

Chris Gardner: The Pursuit Of Happyness

By: Shevaun Voisin

In a moment, on a television screen, Will Smith was blown away by the strength and confidence he saw in Chris Gardner's eyes. Chris was being interviewed by Barbara Walters and Will knew there was something remarkable about him. Whether we're aware of it or not, those we admire most, serve as mirrors reflecting our own greatness.

When the June 2006, 20/20 episode aired, Chris held up a mirror to reflect Will's belief that despite seeming insurmountable obstacles, the American dream can be achieved. Will decided to take on the challenge of playing Chris in the movie based on his life story, *The Pursuit of Happyness*. The movie is a beautiful bi-product of the combined genius of both men.

The former *Fresh Prince*, and newly crowned "Most Bankable Actor in Hollywood" knows a thing or two about making dreams come true. Deciding early on to be a world class performer, it's been through hard work, tenacity, and an unwavering belief in himself that he's earned his way to the top. Taking on diverse roles and challenging himself to grow with each new project, Will continues to move forward creating new opportunities, leveraging the passion required to achieve excellence.

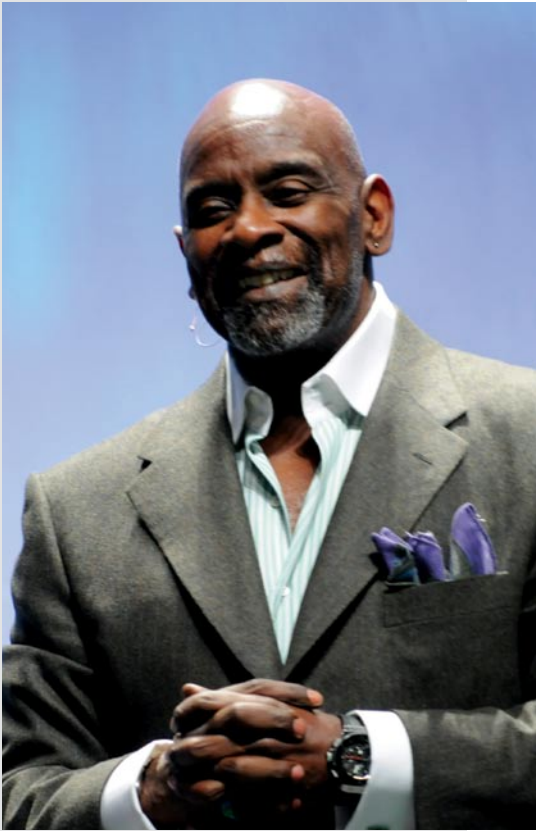
And, so does Chris Gardner...

The day he spotted a red Ferrari 308 pull into a parking lot, was the day his life changed forever. Impressed by the well dressed driver, he posed two questions: "What do you do?" and "How do you do that?" Learning the man was a stock broker, he decided, for reasons he can't explain today, that the world of trading was for him. Despite not knowing what a stock broker was or even what one did, he knew he wanted to earn \$80,000 a month and he believed he'd find a way.

Chris took a leap of faith in committing his energy to achieve his dream. Through painstaking sacrifice, hard work, resilience, and an unshakeable belief in himself, Chris created his own opportunity by landing a coveted position in Dean Witter's internship program. In 1981, he passed his licensing exam and was put on the payroll. In 1983, he became a stock broker at Bear Stearns & Co. where he became one of the top producers in San Francisco and New York. In 1987, he launched Gardner Rich & Co. Today, Chris is a multi-millionaire. He takes nothing for granted and insists on the importance of growing and moving forward. -On striving for his highest potential and never losing the passion that serves as his driving force.

And so how does a single father living on the street with his child, end up building a multi-million dollar brokerage firm? -By first enduring nothing short of a nightmare.

Raised by a loving, but often absent mother and an illiterate, alcoholic stepfather, he spent his childhood dreaming up ways to end the abuse in his



home. He was raped on his living room floor by a 30 year old thug in the neighbourhood and was raised by various family members while his mother served time in jail for attempted murder (she tried to burn down the house in an effort to kill her husband).

