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"My dad's awesome," Christopher Jr. says. "I wouldn't have anybody else do his job."

RETTOUGHT: JANE BUCSANTI/REX USA PICTURES

Millionaire Chris Gardner once lived on the streets with his son. **Will Smith** plays him in the new hit movie about his amazing life



Will Smith with his real-life son Jaden in *Happy*.



CHRIS GARDNER
WITH BILLY TRAVIS

HAPPY ENDING

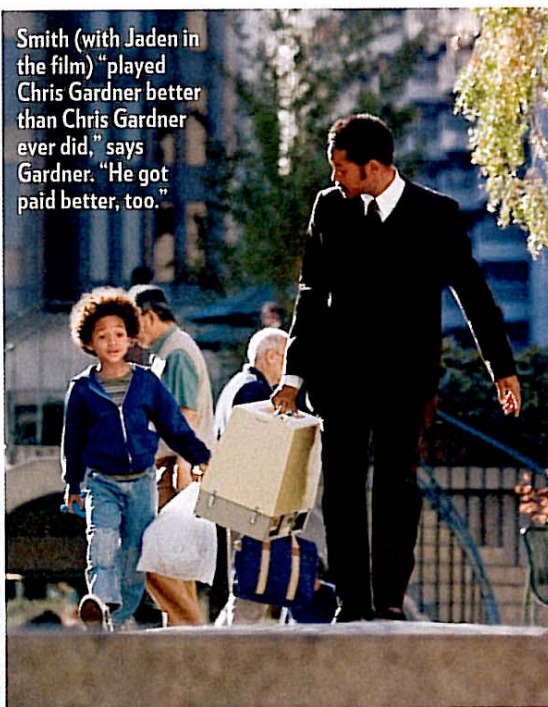
Success, says Chris Gardner, “is not about money. It’s about looking in the mirror and saying ‘I like this guy.’” And what’s not to like? At 52, the once homeless single dad is a multimillionaire with his own Chicago-based brokerage firm, a roster of speaking engagements, a bestselling memoir—and now, his life is a hit movie starring Will Smith: *The Pursuit of Happyness*. (The curious spelling comes from his seeing it that way at a day care center.)

Gardner’s rags-to-riches story began in an impoverished Milwaukee neighborhood, where he stayed with relatives or in foster homes while his mother served two prison terms. He never knew his father. After a stint in the Navy, he settled in San Francisco, spent 10 days in jail for \$1,200 in unpaid parking tickets and then discovered that his girlfriend had cleaned out their place and left him with their son. With no money, father and son lived at times in the restroom of a subway station. “Bam! We’d joined that invisible class of working homeless people,” Gardner recalls. “We may not have known how we were going to eat or where we were going to sleep, but we were together every day.”

Impressed by a stockbroker with a Ferrari, he talked his way into Dean Witter’s broker training program and began to get his life on track. Still, his meager stipend left him choosing between day care, food and shelter—and shelter, most often, lost out. Gardner spent a year pushing his son and their belongings around San Francisco in a stroller. “Most of the stuff my dad went through breaks people,” says his son Christopher Jr., now 25 and working for his father. “We have this thing about never settling. My dad says never play small; always play big.” ●

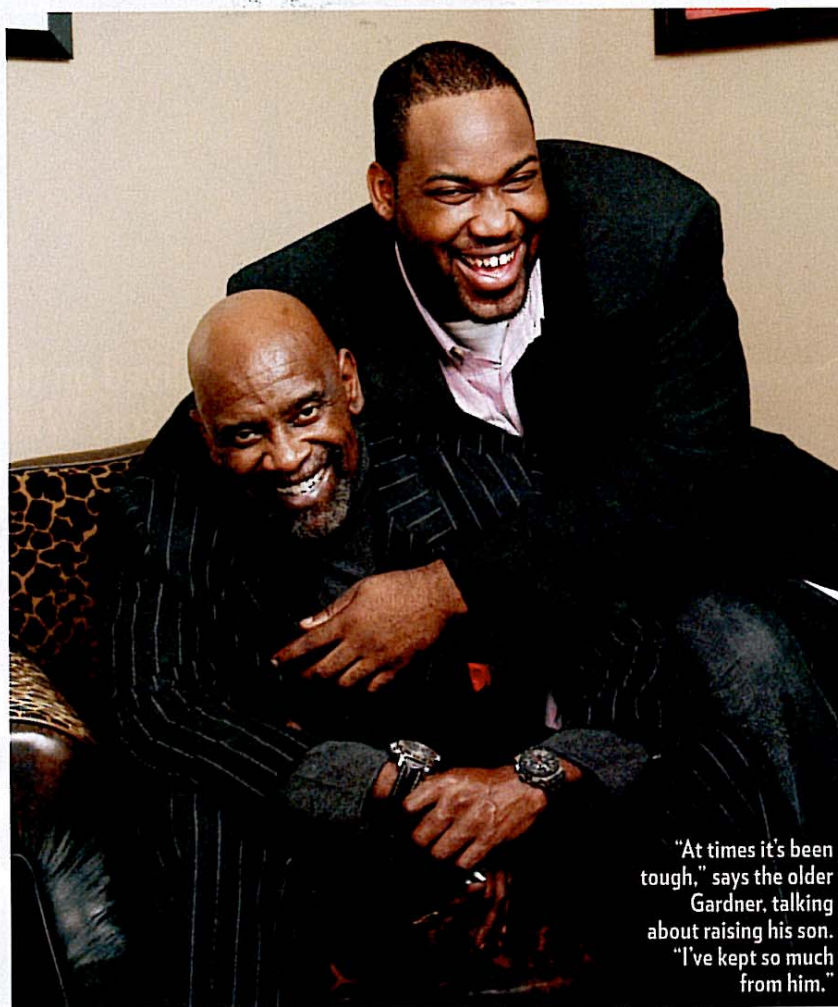
“Bam! We’d joined that invisible class of working homeless people”

Smith (with Jaden in the film) “played Chris Gardner better than Chris Gardner ever did,” says Gardner. “He got paid better, too.”



ON THE SET WITH WILL SMITH & SON

No nepotism, says Smith: His son Jaden, 8, auditioned to play Christopher Gardner Jr. with hundreds of others. Given that DNA (mom is actress Jada Pinkett Smith), the kid proved a natural actor. “He understands human emotion,” says the proud papa. Maybe too well. In one scene, says Smith, “he’s crying and crying, and the take is over—we’re done—but he can’t stop crying. I’m holding him, telling him it’s okay and he says, ‘I want to make comedies.’”



“At times it’s been tough,” says the older Gardner, talking about raising his son. “I’ve kept so much from him.”