



*Not specious or counterfeit: genuine. Meet the real *Frank Abagnale Jr.*, the former con man once hunted by the FBI and immortalized in the film *Catch Me If You Can*. Learn how he has tried to redeem himself over the past 30 years and how his true life is playing out, for the good, in Charleston



“*Frank Abagnale* is one of those people I’d follow to the ends of the Earth,” says longtime friend and retired FBI special agent Al Malinchak, without detecting the irony. Forty years ago, Malinchak’s fellow FBI colleagues were saying, and doing, the same thing, but for different reasons. The bureau’s fraud busters were hunting Abagnale across continents, following him from city to city, from bad check to worse check, to the ends of their wits. That was then; this is now.

Then Frank Abagnale was a wanted man, a world-class imposter, a wily teenager who pulled off incredible guises as a Pan Am pilot, an Atlanta pediatrician, a Brigham Young professor, an assistant attorney general for the state of Louisiana. He was an accomplished paperhanger, scamming banks of some \$2.5 million in a five-year spree of brilliantly contrived check fraud. Back then he was a criminal, a mere kid—only 21 years old by the time the FBI finally caught him, at the ends of the Earth, in a small French town in 1970.

Now he’s a grown man, a wizened soul, though the residual twinkle in his knowing eyes hints of a tamed tomfoolery. He’s a husband of 33 years, a father of three adult sons, a proud grandpa. Then he was a swift-talkin’ slippery felon; now he’s a world-class secure-document consultant, anti-fraud expert, and compelling motivational speaker. Now Malinchak and many others would “follow him to the ends of the Earth,” not because a high-stakes chase is on, but because Frank Abagnale has caught their admiration and earned their utmost respect and friendship. “He may have a very colorful and notorious past, but Frank has ended up being one of the most genuine and generous people you’ll ever meet, as a professional and as a human being,” adds Malinchak, who served as chief of the FBI’s Investigative Training Unit before retiring.

Now you, too, might follow Abagnale—or at least pass him walking along a Charleston sidewalk, on his way to a local restaurant or to his wife and son’s shop on George Street—in his new hometown. And



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF FRANK ABAGNALE

As a teen, Abagnale convincingly took on many personas, including that of a Pan Am pilot. (The image above appeared on the cover of Houston magazine in 1977.)

even here, and now, Abagnale remains one of the FBI’s most wanted men—wanted as a speaker, teacher, and advisor to FBI field agents and financial industry executives across the country, work that he has done for the last 35 years.

A NEW SPIN

These days Frank Abagnale isn’t interested in racking up millions of airline miles (Pan Am estimates he amassed more than a million, to 26 countries, during his “Skywayman” scam) or even millions of dollars,

though he—legally and legitimately—still does pretty well on both accounts. “I’ve got seven million miles on American, and another couple million on Delta, and believe me, there’s absolutely no glamour in flying anymore,” he deadpans.

Abagnale’s not even particularly gung ho about rehashing the infamous exploits that gained him international notoriety, though he’s a silver-tongued storyteller with bank loads of material. His tales of fast thinking and fast women, of clever cons, thrilling escapes, and nightmarish incarceration made a riveting best seller out of his autobiography, *Catch Me If You Can* (ghost-written by Stan Redding in 1980), and a blockbuster hit for Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks, and Leonardo DiCaprio in the 2002 DreamWorks film adaptation.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DREAMWORKS

Abagnale (right)—pictured with Steven Spielberg, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Tom Hanks in a publicity photo for the 2002 release of Catch Me If You Can—served as a consultant on the film.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DREAMWORKS

DiCaprio plays Frank Abagnale posing as a Pan Am pilot in the 1960s. “My uniform was my alter ego,” Abagnale wrote in his book. “Whenever I felt lonely, depressed, rejected, or doubtful of my own worth, I’d dress up in my pilot’s uniform and seek out a crowd.”

Soon these tales are about to get a new spin, and snappy song and dance routine, as a Broadway musical slated to open next spring. The production, by Tony Award-winning playwright Terrance McNally with a score by Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman of *Hairspray* fame, previewed to rave reviews last summer in Seattle and is already stirring Tony chatter, which means that Abagnale’s shady past will once again be in the limelight. But that’s not what Frank is interested in. (If you are, rent the movie or read the book, or order your tickets now before the musical sells out.) Anyway, the sequel is much more compelling.

