuates it. I made a conscious decision to go the other way." Enormously philanthropic, Chris Gardner is committed to many charitable organisations

connected to homelessness and education. "Statistics tell us that 12 per cent of the homeless in America have jobs. One of the coolest things for me on this movie, with its budget of £36million, was that one day we hired 250 homeless people to be themselves."

"A couple told me they both worked but had lived on the streets for six months, saving money to get a home. All they needed was another £250 and they made that money working on the film."

His beam becomes sheepish when he talks about his unsuccessful attempt at reconciliation with Jackie 21 years ago. "No doubt about it, we should have talked more!" The result was his much-loved daughter Jacintha.

That he feels Will Smith, with a Golden Globe nomination and tipped for an Oscar nod, has done him proud, is also beyond doubt although he has not watched the movie in its entirety and probably never will. "I have seen it all but not all at once. Remember, I was there the first time."

Leaving The Waldorf, Gardner wraps his cashmere coat around him against the sharp Manhattan winter chill and for a moment, it's hard to picture this urbane man all those years earlier.

Proud but lonely, he'd slept with Chris under his office desk, in a railway station toilet, in a park, the pram covered with plastic sheeting to protect against the elements; sold his blood so he could feed his child and told nobody about his desperate plight... I mean, it's the stuff they make movies of, isn't it?

● *The Pursuit Of Happiness* is released in UK cinemas on January 12. Chris Gardner's autobiography of the same name is published by HarperCollins. To order a copy, priced £8.99, please send a cheque or PO made payable to the Express Bookshop to: PO Box 200, Rainworth, TR11 4WJ, or call