

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Pursuit of Happyness' Chris Gardner To Speak At UVI's Men's Conference

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Cynthia Graham **January 26, 2015**



New York Times best-selling author and philanthropist Chris Gardner will be the featured speaker at the University of the Virgin Islands' Fifth Annual Man-Up Male Empowerment Conference. The two-day event will take place on Tuesday, Feb. 10 at the Sports and Fitness Center on the St. Thomas campus and on Wednesday, Feb. 11 on the grounds of the Albert A. Sheen Campus on St. Croix.

The theme of this year's conference is "Man-Up – Awakening the Leader Within."

"The University of the Virgin Islands is indeed excited to host the fifth annual Man-Up Male Empowerment Conference," said Dr. Haldane Davies, UVI's vice president for

Business Development and Innovation. "This signature event is designed to assist men of all ages in realizing the value of living meaningful lives and contributing to the positive well-being of themselves and the society."

More than 3,000 young men from public and private schools throughout the territory have been invited to attend.

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Gardner, a millionaire entrepreneur, is best known as the subject of the 2006 film, "The Pursuit of Happyness," starring Will Smith and his son, Jaden. The movie depicted Gardner's life as a new father, in his late 20s, determined to find a career that would be both lucrative and fulfilling. Fascinated by finance, but without connections or a college degree, he applied for training programs at brokerages. He lived on next to nothing while he learned a new trade.

Gardner became a single parent when his son's mother left the family. However, despite his circumstances, he fought to keep his son.

"I made up my mind as a young kid that when I had children they were going to know who their father is, and that he isn't going anywhere," Gardner wrote in his biography.

He earned a spot in the Dean Witter Reynolds training program, but became homeless when he could not make ends meet on his trainee salary. Gardner was forced to go from shelter to shelter with his son and even had to spend a night in a subway station bathroom.

After completing the training program, he worked at Bear Stearns and Co. and became a top earner. After four years at Bear Sterns, Gardner founded his own brokerage firm -- Gardner Rich LLC -- using \$10,000 of his own money to start the Chicago-based firm. Gardner Rich is a broker-dealer specializing in servicing public pension funds and Taft-Hartley plans.

In 2006, Gardner published his autobiography, "The Pursuit of Happyness," which became a *New York Times* and *Washington Post* No. 1 bestseller. It has been translated into more than 40 languages.

As a result of the book and the movie, Gardner received many prestigious awards, including an NAACP Image Award.

"I applaud the University of the Virgin Islands' continuous effort to reach our young males through this conference," said Human Services Commissioner Designee Vivian I. Ebbesen-Fludd. "As a department that serves at-risk youth, it is the goal of the Department of Human Services to continue our partnership with the University, the Department of Education, and other stakeholders to positively influence the attitudes and behaviors of our adolescents, which will strengthen our community and foster positive personal outcomes."

"I am excited about this year's Man-Up Conference and fully endorse the efforts of President David Hall and the University of the Virgin Islands family," said V.I. Department of Education Commissioner Designee Dr. Sharon Ann McCollum. "In reaching today's

young people, we must employ successful and proven interventions to encourage all of our students, in particular our young men, to discover and activate their unique gifts of leadership. It is our hope that this conference continues to strengthen and positively affect change in the lives of our young men."

The Man-Up conference will also include performances by Planet VI, formerly R. City or Rock City. The two brothers, Timothy and Theron Thomas, are natives of St. Thomas, and released their debut album, "Wake the Neighbors," in 2008, which contained the hit single, "Losing It." The Thomas brothers have written music for many music stars, including Rihanna, Chris Brown, Justin Bieber, Usher, Enrique Iglesias, R. Kelly and more. For the 2015 Grammy Awards, they received two nominations for "Best Pop Vocal Album" for Ariana Grande's vocals on "Be My Baby" and Miley Cyrus' "We Can't Stop."

Local radio personality Rashidi Clenace will return as the conference's master of ceremonies.

Sponsors include the V.I. Department of Education, the V.I. Department of Human Services, College Access Challenge Grant and Attorneys Joel and Jackie Holt. The male empowerment conference, an initiative of UVI's Brothers with a Cause student organization, is aimed at motivating young male students to pursue a college education.

Attendees may register online [here](#).

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