

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Retired businessman clowns around with kids

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

BRISTOL — Fred W. Sarkis, 74, has seen life from the chilly bed of a fruit truck his father owned. He's also seen life from the snow-covered mountain ski resort that he himself owned.

Sarkis grew up in poverty during the Great Depression, saw combat as a sailor in World War II, and became a multi-millionaire who went bankrupt once and lost the Bristol Mountain ski resort he'd owned in Ontario County. Through it all, Sarkis has apparently managed to keep a sense of humor and a deep faith in Christ as well.

A parishioner at St. Nicholas the Wonderworker Church, a Greek Melkite Catholic parish in Gates, Sarkis is currently putting the finishing touches on his autobiography titled *Prisoner of the Truck*.

He's also a little less than a tenth of the way to reaching his goal of giving free motivational speeches to 100,000 children. He has taken his presentation to several Catholic and public schools both in western New York and in Florida over the last year.

He talks about his life by dressing as a clown and using a tiny tightrope to symbolize the perils of life and how to get across them. In his act, Sarkis recalls how his dad taught him to develop a positive attitude toward selling strawberries, and how he's worked hard all his life to overcome self-pity in order to achieve all of his goals.

"Everyone is in some form of a prison," said Sarkis during an interview at the restaurant in Bristol Harbour Village, a residential and marina complex with a golf course he developed on Canandaigua Lake after he lost his ski resort. The retired entrepreneur listed drug addiction, single parenthood and a stagnant career among the prisons people can inhabit. "What we have to do is take those prisons, and we have to convert them into potential for good."

For Sarkis, the son of a Lebanese immigrant father and first-generation Lebanese mother of Rochester, those prisons included the prejudice he sometimes felt from his fellow students at the Catholic elementary school he attended. The olive-skinned Sarkis remembered that he even asked his mother once if he could move next door for awhile to live with a white family.

"At the age of 6, I was thinking: 'If I live next door, I could catch blond hair, blue eyes and white skin,'" he said with a laugh.

But he recalled nothing more vividly



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Kindergartner Kaitlyn Vall smiles as Fred Sarkis asks her a question at St. Lawrence School in Greece on Oct. 17. A self-made millionaire, Sarkis presents motivational talks as a clown at various schools. Here, he has removed his red clown nose.

than having to sit from the ages of 8 to 14 in the back of his father's fruit truck on Saturday nights from 7-11 p.m. This was another "prison," as he saw it, remembering sitting on an orange crate huddling next to a kerosene lamp to keep warm on cold winter nights. His father told him to stay in the truck while he sold fruit to customers in bars.

He added that at the age of 12, when he blew his top and told his father how much he hated working on the truck, his father told him to study hard and someday he would be able to free himself through education.

Sarkis took his dad's words to heart, and began relentlessly studying whenever and wherever he could, including on



the fruit truck, and eventually graduated the valedictorian of his high school class.

Sarkis now sees the fruit truck as the prison that he converted into a classroom. But he learned just two years ago from his younger brother all that time he was in the back of the truck, his father actually wasn't selling fruit to customers, he was shooting dice. Despite all he had achieved in life, from the building of a ski resort on Bristol Mountain to the development of a hugely successful coffee vending machine business, Sarkis said the revelation devastated him. However, he has since forgiven his dad, he said, having come to believe his father was the victim of an addiction.

Now Sarkis said he feels that the letters schoolchildren send him are "hugs" from the spirit of his deceased father.

His act has earned him accolades from students and school leaders alike, and Sarkis has collected dozens of letters from kids going through difficult times whose lives he touched briefly yet deeply.

"I lost my father and mother at a young age," one girl wrote him after his presentation. "To hear you talk about your experiences made me feel better about my situation. If there was anyone to come and tell us about their life, I'm glad it was you."

"I open these letters, and I cry," Sarkis said of such feedback.

He added that he's pretty much giving up playing tennis all the time in order to do his current work, even though he's ranked one of the top senior amateur players in the country.

"This is so much more rewarding than hitting a ball back and forth across a net."

EDITORS' NOTE: Sarkis may be booked for a free motivational speech by calling 716/396-2046.

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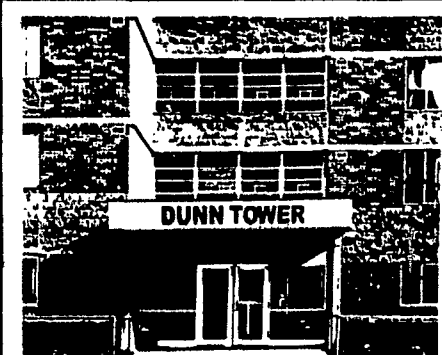
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