After finishing high school and serving four years in the Navy, Chris was married briefly to his first wife. When he remarried, he discovered his entrepreneurial spirit, selling medical equipment to doctors. His son Chris Jr. was born and it looked like his luck was beginning to change. Unfortunately, his second marriage didn't have the strength to withstand the financial stresses and it began to dissolve. One fateful day, when the police showed up to intervene in one of their domestic disputes, they searched his car and found several unpaid parking tickets. He was arrested on the spot and spent ten days in jail. As a result, his ex-wife received full custody of his son, but over time the weight of being a single mother became too much to bear. To his own shock, he was handed his 14 month old son at the door of the boarding house he was staying at. The next day, he was officially homeless; children were not permitted.

There were days where Chris had to choose between eating or staying in a hotel. He sold his blood to pay for food; he washed his clothes in public sinks. Moved by the sight of a single father and a baby in a stroller with all their belongings, "The Ladies of the Evening" insisted on giving him five dollars a day from their own earnings. He was grateful for their generosity because that money made the difference between eating and starving.

The story comes full circle though. Chris knows first hand that money doesn't bring happiness. He admits that he knows plenty of miserable millionaires. Sharing in a recent interview in his Chicago office, "I thought when I was in line for food that I would be happy when I had money, but it isn't true". He knows that having a passion and pursuing that passion is what brings true happiness. He knows that life is about creating opportunity, about seeing something others don't, and going after it with unmatched ferocity.

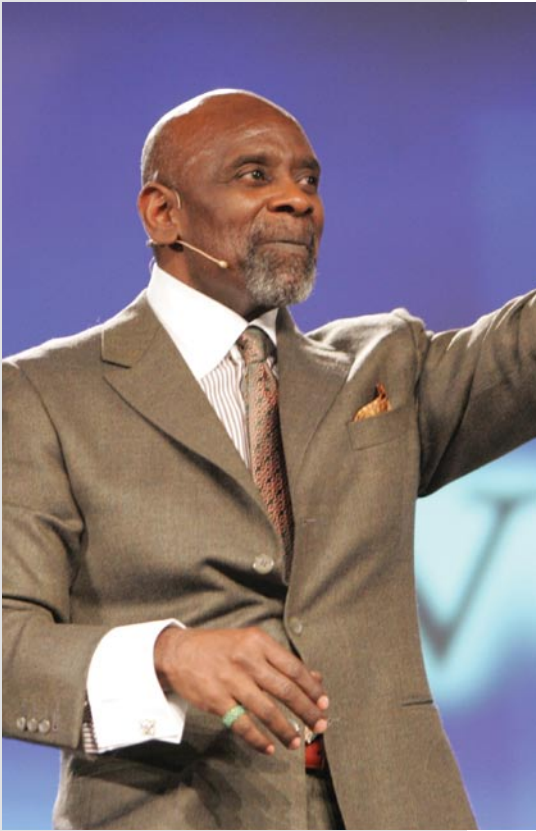
What follows is the conversation I was blessed to share with Chris:

Were you in Chicago when Barack Obama was elected?

No, I was in South Africa, downtown Johannesburg. The people that live in downtown Johannesburg are not South Africans. They're the people that walked from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Zaire, Zambia, Malawi, all looking for a better day. There were more people on the streets that night than we had at Grant Park. An old man said to me, "There are more people out tonight than there were on February 11th, 1990." And it took me a second to figure out what he meant by that. -That was the night that Mandela walked free. You could feel the continent shift. People wore shirts that read, "South Africans for Obama". (Laughing) I told Barack, just in case it was close, I had another 43 million votes lined up in South Africa.

I just wondered if you had the opportunity to feel what it was like here in Chicago?

I did not, but to be in another part of the world, and to feel it there, was probably even more powerful. But even a more powerful thing happened personally. Two days after, I'm on the way home and I have to fly through France to get to the States. I'm at the airport, I buy a coffee, I say, "Thank you", and the guy looks at me and says, "Obama". And I'm looking at him and I say, "Oh, shit...Obama...(laughing)". And then I realize it's a new way of saying, "You're welcome"...Obama. So that was cool!



