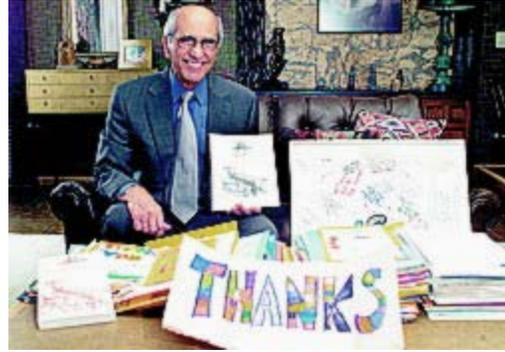


No shortage of motivation

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By AMY KOTLARZ/Messenger Post Correspondent

SOUTH BRISTOL — Fred Sarkis got 40 valentines in the mail last week with a note from a teacher apologizing for their lateness — nearly 70 years late, in fact.



Sarkis, 75, has never forgotten that day in first grade when he gave out 40 valentines to classmates only to receive two in return.

As a motivational speaker, Sarkis tells the story of the valentines to illustrate how his negative attitude toward himself influenced how others treated him.

But a talk with his father gave him the determination to overcome those adjectives. "At the age of 12, I made up my mind that I was responsible for where I would go with the rest of my life," Sarkis said. "I would blame no one."

The South Bristol resident used hard work and persistence to build several multi-million dollar food service businesses in Rochester and develop the Bristol Mountain Ski Area and Bristol Harbor Village, marina, golf course and restaurant.

He uses public speaking skills honed from years of presentations to reach elementary through college students. His goal is to speak to 100,000 students.

Sarkis has written a 362-page autobiography, "Prisoner of the Truck," and a children's book, "Yes Pa," that condenses the autobiography and can be used as a study guide. It is can be downloaded free from his Web site, www.prisonerofthetruck.com.

Sarkis said he encourages parents, teachers and students to use "Yes Pa" together, to delve into the topics he discusses in the book.

Sarkis hears from his audiences through the volume of thank-you notes they send him. The hand-made notes, cards and letters from students of all ages fill a table in the Bristol Harbor Village condominium where he and his wife, Helen, live. Each note, he said, is a hug he never received from his father, who would lock his son in the back of his fruits and vegetable truck while he went into a Rochester bar to gamble.

Despite an addiction to gambling, his father taught Sarkis how to be an effective salesman and how to use a positive attitude to advance his business. Sarkis now teaches these lessons to business school students and elementary students alike.

Alfred University required all freshman business students to read "Yes Pa." Sarkis has spoken to Alfred freshmen, juniors and seniors and may return later this year to speak to sophomores. Frank Duserick, interim dean of the College of Business at Alfred, said Sarkis' speech was timely

in light of recent corporate accounting scandals, even though it was planned long in advance.

Joanne Agrasto, a sixth-grade English teacher at Waterloo Middle School, said Sarkis has spoken several times to her classes, including an alternative education class, where she saw dramatic changes in some of her students after his speech.

"I have found with my students that he really has motivated them to do better," Agrasto said.

Sarkis said he is not trying to make money off the talks and the books. He gives the talks for free and he donates any proceeds from the "Prisoner of the Truck" to children's charities.

Just as Sarkis encourages students to recognize their potential, he recognized the potential for business many times in the Rochester area. Sarkis' book also tells how he saw potential to put a ski hill in South Bristol, using fledgling snowmaking and ski trail lighting technology. After struggling for 17 years to keep Bristol Mountain ski resort afloat, he gave it up to the bank and lost his \$1 million investment.

He also saw development potential in a steep cliff along the shore of Canandaigua Lake. Sarkis' plan to build luxury condominiums, a marina, golf course, tennis courts, a water treatment plant and a sewage treatment plant incited a storm of controversy. He battled for three years before construction of the first phase began.

After running out of money to complete the project, Sarkis and his family sold their 6,000-square-foot home and moved into a 1,200-square-foot cabin in South Bristol. Eventually an insurance company loaned him \$6 million to continue the project, but condominium sales plummeted with the country's energy crisis. Sarkis had to surrender his ownership. But by 1980, he and some local investors bought back the village from the insurance company. He would later sell his share to investors.

"I did what I preach," Sarkis said. "I embraced the failure. I learned from it and went back to it and formed a vending service business, which became a tremendous success, and I recovered what I lost."

Sarkis also coached his sons in a business of renting blood pressure testing machines in drug stores. That business now serves Western New York and all of Canada. Sarkis has five children and 11 grandchildren. He said they and Helen were supportive, even when he lost millions. His struggles also taught them to be responsible, he said.

Sarkis, a prostate cancer survivor, is also a WWII veteran and competes in tennis tournaments when he spends winters in Florida. He said he hopes to win a national singles tennis title in his age group, joking that the older he gets, the less competition he has.

Area visits

Author and motivational speaker Fred Sarkis' upcoming speaking engagements include:

Oct. 11, Geneva Middle School.

Oct. 15 Marcus Whitman.

Oct. 22, Marcus Whitman.

Oct. 24, Gananda Elementary.

Oct. 25, Wayne Ontario Pri-mary.

Oct. 25 Wayne Ontario Ele-mentary.

Oct. 29 Geneseo State College (SUNY Geneseo).