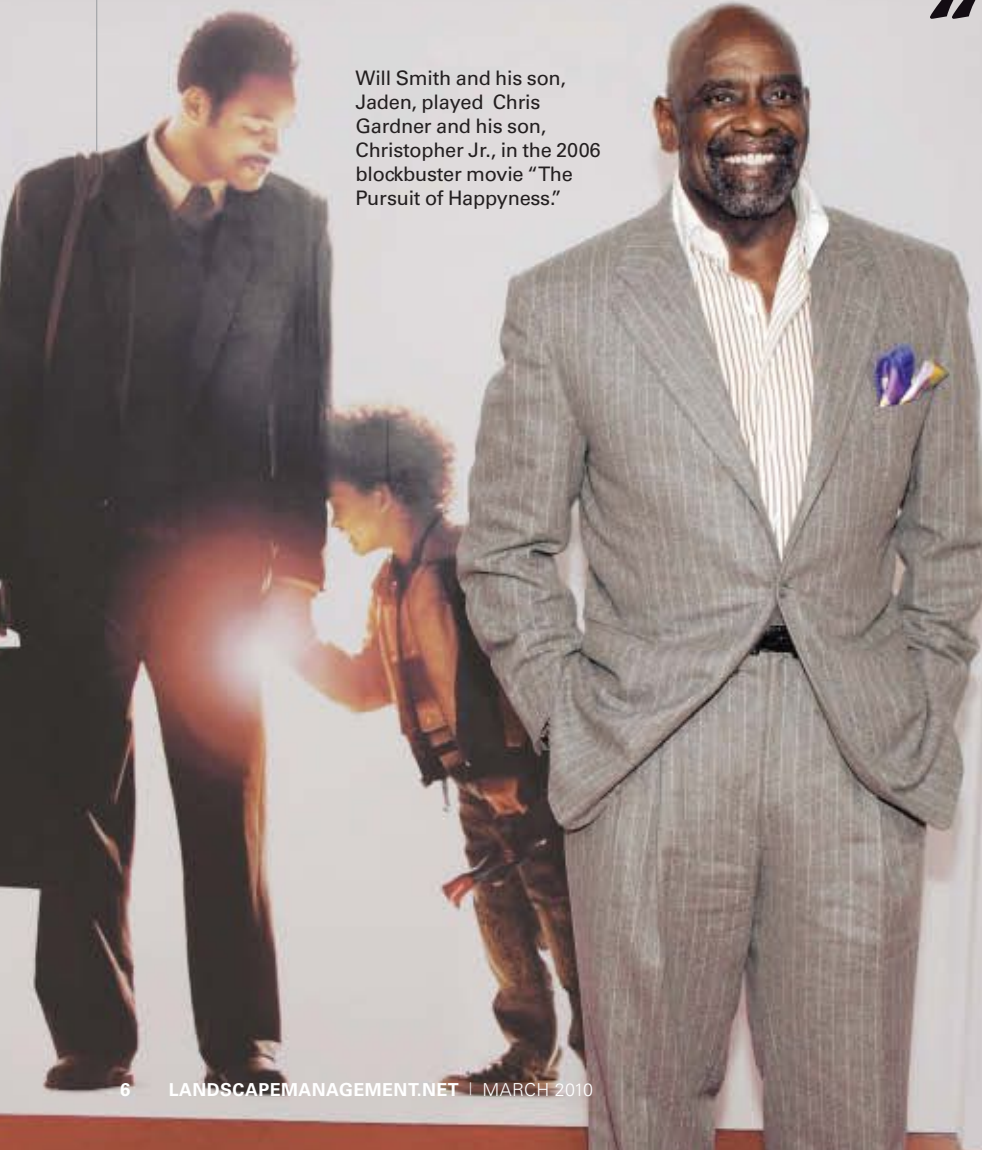


# Homeless, but *not* hopeless

Chris Gardner, author of the best-selling autobiography *'The Pursuit of Happyness,'* shares his street smarts with Green Industry professionals.