What are you most excited about in terms of the future, with Barack in power?

I'm more excited about just the future, period. I'm not a big guy for politicians. I feel honestly, that the person that cares most about you and your family, doesn't live in the White House, he lives in your house! And, I think we're about to see something else happening here, in this country, and that's this whole concept of the company that you work for, looking out for you and caring for you, is bull. The person that's going to look out and care for you, is you. I had a recent experience in New York City. I happened to be on Wall Street, it's probably one o'clock in the afternoon. The car is full. Very, very, unusual. Full of men and women in suits that wouldn't normally be going home until 5:30, 6:00 o'clock. Guy comes over to me, and he says, "Are you Chris Gardner?" I say, "Yah". We start talking. Turns out, the entire car full of people were among the 55,000 employees just laid off from City Bank. And then I realized a lot of these people had a box with them. We've all seen this scene. They had their coffee mug, their plant, the pictures of their family and all that shit. It's over. You're going home, you ain't coming back.

So the conversation goes to, "You know what man, you lost your job, but now you've got to accept the fact that you haven't lost your talent, skills, or your expertise. And the focus now has to be on creating opportunities because those talents and skills are transferable. You're not gonna' find a job, let's forget that. You need find a place that creates space where you can transfer your skills. You need to make your own break."

And let me tell you something even more important, a lot of people are finding out that "rough" just ain't a skin condition. They're finding this out for the first time, they thought rough was just the outbreak of psoriasis. No dude, it's a real way of life. What's exciting about that? People are going to have to start looking at things besides money to determine how they feel about themselves. And that's exciting.

This leads into my next question about it not being external, it not being about money, but the pursuit of it. Is that what has brought you the greatest joy? Pursuing money, but being able to make a positive difference out of that?

I never pursued money. It was never about money for me. To me, it was about becoming world class at something I felt passionate about. One of the things I talked about in the book was about making a decision. I wanted to become world class at something. My first ambition in life was I wanted to be Miles Davis and what happened? My Mom told me I couldn't, someone already had that job. But I was passionate about it. I made that decision as a young guy that I wanted to be world class at something, and the first time I walked into a Wall Street trading room, I knew, "This is it".

So if you lost passion, would that be the only thing that might influence your ability to feel happy in life?

Oh man. Yah. To live without passion ain't living. That's how I feel.

Were you able to feel joy even in your greatest adversity? When you were sleeping in the subway washroom with your son, were you able to look into his face and say to yourself, "How blessed am I?"

When you're a little boy or a little girl and you grow up every day hearing, "I ain't your daddy"; "You ain't got no daddy". I made a decision at five years old that nobody would be able to say that to my child. So 23 years later, at 28, I slept in a bathroom with this baby on my back, I'd do it again.



But could you still choose happiness while you were in that moment?

I was happy. I was happy because he was with me. And we were together. And, nothing was going to separate me from my child.

What was the greatest challenge of being poor?

Whew...what day? Let me tell you something, being poor baby... At some level it becomes real practical. You need to eat, you need to sleep, you need Pampers. Now the major difference between reality and the film, that a lot of people don't realize is that in the film, Jaden Smith plays my son as a five year old, they did that for the dialogue. Chris was just 14 months old. He was still in diapers. That's a whole different situation.

What was the greatest challenge you had to overcome?

It's the challenge and the greatest joy. I broke the cycle of men who are not there for their children. That was the challenge and the joy. It was an active challenge every day. I refused to give up my child. It wasn't even an option. I wouldn't think about it.

What's the greatest challenge of being wealthy?

Hmmm..... Wow!... It's simple, the greatest thing about money is the stuff you can do for other people. Having options. To be able to say, "You know what, I don't want to live over there, I want to live over here." Just having the options. But also, in that, there are responsibilities and opportunities.

