

“Believe you are capable of doing better”

Daily Messenger - June 6, 2001
PAUL LONG/Messenger Post Staff

Fred Sarkis speaks with a group of Waterloo Middle School students and their teacher, Joanne Agrosto, during a motivational session yesterday. (Messenger Post photo by Jack Haley)



Bristol Mountain and Bristol Harbour founder Fred Sarkis hopes to reach 100,000 young people by next year.

WATERLOO - Last fall, Joe Ann Agrosto was in a bind.

Several of her students at Waterloo Middle School had been held back a grade, and now, a month into the new school year, most of them weren't doing much better.

In an effort to reach these students, Agrosto turned to Fred Sarkis. The founder of Bristol Mountain Ski Area & Snowboard resort and Bristol Harbour Village has been giving motivational talks to middle school-aged children in New York and Florida, and Agrosto hoped he would have an effect on her students, as well.

"I think it really motivated them to do well," Agrosto said yesterday. "They're so much better now." In fact, she said, all of the students in the group are on course to advance this year.

Sarkis, 75, was back in Waterloo yesterday, eight months after his original talk, to measure the students' progress. He also shared his message with the entire student body.

When Sarkis was 12 years old, a brief but intense conversation with his father led him to conclude that he, and he alone, was responsible for the rest of his life.

At the time, Sarkis was working nearly 100 hours a week, helping his father sell fruits and vegetables door-to-door in Rochester. Many of those hours were spent sitting in the back of his father's truck while his father met with customers in bars and restaurants.

Eventually, he realized his father, who was uneducated, had no other way to make a living. To avoid a similar fate, Sarkis took advantage of his considerable wait time, and began to bring his school books along for the ride.

His performance in school soon improved, and, by the age of 34, he was a multimillionaire, after starting a successful coffee vending business. He launched the Bristol Mountain resort in 1964, and helped found Bristol Harbour seven years later.

"It doesn't matter how much money I have, or what kind of car I drive," Sarkis told his audience

yesterday. "If I can have a positive impact on one child's life, that's all the satisfaction I need."

Married for 46 years to the former Helen Margaret O'Hara, Sarkis has five grown children and 11 grandchildren.

After he retired, Sarkis focused much of his energy on tennis, which he refers to as "my greatest stress reliever." He set out to win a national title for his age group, and, after just 12 weeks, he was ranked among the top 10 seniors in the state of Florida. But his life took a new direction in 1998, when Palmetto, Fla. math teacher Rick Born asked Sarkis to share his life story with Born's students.

Since then, Sarkis has given more than 100 motivational talks in western New York and southwestern Florida. From May 15 through next Thursday alone, he will have reached over 10,000 children, including nearly 500 during a May 17 appearance at Victor Junior High School. He will appear tomorrow at Pittsford Mendon High School; on June 11, he will be at Rochester's Norman Howard School; and, on June 14, he will speak at St. Christopher's Church in North Chili.

Sarkis recently published a book, "Prisoner of the Truck," detailing the life lessons he learned from working with his father more than 60 years ago. The book was published by WriteRead Press of Beverly, Mass., and is available for \$12.95 through Sarkis's Web site, .

His primary theme, he said yesterday, is attitude and enthusiasm. "I'd like them to see that it's possible, at 12 years old, to change your attitude, and realize that you can be responsible for the rest of your life."

"Don't blame failure on your home situation," he added.

Sarkis said he would also like to inspire other retirees to do their part to help children. "If I can do it at 75," he said, "these guys who retire at 60 can really make a difference."

Reunited with the students he first met last October, Sarkis reminded them that their attitudes and outlooks would need time to change. "It's a struggle - you sometimes think you're not making progress," he said.

"Be patient," he added. "Don't get discouraged, and believe you are capable of doing better."

Sarkis told the group that, when he was their age, he often wished he didn't have a father. Sixth-grader Adam Gascon quickly interjected, "But if you didn't have your father, you wouldn't be at this point right now."

Seventh-grader John Gillett said he is doing better in school since Sarkis's first visit. "I've learned to never quit, and to stick to my goals," he added.

Classmate David Jensen said his attitude has improved, along with his grades, and that he learned to "never give up, and you can do what you want to do."

Sarkis said he was impressed with the students' progress. "The seeds I may have planted are coming out of the ground, and beginning to bear fruit."

"I've never been happier with anything I've ever done," he added. "This is the most rewarding."

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