BY MARTY WHITFORD EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



Will Smith and his son, Jaden, played Chris Gardner and his son, Christopher Jr., in the 2006 blockbuster movie "The Pursuit of Happyness."

**"E**VERY TIME I see the movie "The Pursuit of Happyness," I'm absolutely amazed. How did those people spend \$70 million to tell a story about what I did with nothing?" half-jokes Chris Gardner, who penned the same-named rags-to-riches autobiography on which the 2006 blockbuster was based.

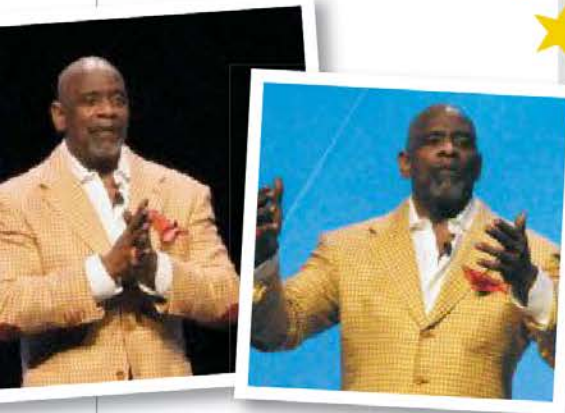
Delivering the keynote address at the Golf Industry Show in San Diego Feb. 11, Gardner took Green Industry aces on an emotional ride — with a crowd of thousands roaring with laughter one minute and solemnly reflecting the next.

Gardner says his autobiography strikes a reverberating chord because it reaches out to every dad who also has to be a mom, every mom who also has to be a dad, and everyone who refuses to let his dream drift away.

After his book was published, it became a best seller for nine consecutive weeks. It was so popular it was printed in 33 languages eventually.

Gardner took GIS attendees on his journey — from the streets of San Francisco to Wall Street stockbroker to the *New York Times* Best Seller list to the silver screen — with the

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\$20-million-man, Will Smith, and his son Jaden Smith, playing Gardner and his son, Christopher Jr.

### Gumption

One of the most humbling moments along Gardner's ascent happened early on in the movie-planning process.

"I was asked to 'take a meeting' in L.A. with these movie moguls," Gardner says. "I'm from Chicago. We take trains. We take naps. We don't 'take' meetings."

But Gardner did "take" the meeting, during which one of the film producers from Escape Artists asked Gardner why he recently had declined an opportunity to promote his book on national television. "I asked the gentleman, 'Have you ever seen the movie 'Forrest Gump'?" Gardner says. "The room got quiet. Then the gentleman nodded and said, 'Yes.' I told him I felt just like Forrest in the scene where he walks into an antiwar rally, and they ask him to speak. When the microphone finally gets turned on, all you hear Forrest say is, 'And that's all I have to say.' I had written my autobiography, and that's really all I had to say."

After the meeting, the man who set it up turned to Gardner in the elevator and said, "You know that gentleman you asked if he had seen 'Forrest Gump'? Well, he's Steve Tisch. He produced 'Forrest Gump.'"

"So there I was, in a meeting with Hollywood big-wigs looking at turning my book into a movie, and I actually asked the producer of 'Forrest Gump' — winner of six Oscars and at the time the second-highest grossing film ever — if he'd seen his own movie."

## HOLLYWOOD VS. REALITY

According to Chris Gardner, who penned the best-selling autobiography "The Pursuit of Happyness," the following are just a few of the creative liberties taken by Hollywood when producing the like-named, Academy Award-nominated, silver screen version of his rags-to-riches story:

### HOLLYWOOD

In the 2006 film "The Pursuit of Happyness," Chris Gardner's son — played by Jaden Smith, son of Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith — is 5 years old.

Gardner (played by Will Smith) has his belongings in a single suitcase.

