

The Character that is Frank Abagnale

Frank Abagnale moved to Charleston from Tulsa, Oklahoma. It was an arrangement from a promise made to his wife, Kelly. Abagnale didn't come to Charleston in the same timing that his furniture arrived. In fact, he shipped his cars, his boat and the furniture concurrently. Then, he changed his mind.

Abagnale couldn't disconnect from his Tulsa home where his three boys had been raised from childhood to adulthood. The empty 6000 square foot house on several acres enhanced his deep emotion of withdrawal. The Tulsa home was in stark contrast to the quaint historical downtown Charleston address the Abagnales would assume. But Kelly Abagnale had found the perfect Charleston residence, built in 1784 and restored complete with a video chronicling the effort of some 200 carpenters, electricians, etc. It was Kelly's dream circumstance. The Abagnales bought it. It took Kelly three days to unpack the kitchen alone. Since the house was smaller, some furniture would need to be stored. The cars had arrived. The boat was delivered. But Frank Abagnale could not get past leaving the Tulsa home. He told Kelly of his reluctance and arranged for everything to be moved back. It was an extraordinary turn of events. A Tulsa neighbor later told him that they thought he had lost his mind. In a good way, he did. He was lost in melancholy.

The Abagnales decided to keep the Charleston home as a second residence. They reinstalled the return-to-Tulsa bound furniture and re-established their previous life. It was a deeply emotional reversal. For a matter of months, the episode subsided. Then, Abagnale realized that he had gone back on a promise to the woman he loved. He had promised that – once the youngest of the three boys was emancipated from the household – he would go wherever Kelly wanted him to live “as long as it had great air service.” He put the Tulsa home on the market, and with Kelly, came to Charleston. There, they bought new furniture and accessories to fill their Church Street home. Incredibly, they performed this mammoth task all in just one day! The Abagnales became instant Charlestonians. Frank Abagnale has often looked back, but has become an eminent fixture in Charleston because of his ability to look forward.

He would be the graduation speaker the following day (of the interview) at Academic Magnet High School. It was just one of dozens of appointments, commitments and appearances that had filled his electronic calendar.

“I feel an obligation to bring a moral message. I entertain first, then I bring a purposeful insight.” Abagnale stated. “My career has been to protect businesses from fraud. I'm personally paying back with a second chance at life. I can never fully pay back until death. Life is not short, but long. I feel that I can save young

people from making wrong decisions. Living with the burden of wrong decisions will be for a long time. Life will come back and remind you. Think before you act.”

This thick white haired gentleman is emboldened by his own experiences. He is much too humble and understated for what he has been able to give back to the world in sensitive parenting messages, ethical guidelines and moralistic stories that inspire. He has saved businesses – big and small – billions upon billions from would-be criminals. Abagnale is contemplative, naturally pleasant and forthright in his candor. He is justly proud of his children and steadfast in his reverence of his wife. She changed him. His depth of purpose is the sidelight to his career, though it could certainly be seen that his life’s work has not been his career, but his self-imposed duty to reassert needed morality in every quarter.

Abagnale gave a poignant example that he had experienced when his three boys were younger. It spoke to his moral cause.

“We had stopped at a Wendy’s drive-in and made a small purchase of under ten dollars. The young clerk gave me back change for a twenty even though I had only handed her a ten. I immediately corrected the mistake and gave her back the ten dollar error.” Abagnale explained. “One of my sons noticed it and asked me upon leaving why I did not just keep the money. I asked him if the ten dollars would make any difference whatsoever to my life. Of course, he answered ‘no.’ I then gave the devastating other side. The young lady that made the \$10 mistake would cash out on her register short by that amount. She would likely be accused of stealing and could be fired from her job. So, I asked, ‘would it have made a difference in her life?’ My son immediately understood the importance of morality.”

Character for Abagnale has been defined is a variety of notions. Character could be a person of distinction or some other detailed positive qualities. Character could be simply a reputation or the enhancement of values like courage, personality or especially morality. There are developed characters – mostly contrived – that are famous in our literature or even in movies. In the sense of partygoers, a character is someone that may attract comment because they are unique and unusual. Someone acting ‘out of character’ would be doing something unexpected given the reputation of his or her previous actions. Frank Abagnale is all of the above and more than this; he may symbolize, more than anyone, the resolution of character over a lifetime. He is a redemption realized.

The character that is Frank Abagnale has heightened the sense of cleverness as it is detailed in his best selling book (and the later movie and Broadway musical) entitled “Catch Me if You Can.” It was written in 1980 upon a suggestion by famed late night television host Johnny Carson. In fact, it was published by Carson’s own publishing source. It has remained in constant print for over thirty years and is available in 35 languages.