This inauguration coming up, I'm not going. This whole election was about change. It's a nice thing to say, "change". But you need to remember, for years and years, we've heard Ghandi say, "Be the Change". I sat down and looked at what it would cost me to go to this inauguration. I added up the hotels, the airfare, the wining and dining and all that stuff. I'm going to take that money instead and help some people stay in their homes. I'm going to pay some peoples' mortgages. And it might only be seven or eight people, so that's not a lot of people, but for those seven or eight families it's everything. So I'm not going to the inauguration, I'm going to go and pay some people's mortgages and help some working families keep their homes.

With wealth, comes responsibility. Do you ever feel almost emotionally overwhelmed by how much there really is? Both on a personal and global level? I know people write you letters asking for help and on one hand, you can only do so much.

No, I don't feel overwhelmed. Because the truth of the matter is, it's a blessing to be in this position. What I've learned is, so many times people don't want money from you, they want a little bit of compassion. A little bit of the sense of, you know what, if you could do that, I can do this. And if I can give that to people, that's more than any amount of money.

Have you fully released the past, or has it just become who you are?

No, not totally. I was just in San Francisco earlier this week, and it used to be I would always stay in the same hotel, in downtown San Francisco, to get a room on the same side of the building so I could look down at the park where I had to stay with my son. You get to a point where you realize, you gotta let that go. That little, little, stuff becomes a part of who you are.

I've got a room in the house with nothing but bags in it. It's rare that you will see me without a bag. Now that bag may be crocodile, (uproarious laughter) or it might be alligator, but I have this thing about bags. I'm a bag man. I'm the Chicago bag man!

In choosing that hotel room, and going back to that space though, is that not a good reminder in one sense, because you'll have that empathy, be filled with gratitude for where you've come from, or is that not a good space for you to keep visiting?

(Chris interrupts) No, no, no, I've dealt with it. Parts of it you have to let go, but parts of it I'm holding on to. I don't ever want to think that I'm some kind of "smart guy"...having had the experiences that I have, just makes me that much more appreciative and if you forget that experience then maybe you're not going to be as appreciative. I'm thankful and humble.

If you're looking at the growth as a ladder, climbing rung, rung, rung....where do you want to "be" before you die? It will always be about growth for you but eventually, do you have a sense, "if I could get there", that would be good.

I'm already there. And I had to learn that, I had to stop doing. So much in my life was rung, rung, rung, next, next, next - when you do it like that, you're going to miss out on the beauty of a whole lot of where you are.

When did you "get that"? How old were you?

It started coming four or five years ago. I'll tell you what I thought, "No money, no problems". I remember standing in the food lines saying to myself, "When I have money, I'm not going to have these problems." I was right! You have different problems. More money, more problems!

Oprah and I had this conversation once...never be the first person in your family to make money. Let me tell you something, the first person that gets out and makes some money, you owe everybody! You owe 'em, and you got to give it to 'em, and if you don't give it to 'em, you're a bad person. That's when you realize you're not helping anybody. I had to learn how to start saying "no" and I've gotten pretty good at it. It's my favourite word. No. No. No.

Generally, when you think about people facing adversity, related to your theory on spiritual genetics, why do you think some people have the intestinal fortitude to move forward and others just don't. How do you view this? As a family thing or how does this work for you?

I refer to it as "spiritual genetics". What I mean by that, is we all understand genetics as to be getting your Mom's eyes and your Dad's nose, but the spirit of who you're going to become as a man or a woman, you get to choose. In my case, I could have embraced the spirit of my step-father and chosen to become another illiterate, wife beating, child abusing alcoholic and a lot of people would have said, "Look where he's from, he didn't have a choice".

I chose to embrace the light I saw in my Mom. I don't know what your religious beliefs are, but scripture tells us that, we're all born with a spirit that allows us to embrace God, that same spirit can embrace darkness - by choice. Or can be beaten down to and submit to darkness. I chose to embrace the light.

Do you believe everyone has the capacity to embrace the light?

Absolutely.

Why in the face of adversity could you rise above it, and someone else in the same situation, can't?

I chose the light. It's just a choice.

One of the first stories I talked about in my book was my Mom telling me that, "If you want to, one day, you can make a million dollars". Until she said those words, it never entered my mind. One of the most important scenes in the film was the scene that took place on the basketball court. It was written originally in the script, that the little boy would throw up the ball and say, "I'm going pro" and the father says, "Forget it, it'll never happen, you can never do it, I was no good at it, you can't do it, so that's how it works."

