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Teens' essays strike chord with author To deliver his 'Happyness' message at Memphis church

By James Dowd

What young people need more of, Chris Gardner believes, is hope. And happiness. Or "happyness" as he writes in his autobiography.

Gardner, who wrote "The Pursuit of Happyness," which was made into a popular movie featuring Will Smith, will personally deliver his "Message of Hope" on Sunday to a group of teen residents of a Memphis shelter.

The best-selling writer will be the featured speaker during the morning worship service at New Sardis Baptist Church in southeast Shelby County.

Gardner was inspired to visit Memphis after reading a story in The Commercial Appeal about a group of residents at Seek For the Old Path Shelter near Downtown. After watching the movie version of Gardner's life, the young people wrote essays explaining what the story meant to them.

The movie outing and essay contest were sponsored by a women's ministry group at New Sardis.

"I read about those kids, and I thought that if ever there was any little thing I could do to help them, it would be to say that 'Where you are now is not where you have to always be,' " Gardner said in a phone interview on Wednesday. "I want them to know that they make their own tomorrows and they can make their own futures."

Gardner's story of despair and redemption, from homelessness to becoming a multimillionaire, resonated with many of the shelter residents. Rickie Works, 15, was one of the essay writers and will be on hand to meet Gardner on Sunday.

"I was going through so much at the time when I saw the movie, and Chris's struggle seemed like my struggle," Rickie said. "Now to know that I'm going to get to meet him and he's coming here just to see us, it's almost more than I can imagine."

Larry Pillowe, 16, "can't wait" to meet the man that inspired the movie. "It touched my heart, and even though times are tough, he made me believe that I've just gotta hold on," Larry said. "And that's what I'm trying to do, every day."

The New Sardis program will be open to the community, said the church's pastor, Dr. LaSimba Gray, and include several of the teens reading their essays and a motivational message by Gardner. A book-signing will follow.

Gray was surprised by the reaction his church's program received, but thankful for Gardner's interest.

"We didn't do this to be noticed, it was designed as something nice for these children," Gray said. "But the fact that Chris Gardner is coming to Memphis as a result of learning about some of our homeless children should be a call to all Christians that this is a major issue we cannot afford to ignore. We must see what we can do to make a difference."

-- James Dowd: 529-2737

Message of Hope

What: Church program featuring Chris Gardner, author of "The Pursuit of Happiness"

Where: New Sardis Baptist Church 7739 E. Holmes

When: 11 a.m., March 18

Admission: Free

Information: Call 754-3979