

Hills student is on 'Today'

By Tom Henderson
staff writer

Like mother like son.

Farmington Hills resident Chris Sarkisian thinks he has a nifty idea for a new business.

The Today Show thinks so, too, and flew him to New York over the weekend so he could talk about his idea today on the NBC morning program.

"Please, no shuttle disasters," he said before flying out, hoping that no major news would break and bump him off the show.

"I thought it was a joke," Chris said of the call that came two days before Christmas telling him the network people in Manhattan wanted to pick his entrepreneurial brain. "I thought: The Today Show? What do they want me for? I didn't think it was that big an idea. I guess it was bigger than I thought."

AS WITH MANY good business ideas, Chris' is so simple you wonder why nobody ever thought of it before.

A senior at Michigan State University and 1983 graduate of Farmington Hills, he had done a slow burn for years over selling his used books to the bookstores, then seeing the same book on the shelf at a substantial markup.

Why not sell directly to other students and eliminate the middleman? The seller would get more than the bookstore was offering, and the buyer would pay less.

And how best to hook up student seller with student buyer? Chris, a computer buff and marketing major, figures he could set up a computer network, charging a modest fee for linking buyer and seller.

"I've had the idea a long time, since my sophomore year," said Chris. "Everyone was always complaining how unfair it was:

You buy a new book for \$10 and then when it's time to sell it, they say, 'OK, we'll give you \$2.50.' At the next term you see the same book selling for seven or eight bucks."

LOTS OF PEOPLE have good ideas. Not many of them get invited by the Today Show to discuss them before a nationwide audience. What made Chris so special?

In October he saw an ad in Career magazine offering a first prize of \$10,000 for the best proposal for a new business by a college student. (The contest was sponsored by I Can't Believe It's Yogurt, a chain of 175 frozen yogurt stores headquartered in Dallas and founded 10 years ago by Bill and Julie Brice, a brother and sister who were students at Southern Methodist University.)

Chris saw the ad on Oct. 15, which was the deadline for entering. He decided to enter, anyway, and Federal Express his proposal.

On Dec. 1, he was notified that he was one of 10 finalists of the 575 entrants. He and the other nine must submit a detailed plan of operation for the proposed business by Feb. 15, with the winner getting the money and a trip to Washington in March for Young Entrepreneurs Week.

In the meantime, the Today Show found out about the contest and decided it liked Chris' idea and one by a woman in Baltimore. Both were invited to New York.

Chris' mom, Gayle, and his sister, Nicole, went with him to New York, combining business with the pleasure of seeing his appearance. Mom owns Green Plant Designs in Livonia, a company that takes care of plants in businesses throughout southeastern and central Michigan. (Chris works for his mother, tending plants at businesses in Howell and Flint.)



Chris Sarkisian

GAYLE AND NICOLE are also starting another Livonia business, No Sweat Exercise, a passive exercise facility across from the Livonia Mall, which is supposed to open in the next week or so.

The facility offers a series of work stations, with machines that put the body through a range of motions without the person involved doing any of the work. The theory is that oxygen gets into the muscles and burns off fat.

In addition, the Sarkisians will sell a line of fitness clothes at the store and went with Chris to New York to see their clothing distributors.

As for the future, Chris, who graduates in June, isn't sure he will actually try to turn his idea into a reality.

He talks of getting it started at MSU and then branching out to other schools. But a lot depends on whether he gets accepted to graduate business school at Harvard or Yale. Eventually he wants to be a consultant, helping others market their businesses.

Of more immediate concern last week was a trip back to East Lansing Friday for an interview with the Lansing State Journal.

"They want to take a picture of me in front of the bookstore. Real nice — get me in trouble before I even start."

Self-awareness needed to grapple with bigotry

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threat is posed by more subtle forms of bigotry.

People must reach the hidden racism and bigotry — feelings and attitudes that aren't publicly discussed but nonetheless felt and taken home. "You learn as a minority how to recognize subtleties," he said.

SUBTLETIES POP up at those moments in a store when Agnew, who stands taller than six feet, will wonder why — even though it's his turn — he is not being waited on by a salesperson. "At my height, I don't think it's difficult to notice me."

Not that Agnew is the type of man to feel sorry for himself. He acknowledges that the store incident probably happens to many more people when they happen to be the minority in a given situation.

The racism and negative feelings Agnew refers to are not simply black versus white. The awareness and cultural education Agnew and the committee are attempting to

pursue runs the gamut of race, ethnicity and culture.

Consider the angst and sometimes outright anger among religions and even subgroups within larger religious institutions. Or the lack of understanding portrayed in jokes or slurs between the various European groups — Irish, Polish, Italian — that immigrated to America.

Each group, Agnew said, has its own imagined stereotype for yet another group that is unlike them. Those misleading stereotypes are the result of ignorance.

That's where Agnew and the cultural committee want to step in and make some change. Education and awareness will be the committee's tools.

"WE ARE fortunate to have a multi-ethnic community here in Farmington Hills," he said. "It's a hotbed of learning for each other. As people, we have the power to enrich others' lives — in general, human-kind."

Agnew and his fellow committee members aren't kidding themselves.

"It's going to be a lot of hard work. If we can't get people to get out and vote in elections, it's going to be tough (trying to improve their cultural awareness). But I think we will be successful."

"If we don't do anything as a committee but scratch the surface, we have at least left some sort of a mark," Agnew would like the committee to be in the forefront of the community, he said.

Relying on his own experience in the '60s, Agnew said personal awareness must precede further change.

"You have to be open and honest with your own feelings. Before you can attempt to change, you have to understand what your feelings — good and bad — are."

If a person dislikes a group, that feeling should be acknowledged. Once acknowledged, it's easier to determine where the education must begin.

"You have to recognize your feelings as a positive force or as a problem. Once that's done, people can help."

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