



Daily Journal

Movie 'Sound of Freedom' is a vision of hope

Lynn Fitch
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If you have not yet gone to see "Sound of Freedom" at the movie theater, I highly encourage you to do so. It has become a box office hit – grossing \$40 million in its first six days despite its small theater footprint – for a reason: It is a compelling story of hope, and people need to feel hope.

That may seem incongruous with the horrible subject matter of the movie: the gritty, disgusting world of international child sex trafficking. The movie offers an often-uncomfortable portrayal of the events that led veteran Homeland Security agent Tim Ballard to walk away from his job and pension to found Operation Underground Railroad. As an agent, Ballard was able to catch hundreds of child predators, removing them from the online world where they were exploiting children. But with Operation Underground Railroad, he and his team are not only able to take down predators, but rescue children.

As the lead law enforcement agency for the Mississippi's Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force, my team is familiar with this line of work. We investigate and prosecute crimes of online child exploitation, which largely start as tips to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) CyberTipline. The growth in these tips is as heartbreaking of the abuse they involve. In 2020 – even with a pandemic that kept people in their homes with little more to do than roam the worldwide web, we got 1,860 Cybertips. Just two years later, in 2022, we were up to 2,936.

There is a world where people abuse children, rape them, not only for their own pleasure, but for their profit. The child is victimized again and again and again, each time the image of her pain is sold to another for their pleasure. My ICAC team, like Ballard's character, works with the local law enforcement affiliates we train to put an end to this.

And my team of cyber experts works closely with another team in my office, our Human Trafficking team, which works to disrupt trafficking operations in Mississippi. Watching "Sound of Freedom," you might be lured into the false comfort that trafficking is something that is happening in far off countries, where cartels and rebel juntas have great power and the rule of law is non-existent. But make no mistake about it: trafficking is right here in Mississippi. In two years, my team has led over 40 multi-jurisdiction operations with the more than 300 law enforcement officers we have trained, made over 60 arrests, and recovered more than 200 victims who have the chance to restart their lives without shame or blame.

This is where we return to the message of hope that is at the center of all the vile images and story lines in Sound of Freedom. To complement our law enforcement work, I have been intently pursuing a public awareness campaign – Be The Solution – throughout the state since I took office. Be The Solution is an effort to engage all Mississippians in the fight against human trafficking. It is about empowering the people to be a part of a fight against a multi-billion-dollar international criminal underworld with tens of millions of victims on any given day. Recognizing the signs of trafficking and reporting it appropriately may be the key to saving a life. That may seem small in the worldwide scheme of things – but it is certainly not small to that one victim who can begin her life anew thanks to that tip.

Similarly, "Sound of Freedom" is about how one man took a chance and heeded a call that many probably thought was insane at the time. But his one brave decision to take a stand for children has made an unimaginable difference. According to their website, Operation Underground Railroad has been involved in over 4,000 operations, impacted over 7,000 lives, and participated in over 6,500 arrests over the past ten years.

The fight against trafficking will be won by such singular acts of courage. It will be won by the long-haul trucker who calls in a tip because he sees something suspicious at a truck stop. It will be won by the motel owner who refuses to allow his establishment to be the site of repeated criminal behavior. It will be the flight attendant who stops a trafficker from taking a young victim on a flight that could be her last chance at freedom. When you see Sound of Freedom, stick around at the end for the special message by Jim Caviezel who portrays Ballard. It is a good reminder of who the real heroes are – Good Samaritans like these and the victims who will be able to stand tall with dignity when those tips lead to their recovery.

"Sound of Freedom" is about hope because while trafficking may seem as if it is too big to comprehend, let alone apprehend, its end will be brought about by all of us when we stand up and say: Enough. You cannot have our daughters, our sisters, our friends. None of God's children are for sale.