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In pursuit of their happiness

Christ the King freshmen hear from businessman who inspired Will Smith film

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Christopher Gardner



Courtesy DAISY WINFREY

Telling it like it is: Christopher Gardner taking a question from a Christ the King freshman at Monday's assembly.

year-old Gardner walked to the podium with quiet confidence.

Entrepreneur Christopher Gardner, who Will Smith portrayed in the 2006 movie *The Pursuit of Happyness*, looked the part of the successful man he is Monday, talking to students of Christ the King High School.

Austin facts

The former Austin High School building, 231 N. Pine, currently is home to three small high schools: Austin Polytech, Austin Business and Entrepreneurship Academy, and VOISE (Virtual Opportunities in a School Environment).

Monday's assembly was the first ever for the new Jesuit school, whose 120 freshmen are taking classes at a temporary location in Austin while their permanent campus is being built near Jackson and Leamington.

An assembly room in the basement of the Old St. Martin de Porres School in Austin on Monday was filled to near capacity. The man of the hour was tall and dignified. Wearing a beige double-breasted, finely-tailored suit with a maroon handkerchief tucked neatly into his jacket pocket, the 54-

Gardner had a clear message for the young students leaning forward attentively to hear him.

"2012 is going to be here before you know it, so I want you right now to pick the five colleges that you want to go to in 2012," he said. "Ask yourself, 'What do I need to do to get where I want to go?' Go to the school you want to because you are prepared for it. Don't go because there's some special consideration...Go where you want to go, and the way you start making that happen is right here today."

Gardner's own firm-Gardner Rich & Co.-is providing internships for four of the school's inaugural freshmen. The remaining students will work at paid internships at others businesses in Austin, Oak Park and surrounding Cook County.

The businessman's rise from homelessness to becoming a millionaire was the focus of the 2006 film, which garnered Will Smith a Best Actor Academy Award nomination.

Gardner recalled for students a story about a scene in the movie taking place on a basketball court. The scene was originally written to have Gardner tell his son while they're playing a pickup game that he'll never turn pro after the son tells his father he wants to one day.

On the day of shooting the scene, Gardner approached Smith and said, "We can't shoot the scene that way. I was taught by my mama that I could do or be anything I wanted to do or be."

After a long and sometimes tense discussion with the producers, it was Smith who said, "I have to agree with Chris because my mama told me the same thing."

Looking the freshmen in their eyes, Gardner said firmly, "Don't ever let somebody tell you what you can't do."

During the question and answer period Gardner offered some of his wisdoms to students.

"Knowledge is portable and transferable. Learn everything you can," he said. "You don't have to like a job to learn from it...Every struggle I went through was preparation for what I do today. No test, no testimony. Find the one thing you want to do, that gets you so excited that the sun cannot come up fast enough. Forget about money. Be bold enough to make it happen. A big part of bold is doing the work, pounding the anvil every day.

Gardner added, "There ain't no secrets to success. You have the opportunity to be world class at something you love."

Christ the King's location at the corner of Jackson and LeClaire is temporary. Jack Crowe, the chair of its building committee, said the \$27 million facility under construction on the site of the old Resurrection Catholic parish is scheduled to be completed in 2009.

Since the closing of Austin High School, 231 N. Pine, Christ the King becomes the area's fourth high school, and first Catholic school on the West Side in more than 80 years. Enrollment at the school will reach no higher than 600 students, school officials said. Christ the King is part of the national Cristo Rey Network of 20 schools nationwide, including in Pilsen.

Fr. Chris Devron, Christ the King's president, made a promise to his students during Monday's assembly: "We will not be satisfied until every one of our students successfully graduates from college."

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