



PRESS RELEASE

Available for Release on September 18, 2009

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United Way of Midland County Community Kick-off Features an Inspirational Message from Chris Gardner

MIDLAND--The United Way of Midland County held its 2009 Community Kick-off event on Friday, September 18th at the Midland Center for the Arts. Over 1,200 community members were in attendance. "This is by far the largest crowd we've ever had at one time," shared Ann Fillmore, United Way of Midland County Executive Director.

Many were there to hear the incredible and moving message of Chris Gardner, author of the autobiography, "The Pursuit of Happyness," his life story that was the inspiration for the award-winning movie starring Will Smith.

"Very inspirational," said Curt Johnson, Dow Chemical. "Everyone could relate to his message. My kids are here with me and they got the glitter from Hollywood, but today they heard the real story."

Few stories are as moving as his. Chris shared with the audience his childhood experiences marked by poverty, domestic violence, alcoholism, and family illiteracy. Chris wrote his first book to shed light on these issues and demonstrate that circumstances do not have to define you.

Chris Gardner's newest book "Start Where You Are," provides direction in a time of great uncertainty. "The power of the present offers each and every one of us that same new beginning. It's doesn't matter how young, old, rich, poor, tall, short, or in between you are," states Chris. "You don't have to have lived on the streets or have traveled in high-powered circles."

Many free tickets were distributed to area youth and families. “It is important to have people who are struggling with many of these same issues, to share in this incredible message of hope,” stated Ann Fillmore.

“It was a mixed emotion event today. I laughed. I cried. I believed in myself today for the first time in a very long time. The message provoked thought as to how to give back to my community and help those in need. After all, I’ve been blessed with a good family, good friends and a good job...after being homeless myself,” stated an anonymous attendee.

Mr. Bob Rathbun, Community President and Senior Lender of Chemical Bank and the 2009 United Way Campaign Chair announced this year’s campaign goal of \$4.8 million. “So many in our community are in need of help right now and our community is rising to meet that need,” shared Bob.

The kick-off event also celebrated the early momentum that the pacesetters have established. Pacesetters are local groups that agree to begin their giving campaign early, to build momentum and set the pace for the rest of Midland County. This year, the ten community Pacesetter organizations did a fantastic job. Their contributions, along with other early community donations have already raised \$404,695, an impressive 8.4% of the overall goal. Guests were treated to a preview of the upcoming ReMax Balloon festival, with balloons inflating and taking flight from the parking lot of the Midland Center for the Arts.

“Phenomenal event, great speaker,” said Rob Vallentine, Public Affairs, Dow Chemical. “I, as an individual, need to respond. Families need to respond. Our community needs to respond.”

United Way is committed to reaching out to those in need, recognizing each of us has a role to play in making our community a better place. Partnering with local agencies, they assess the needs and address them with targeted programs and services for the people who need it most.

This inspirational event is sponsored by: Chemical Bank, The Dow Chemical Company, Dow Corning Corporation, MidMichigan Health and supported through the generosity of Midland Center for the Arts and Citadel Broadcasting.

For more information, contact United Way of Midland County at (989) 631-3670 or visit www.liveunitedmidland.org.