

Speaker brings motivational story

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If you spent a good portion of your childhood in the back of a truck with a negative self-image, would you think you could become successful some day?

Misfortunes in life may be discouraging, but they also have the power to provide lessons that help enrich your life, said Fred Sarkis during presentations last Tuesday in the Olin Building.

During his childhood, Sarkis was a self-described "prisoner of the truck," forced to spend his entire summer and weekends during school working with his father on a truck selling fruits and vegetables.

Yet, with two important life lessons and a strong desire to succeed, Sarkis became a prosperous businessman who now travels to schools to share his motivational story.

Although he usually speaks to children in middle and high schools, Sarkis gave three presentations to Alfred University business students throughout the day.

In advance of the speech, students were asked to read Yes Pa, a free version of his autobiography in order to familiarize themselves with Sarkis' story.

The presentation opened with a routine where Sarkis, dressed like a clown, attempted to walk a tightrope stretched between two chairs. When the endeavor failed, he noted that the lesson was to learn to embrace failure as an "opportunity to learn to do better."

The talk that followed was quite similar to the book, containing a narrative of Sarkis' life, with the lessons he learned intertwined.

He opened with a tale of being bullied and ridiculed as the son of a Lebanese immigrant going to a predominately Irish- and German-American school. He noted that because of this, he developed a negative self-image at an early age.

At the age of eight, Sarkis began what he referred to as his "prison sentence." His father earned a living by selling fruits and vegetables door-to-door out of the back of his truck, and began to bring Sarkis along to help.

Each day during the summer, he went to work with his father from early morning until evening. On Saturdays, he was forced to wait in the back of the truck until 11 p.m. while his father sold his wares inside the local bar.

Once winter came, Sarkis had a reprieve during the week to go to school, but Saturdays he was back on the truck until late into the night with only a kerosene lamp to keep him war.

This situation continued for four years with no change: Sarkis still had a low self-image, which was not helped by his feelings of being a prisoner on the truck.

At age 12, however, Sarkis learned two important lessons from his father.

The first involved a sales technique, which also helped to give Sarkis a more positive overall attitude. During strawberry season, his father would buy extra strawberries and sell them in the evening in different neighborhoods to increase his income.

Selling the strawberries were Sarkis and his brother Joe, four years younger. One time, when Sarkis came back to the truck to get more strawberries, his father asked why Joe sold more strawberries than his brother did.

His father then followed Sarkis out to observe his sales technique, which consisted of Sarkis saying to a potential customer, "You don't want to buy any strawberries, do you?" while shaking his head.

His father then demonstrated his technique, which displayed the strawberries while extolling their quality and freshness. To finish the pitch he asked, "do you want one quart or three?"

Sarkis explained that the lesson he learned here was the importance of attitude. His original negative attitude made it easy for potential customers to say no, while a more positive approach got the customers excited about buying strawberries.

Another lesson was learned one day when Sarkis' father asked him if he enjoyed working on the truck. Sarkis answered that he hated it. His father then explained to him the importance of an education, for it was his father's lack of education that forced him to work on the truck.

From that day forward, Sarkis was aware of the value of education, using his time on the truck to study. He turned himself from a poor student who hated school into one whom earned a scholarship to a business school and graduated first in his class.

Indeed, education became a way out of the truck as Sarkis got a job that allowed him to buy a larger house for his parents and many siblings. This would be just the beginning of a long, storied career in business.

After serving in World War II, Sarkis began a business providing coffee vending machines to local businesses. His business became so successful that he eventually sold it to a large company that also put him in charge of their Northeast operations.

This began a string of many business ventures, some successful, some not before Sarkis retired with a new goal of becoming a tennis champion.

It was at this time that Sarkis made a new discovery. He and his brother Joe were discussing their time on the truck -- Joe had taken Sarkis' place once he got his first job -- and Joe asked why

Sarkis had never followed their father into the bar on Saturday nights.

Sarkis replied that he was simply doing what he was told; Joe was more headstrong than his brother and had been going into the bar with their father.

At this point, Sarkis asked Joe why it took their father their entire evening to sell fruits and vegetables to patrons. Joe, surprised at his brother's naivete, explained that their father had in fact been gambling the entire time.

At this point, Sarkis was heartbroken. He believed that the whole time he was in the truck, his father was working hard to support the family, while in reality he was gambling.

After professional counseling, Sarkis decided he wanted to share his story with young people. He believes that the lessons he learned can help others as well.

After relating this story of his life to his audience, he answered a few questions about his life and the lessons gained from years of experience.

In closing, Sarkis referred to an acronym that sums up his important life lessons: ACE. He explained that Attitude, Courage and Enthusiasm is essential and urged those in attendance to adhere to this philosophy.