I waited until that day, when we were going to film that scene, and I went on the set and said, "You can't shoot that scene. You can't tell that little boy that, because that's not what my Mama told me. I was told you could do or be anything you wanted to do or be."

We had a very, very, intense discussion with myself, Will Smith, Gabriele Muccino and one of the producers. The producer's position was, "We got to stay true to the script. The father's got to keep it real with his son." –Now what he knew about keeping it real, I don't know. But after some very intense discussion, it was Will that said, "You know what, Chris is right, because my Mama told me the same thing". So what we filmed, is what you saw. "Don't ever let somebody else tell you what you can't do."

And that's what I find so remarkable about your story. Your Mom wasn't necessarily demonstrating happiness, but she said that you could find it. Why didn't it need to be demonstrated? How did you just manage to grab on to what she said and believe it?

I saw it differently. What she demonstrated to me was that she had so many of her own dreams destroyed. But she still instilled in me that I could have things. Not just have the dreams, but I had the power and the responsibility. And I got it. You can have the greatest teacher in the world, but you know what, the pupil has to be ready to receive it.

Why didn't you quit, crack, or cry?

I had my Mom, who had too many similar situations and she kept going. So she demonstrated that I could too. She would say, "Boy, I have done so much, with so little, for so long, I could do anything with nothin'". I saw her do it!

Why do you think people claim not to know what their passion is?

They probably don't know. Or, more importantly they're probably afraid to express it, because they need or want some form of external validation. It's OK if you want to be a candle maker, if that's what turns you on. That's OK! I know so many lawyers who went to law school because their Mom or Dad wanted them to. And they go to law school and they find out, "I don't like this, I don't want this". But they were afraid and they didn't have whatever it took to say, "You know what, this is what I really want".

My Mom always used to say, "Boy, you're seeing ghosts ain't you?" And I'd say, "Yes Ma'am". And what she was talking about was that I saw things...like opportunities, that other people didn't. But she'd always say, "As long as you're always seeing them with the eyes of your soul, ain't nobody else that got to see it." And the second you need somebody else to co-sign it, to validate it, to say it's "OK", it ain't real. You got to see with the eyes of your soul.

I read somewhere that you felt that God has given you a lot of adversity so that you'd be prepared for where you are now. Do you see it that way?

You know what, Nelson Mandela once told me that perhaps my life has been filled with what it has been, to prepare me to become a part of what he calls the "Great Generation". – Meaning the generation that has the will and the means to do something greater than themselves.

When you have that kind of conversation with Nelson Mandela, when you leave the room, you're not the same person. It would not be possible to leave that meeting, come back, sit at my desk, and just go back to business. It's about doing something bigger than yourself.

Maya Angelou said that to you as well, right? Both Nelson Mandela and Maya Angelou gave you the same message, how confirming is that?

You know what she told me that just resonated? ...Let me tell you something, when we have someone like Dr. Angelou say certain things to you, you doesn't say anything mildly. She doesn't say anything gently. She says what she feels. And you have to rise to accept it, because if you don't, you'll miss the lesson. She told me, "God has got something special for you to do, and I think you're ready for it." When she said that to me, it didn't click. –I get it now though. All I'm to do right now, in this whole space of fear, this global fear, is to share this message: "You know what, you can do this!" Now, you got to do the work, and a lot of folks want to talk about hope, well, you know what, I'm not too big on hope. You need to have a plan.

Rudy Giuliani, the former mayor of New York, said one thing I agree with, he said, "Hope is not a strategy". Hope and three dollars will get you on a train. You can't get on a train with hope. You need to have hope and three dollars. Your plan needs to be clear, concise, compelling; you need to be committed, consistent, and passionate.

What is the greatest advice you can give to help someone realize their dream?

Passion. Passion. Passion. If you don't feel it, you can't fake it.

Thank you so much for your time, Chris. You're an inspiration.

My pleasure.