The persona in that book and movie was a uniquely developed *character*. Fact is indeed stranger than fiction! The book essentially details the honest and true account of Abagnale's six-year journey from a shattered home to a federal prison. Two of those years had been spent in other prisons of Sweden and France. In between, he had posed as an airline pilot, a schoolteacher, a stockbroker and a doctor – among other *characters*. Incredibly, owing to his profound academic prowess, Abagnale passed the BAR exam after studying for only two months. The Federal Bureau of Investigation Special Agent, Joe Shea, who had pursued the composite character of Frank Abagnale was certain he was trying to apprehend a seasoned mastermind of extraordinary experience, deception and enterprise. He thought him to be in his mid thirties. His intensely pursued suspect was only a teenager.

Abagnale had left his New York home at the age of 16. He had been summoned from a high school classroom to a courtroom by a judge to choose which parent he would live with after a divorce was decreed. He would live with neither. He ran away. In the years that followed, though he spoke with his father by phone, he never saw his father again. It was a much-lamented circumstance of a bad decision.

The young runaway's acute abilities and believable sincerity had channeled him to a life of fraudulent crime. He became adept at the art of defrauding large corporations by counterfeiting their payroll checks. He realized there was no turning back. He expected to get caught and he did. He was extradited from a Swedish prison to the custody of the F.B.I. at the age of 21 in 1970.

Abagnale and Special Agent Shea had a common thought. Both knew the eventuality was that Abagnale would be apprehended. His twelve-year sentence for what amounted to nearly \$2.5 million of fraudulent corporate checks would have seemed to be the book's last chapter. It was in the reality that is life only the beginning. What followed placed Abagnale on a path to become a man of great character and impeccable morality.

"I'd like to say the prison system works and it changed me or that I became born again or that I had grown up and matured and was contrite." Abagnale stated. "But none of that happened."

Something much more meaningful in Abagnale's life changed him. But before that could happen, another event would present itself. Precisely because of his now-catalogued file of ingenuity, Abagnale was not a forgotten inmate number.

The pursuer, Joe Shea, came back to Abagnale to work a deal in 1974. Abagnale was not a violent criminal. He did not defraud individuals. He showed a unusual pattern of honesty throughout the pursuit. Real criminals depend upon dishonesty as a weapon. He was just a child that had reacted to an extreme domestic circumstance by striking out on his own. He did not steal from people or

carry a handgun. He only targeted the mega-funded entities like banks and airlines for what amounted to survival. Shea pleaded for a deal with the FBI. They refused at first, and then consented. The FBI would let him serve his final eight years working directly with their counter-fraud unit. It was a no-brainer for Abagnale. He not only worked the final eight years, but continued to work beyond those initial testy years with the FBI. Other career FBI employees did not accept him in the first few years. It took several years to gain their trust. He continues to work with the FBI even today after 36 years. Shea, who became a second father to Abagnale, died in 2005 at the age of 88.

“Joe Shea had two daughters.” Abagnale related. “We stay in touch with them and their children even now. One lives in Greenville and the other in Georgia. Joe never had a son. In a way, he adopted me in that role. He saw that I had a value system, and despite the crime, was an honest person. He had a sense of sympathy that I was a runaway. I think he saw that I was a talented person that was on the way to wasting my life. He personally came to see me. He personally worked the release deal. Joe Shea gave me a second chance.”

“Joe was a caring and deeply religious man. He was a loving father.” Abagnale continued. “He was very persistent in his career and a very tough FBI agent. He was creative and talented.”

“I was working undercover in Texas in 1975. I met Kelly as part of this assignment. She was an innocent aside and not a part of the focused criminal operation. I immediately fell in love with her.” Abagnale intimated. “I did the unthinkable and blew my cover. She had total faith in me. She believed in me. She trusted me despite everything I told her in honesty about my background. Against the wishes of her parents, we were married in 1976 in the Church.”

“Her parents, once they knew of my federal prison time and lack of formal education, tried everything to dissuade her from marrying me.” Abagnale offered. “And you could see their point. They thought it was another con and that my life, once my service to the FBI was over, would revert to crime. It was foolish for me to try to convince them otherwise. They were trying to protect their daughter.”

Their daughter was trying to save the life of the man she had consented to marry. Abagnale knew what he felt. It is rare to hear a man speak so lovingly about his wife.

“She made me see that a marriage and a family can be so very positive. She knew that my parent’s divorce was the catalyst that started my life of crime. She elevated my belief in people and especially in marriage.” Abagnale continued. “In this way, she was the real reason my life changed and I was able to go back to my true core values I had learned in parochial schools. My entire life turned on the love of a woman.”

It is “character” that is illustrated by an incredible restoration of the human spirit. Abagnale’s *deus ex machina* wasn’t deity or a mechanically produced solution from an unconsidered source. That character change came from extremely human intervention – the caring woman that would become his wife of 35 years.

The Abagnale value system is exemplary and refreshing. It is indeed his resolution of his own character and reputation over a lifetime. He benefited from his own upbringing. He was taught by Catholic brothers. His father, in contrast to movie’s perceived character, was honest, responsible and diligent.

‘He fostered a strong sense of right and wrong. He was wonderful and good-hearted and loved my mother.’ Abagnale stated.

