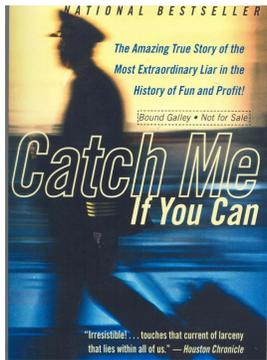


Life not defined by youthful crime spree



Tim Evans, tim.evans@indystar.com 5:48 p.m. EDT May 25, 2016



(Photo: Submitted)

Most people know Frank Abagnale only as the daring young criminal portrayed by Leonardo DiCaprio, who posed as an airline pilot, doctor, attorney and college professor while traveling the world cashing more than \$2 million in forged checks.

But that's not who Abagnale sees in the mirror when he wakes up in the morning.

"I know that people are fascinated with what I did 50 years ago when I was a teenage boy between the ages of 16 and 21. But when I look back on my life now, I look at my life and think that was not what was amazing," Abagnale told me last week.

"What was amazing was that I did those things, that I got caught and went to prison, and came out of prison at 26 years old and I've worked for the FBI for four decades."

Abagnale, 68, is now one of the world's leading experts on forgery, embezzlement and fraud. He was in Indianapolis last week to do an educational program for the AARP Fraud Watch Network.

While he was in town Thursday, Abagnale had lunch with about 40 people, including Marion County Prosecutor Terry Curry, Secretary of State Connie Lawson, staffers from the attorney general's consumer protection division and IMPD fraud investigators.

Before lunch he rented a car and, without fanfare, drove to Greensburg. He said a teacher there had been writing him for about eight years, asking if he would come speak to his students. Abagnale said he appreciated the persistence. So when he scheduled the trip to Indiana, he went out of his way to finally grant the teacher's request.

Speaking to those students — who are about the age Abagnale was when he went on his now-famous crime spree — was a change of pace from his work with the FBI. Abagnale has consulted on sophisticated financial frauds including the Enron, WorldCom and Tyco cases. He said the agency turns to him on cases "where it's difficult to find out how somebody's doing something."

Abagnale also works in the private sector, developing technology to help thwart fraud, assisting businesses and financial institutions and partnering with AARP to provide education on how people can protect their identities and money.

"That I could have done all these things, that I paid my debt to society, came out and was able to do something so positive with my life; and that's what, to me, makes America great — that you can get up and change your life," Abagnale said.

"To sit here and know my own son became an FBI agent is just overwhelming to me, and always amazes me every day that I wake up where I am today."



Frank Abagnale speaks to an AARP group about protecting your identity and money. (Photo: Submitted)

Amazing. That word, in my opinion, is the ideal way to describe Abagnale.

While it was his criminal past that made him famous, he proved there is such as thing as a second chance. At least, for those willing to work for it. Still, he admitted, even after four decades working with the FBI, his past is a burden he "must live with every day."

"What I did," he said, "was immoral, illegal and unethical."

Abagnale has been offered pardons from three presidents. And he has turned them all down.

A piece of paper, he explained, is not a measure of a man's character. That comes only from actions, a philosophy Abagnale said motivates his decisions every single day of his life.

Here's some more from our conversation last week, in Abagnale's own words:

Question: What do we need to know about scams and fraud?

Answer: The biggest concerns Americans have is about their identity being stolen. Because of all the breaches and because of all the information people give away of Facebook, stealing someone's identity is a very simple thing to do and, consequently, if I can become you, what I can do as you is simply

limited to my imagination.

It's an amazing crime. We have a victim every two seconds in the United States now.

It is so easy to do. It is a very simplistic crime to get someone's information. You just need their name, their Social Security number, and their date of birth and you can become that person. ... There are so many ramifications, whether I apply for tax refunds in your name, or I apply for credit and get it in your name, it is not that simple to just say, "well I've been a victim, that was somebody else did that." It is very difficult to get it straightened out once you've already had someone steal your identity.

Q: What do you do with the FBI?

A: When the FBI originally took me out of prison it was to do undercover work. I only had a short obligation to work for the FBI. I didn't have to stay there, it was just part of my parole. And when that time came that my parole was up and I had served the completed part of my sentence I was free of that obligation. But that was something that I wanted to continue to do. I was honored that I was ever asked to be part of it.



Frank Abagnale, who's youthful crime spree was the inspiration for the book and movie, Catch Me If You Can, has spent the last four decades working with the FBI and businesses to combat fraud and theft. (Photo: Submitted)

Crime has changed a lot. When I first went with the FBI, everything I dealt with was involving counterfeiting and forgery and forged checks and things of that nature. Now, 40 years later, most everything I deal with revolves around cybercrime, and cybertechnology, and software and things that didn't exist back then. I had to learn and change pace just like everybody else. Every day there's a new type of crime, and the way crime works, and the way people figure out how to do crime, and certainly technology breeds crime, so I've had to stay one step ahead.

Q: So, is it hopeless?

A: I have found that if you go out and educate people, and you say these are the things you don't want to do and this is why, and you make it very simple for them to understand, they're smart enough to then go ahead and take those steps. ... It's just a matter of teaching people to do these things. And once you teach them they don't fall victim to these scams.

Q: Tell me about the "real" Frank.

A: Prison didn't rehabilitate me. I was not born again. I didn't see the light.

I was raised by a good family and a good Catholic school. I was taught right and wrong, so I was given those tools and, like a lot of people in life, you sometimes go down the wrong road. But I was very fortunate that I had the rope my parents had given me to reach out and grab that rope and pull myself back.

But until I met my wife and I got married — and she married me against the wishes of her parents — that's what really changed my life. I have a child and I started to realize the importance of being a good father and a good husband, and that has been the main focus and important thing in my life. I have three beautiful sons, four grandchildren and, as I said, been married to my one-and-only wife going on almost 40 years. That's what's made my life special, that's always been the main, most important thing in my life. Everything is secondary to that and I think I am where I am today because of that.

Tim Evans is IndyStar's consumer advocate. Call him at (317) 444-6204. Follow him on Twitter: @starwatchtim.

+ At [indystar.com \(http://IndyStar.com\)](http://IndyStar.com): See Abagnale's take on the information many people share (</story/money/2016/04/27/4-tips-protect-your-identity-money/83545218/>) on social media, and his four tips for protecting your identify and money.

Read or Share this story: <http://indy.st/1Ty48Ck>