Gardner wears one suit at work for an entire year as he toils away as a trainee at Dean Witter, while trying to hide that he and his son are homeless.

### REALITY

"When my ex knocked on my door and said, 'I can't do this anymore. Here,' and handed over our son, Christopher Jr., to me, he was just 14 months old. We instantly became homeless because the boarding house I was staying at didn't allow kids. Had the script stuck to reality, it would have made the dialogue between Will Smith, who played me in the movie, and his son, who played my son, very difficult," Gardner says.

"Let's get real," Gardner says. "When I was running around like a mad man after work every day, desperately trying to get into a homeless shelter, I wasn't as lucky as Will Smith was in the movie. I didn't have a 5-year-old and a suitcase. I had a 14-month-old on my back and bags and bags of stuff in my hands."

"Let's set the record straight: I didn't wear *one* suit for a year straight," Gardner says. "I had *two* suits. One was blue, one was gray. The joke around the office was that I was in the Civil War ... and I was switching sides every day."

### Breaking the cycle

Gardner — now a multimillionaire and CEO of Gardner Rich LLC, a Chicago-based brokerage firm — says the most important thing he's done in his life is be there for his son and daughter, Jacintha. And they, in turn, are always here for Gardner, teaching him as much as he's passed on to them.

"I'll never forget the one day during all of this hoopla that my daughter really put me in my place," Gardner recalls.

"Will Smith's name had just come up as the perfect actor to play me in the movie. Don't get me wrong. I love Will Smith. I'm a big fan of his music and movies. But when I think of Will Smith, I think 'blockbuster' and 'outer space.' My book of memoirs was all about inner space.

"When I shared my doubts with Jacintha, she turned to me and said, 'Poppa, Will Smith played Muhammad Ali. ... If he can play Muhammad Ali,

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## HAPPYNESS

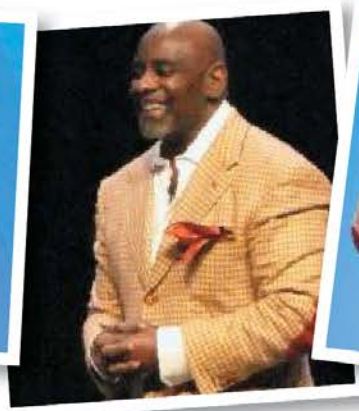
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he can play you!”

Gardner knew by the age of 5 the importance of being a good dad. He had a few good “bad examples” in his life.

“I grew up without a father, and for years I had a stepfather who reminded me of that fact,” says Gardner, with a tremendous sadness in his voice. “My stepfather would say, ‘I ain’t your daddy. You ain’t got no daddy — sometimes driving home the point with a 12-gauge shotgun pointed right at my chest.’”

Gardner credits his mother, Bettye Jean, for his relentless pursuit of happiness.

“I blame my success on Mom,” Gardner says. “My old-fashioned mother taught me I could do anything and be anything I wanted to. ... Apparently, I took it too far.”



### Y perseverance matters

“Happyness” is purposely spelled with a “y” — instead of correctly with an “i” — in the book and movie titles because that’s how the daycare center that took in Christopher Jr. spelled its name. And that place, Happyness, was crucial to Gardner being able to pursue his dream of becoming a broker while knowing Christopher Jr. was in good hands.

Some people who paid the price of admission to see “The Pursuit of Happyness” felt like too much of the movie was a downer. Gardner says they missed the message: The rainbow is

definitely worth chasing — just don’t expect to stumble upon several pots of gold along the journey. Many times, the rainbow is the journey itself.

What do Gardner and “The Pursuit of Happyness” have to teach Green Industry professionals? Two words: perspective and gratitude, especially amidst this so-called Great Recession.

“Never lose hope — no matter what,” Gardner says. “Dream big and work hard. The rest will take care of itself. Better buckle up, though. Life’s a real trip. And don’t forget to enjoy the ride.” **LM**

PHOTOS BY: MARTY WHITFORD

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