

Motivational millionaire

Real-estate developer Fred Sarkis now helps children build their lives with inspiring talks

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(September 27, 2000) -- Fred Sarkis knows what it's like to struggle -- and he knows what it's like to survive.

The self-made millionaire has endured everything from 100-hour work weeks as a child during the Great Depression to cancer and bankruptcy.

And at 74, the coffee vendor-turned-developer of Bristol Mountain Ski Resort and Bristol Harbour golf course, marina and condominiums, has a new goal.

Sarkis wants to reach 100,000 children with a message.

"I want them to know they have it within themselves to overcome whatever adversities or obstacles life may send their way," he said. "And I want them to know that, regardless of the circumstances they find themselves in, they have the power to achieve any goal they set."

He's getting his message out in a variety of ways.

Sarkis is now offering his services free as a motivational speaker. He talks to children dressed as a clown and to teens in regular street clothes. Regardless of the presentation, the message is the same.

He talks about positive self-image, taking responsibility for their actions, setting realistic goals and following through one step at a time.

Jason Brown, 18, of Palmyra, heard Sarkis speak at Palmyra-Macedon High School earlier this month, and was impressed with what he heard.

"He's a captivating speaker," said Brown. "I don't think I took my eyes off him once when he was speaking and I was in awe of what he said for four or five hours after he was done."

Brown said he walked away from the talk with a lot to think about.

"He really emphasized responsibility and that the world doesn't want to give you anything," Brown said. "I have to take what I have in myself, show the world who I am, and that I can go out and do anything."

Sarkis also speaks to adults about the importance of becoming mentors.

And he's just completed an autobiography about his childhood, titled Prisoner of the Truck. He hopes to have a publisher lined up soon.

"I do not know how successful the book will be," he said. "But I do know that, if successful, any royalties will be set up in a trust fund for the benefit of children."

Sarkis and his wife of 44 years, the former Helen Margaret O'Hara, also from Rochester, have five children and 11 grandchildren. They spend six months a year at their Bristol Harbour condominium and six months in Florida.

Sarkis began retirement playing tennis and penning his autobiography, Prisoner of the Truck.

Then, in April 1999, a friend told Sarkis his life story was inspirational and asked him to speak to his math class at Palmetto High School in Florida. That led to three days of motivational speaking to more than 1,300 students.

He was thrilled.

Sarkis -- who has been involved in retirement with United Way and Big Brothers, Big Sisters -- studied clowning a year ago and then began forming skits to get his message out to younger children.

He's done three clown performances to help raise money for Camp Good Days and Special Times. And he recently made a presentation to 70 children in Canandaigua's Phoenix Program.

The program provides children, ages 7 to 16, with activities between the end of the school day and when their parents get home and during summer vacation, said Canandaigua Police Chief Patrick McCarthy.

"Fred's presentation had the kids talking," McCarthy said. "And that's always a good thing. It obviously made an impact on them."

Despite the adversities, Sarkis will tell you he's thankful and grateful for the life he's led.

But he'll also tell you there's still a lot to be done. In his mission to reach 100,000 children, he says he's spoken to about 2,000 so far.

"What's really important to me is helping kids," he said. "And if I can make a difference in even one of their lives, it's worth it. Money can't buy that kind of success or satisfaction."