Abagnale’s French-born mother never remarried as the movie depicts. She is 83 and still lives in New York near Abagnale’s other two living siblings. His youngest brother died of a liver ailment just a few years ago. Frank William Abagnale (senior) died in 1971. Son Frank was denied a bereavement leave to attend his father’s funeral.

‘I’m one of the very few prisoners ever denied this type of leave.’ Abagnale somberly reflected. ‘I suppose they still considered me a flight risk given my background. The experience of mourning in prison and not being at the funeral was emotionally devastating.’

‘He was never a con man or dishonest and certainly may have been prone to alcoholism.’ Abagnale confided. ‘He was conservative and honest. He had a high school education and ran a stationery store. His younger brother was a C.P.A. who did not pay the taxes and caused the business to fail. Yet, my father, though angered, eventually forgave my uncle. My father was a good man.’

The *character* portrayed in the movie by actor Leonardo DiCaprio would lead one to believe Abagnale was a suave and sophisticated con artist that reveled in the activity for the thrill of it all. That was not quite what Abagnale really experienced. He was always on the run. He could not afford to trust anyone. In part, his activities were part of simple survival. The two years in European jails were not emphasized in the movie as they were in the book that detailed the misery. The French prison he endured was a hundreds-year old facility lacking modern conveniences. It took Abagnale great resolve and personal fortitude to tolerate these Spartan experiences. It took character.

That foundation of internal character is personified in the fully evolved Abagnale. His core value system grew to embrace the tenets of impeccable ethics and staunch morality. This became his personal triumph. That leap is greater than any book or movie could perceive. It is a lifetime resolved and a commitment to the goodness within.

His post FBI venture of protecting businesses from fraud has saved billions. His speaking ability, though so very entertaining, arrives at a conclusion of a very special message. He is clear in his point.

“I am so glad that I was raised in a Catholic school. It’s not so much about God and religion as much as it is about right and wrong. You may make mistakes, but there is always a rope to pull yourself onto the right path. You can change your life. My wife, Kelly, also went to a Catholic school. My parents saved money to send me. Back then, 99% of the students were Catholic. Now it’s more like 50%. Others see the benefit today. Public schools simply do not teach right and wrong.” Abagnale noted.

“When my children were going through Catholic schools I sat next to a Jewish man. I asked him why his child was there.” Abagnale continued. “He said ‘here you learn respect, you learn to pray, you learn about God.’ Others see the importance in learning ethics and morality which are not taught elsewhere.”

Abagnale sees a grave concern that is associated with his career. Last year alone, he estimated that \$950 billion was lost to fraud. He sees that as a direct result of our families not disseminating proper values to their children and an education system that does little to teach moral values.

“Nearly fifty percent of all high school age students consider getting instant answers for a test from Googling on a cell phone to not constitute cheating.” Abagnale explained. “There is a dire lack of morality in our society today. It must be addressed.”

Abagnale’s appearances have been largely gratis and have been to benefit others – so many being in support of local causes. There was an address to The Citadel’s Criminal Justice majors in late February, a completely different talk at a fundraiser for the Interfaith Crisis Ministry in April and a late May graduation speech aforementioned. There are many others. His message may be the “rope” he describes to pull someone else back to the right path. After all, he has seen crime from both sides. He is the crusader that has experienced what wrong decisions can cause and warns of such so that the listener’s decision is always for what is right.

His route of redemption brought him to the Holy City reluctantly at first. Now he loves it.

“I spent ten years in Houston and moved to Tulsa to raise my family in a smaller setting. They each knew my story from an early age. I wanted to give them a loving environment and a place to grow up away from the big city problems. To them, I’m just ‘Dad.’ They were each great children and never a problem.” Abagnale intimated. “We only had one really strict rule – no physical hitting or fighting – not even in horsing around. As a result, my three boys are very close.”

Scot Abagnale is 32 and works with the FBI in Baltimore. Brother Chris is 30 and lives in Charleston. He's Kelly's partner in running their chic fashion shop on George Street, the "House of Sage." Youngest son Sean is teaching in China. The three of them are in constant communication. One month the phone bill from Chris to Sean in China was \$1600.

"I know that's high. But Kelly and I agreed that the significance of their frequent sibling communication was more important than the phone bill." Abagnale related. "That will serve them both for a lifetime."

The Abagnales had considered coming to Charleston before. They had purchased a lot at Kiawah in 1995 and loved the area so much that they contemplated leaving Tulsa then.

"The boys were still in school and we really feared the drive from Kiawah down River Road, especially at night." Abagnale recalled. "And now we're here and enjoying Charleston permanently. My wife, Kelly, says it best. 'How could you not like it? It's like living in Paradise.' We've found the people here are different as well. They are not suspicious of you here. They fully accept you - unconditionally. Where you're from or what you do or where you go to church doesn't seem to matter. It's not like that anywhere else."

In Charleston, Frank William Abagnale, Jr., is a *character* we enjoy with the *character* of great warmth and sincerity that teaches lessons of moral *character* to our entire community.

Catch him when you can.