“That period was only five years of my life. I was just a teenager, but the media never focuses on what I’ve done since,”

notes Abagnale, who for just this reason has heretofore rarely granted an interview. “I’ve turned my life around. That’s why Steven Spielberg loved my story. He loved the redemption angle.” So let’s leave the heists and hoopla behind, and meet the real, circa-2010 Frank Abagnale. Actually, unbeknownst to you, you may have already been introduced—his imprint may well be

in your wallet, checkbook, or passport.

FROM CAPTIVE TO CAPTIVATING

After spending five years in prisons in France, Sweden, and the United States, Abagnale received an enticing offer from U.S. officials—he would be paroled contingent on assisting the feds, without pay,

“I didn’t make this film about Frank Abagnale because of what he did...but because of what he has done with his life over the past 30 years.”

—Steven Spielberg





ROLE PLAYING

Abagnale impersonating a Pan Am pilot, an attorney in Louisiana, a doctor in an Atlanta hospital, and a college professor in Salt Lake City, Utah. In the book *Catch Me If You Can*, he wrote, “An airline official who made a statement to the police concerning my escapades offered what seemed to him a logical explanation: ‘You simply don’t expect a man in a pilot’s uniform, with proper credentials and obvious knowledge of jump procedures, to be an impostor, dammit!’”

SMOOTH TALKER

After appearing on *The Today Show* with Tom Brokaw in 1977 as an expert on counterfeit money, Abagnale was invited on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson (right). The segment, scheduled for six minutes, lasted 20. He also appeared on *The Mike Douglas Show* in 1979 (below) and *To Tell the Truth* in 1977 (bottom).



PHOTOGRAPHS (7) COURTESY OF FRANK ABAGNALE

by teaching law enforcement agencies the nefarious tricks of his trade. Abagnale accepted, and for the last 35 years he has fraud-primed every new agent rotating through the FBI Academy and worked with the FBI National Academy instructing law enforcement agencies nationwide. During this cleaned-up career, Abagnale developed a close friendship with Joe Shay, the dogged agent who finally collared the errant youth (he was played by Tom Hanks “to a T,” according to Frank). Shay, to whom Abagnale dedicated his book *The Art of the Steal*, died last year at age 88.

“Frank has this incredible intelligence and brings a fresh, comprehensive perspective from both sides of the law. He understands criminal motivation and knows how they operate. He looks at things differently than you and I do,” says special agent Keith Slotter, head of the FBI’s San Diego Field Office. Whereas he once figured out ways to make hay of loopholes, now he spins it the other way—creating solutions to thwart criminal opportunity.

Case in point: it took Abagnale only a quick glance to see a flaw in a new ATM prototype a client had asked him to evaluate. The machine had a door that electronically opened for users to retrieve their cash. Frank simply took Super Glue, glued the door shut, then sat back and watched as several ATM customers inserted their card, entered their PIN, and waited for their cash. When the door failed to open, they assumed the machine was broken, hit “Cancel Transaction,” and moved to the next machine. After they left, Frank walked up, broke through the glue, and there was the loot—which is why ATM machines today use open slots for cash delivery, not doors.

Using the same brazen creativity and ingenuity that infuriated financial crime fighters back in the 1960s, Abagnale is now the go-to expert for developing document security products and fraud prevention programs used by more than 14,000 financial institutions. Standard Register Company uses Abagnale-designed security features on car titles, birth certificates, and other docu-



PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER FRANK EDWARDS

Frank credits his wife, Kelly (pictured in their downtown home), and their three sons with turning his life around: “I was lucky enough to find someone who believed in me.... That’s what changed me.”

ments. He helped develop PrivacyGuard’s credit-monitoring system and the Sanford Uni-ball 207, the only “safe” pen in the world, unalterable by chemicals and solvents, with 20 million sold annually in the U.S. alone. Abagnale & Associates has a client list that reads like a corporate America roll call, from ACE Hardware and Arthur Anderson to VISA and Westinghouse. He has published

numerous articles and three books on fraud and identity theft prevention: *The Art of the Steal*, *Real U Guide to Identity Theft*, and *Stealing Your Life*.

In addition to his pro bono FBI work and his secure-document innovations, Abagnale is a highly sought-after public speaker, by all accounts a powerful and captivating one. He unleashes the same charm and

charisma that conned bank tellers and convinced doctors and lawyers that a teenage high school dropout was one of their professional colleagues and reels his audience in. His delivery is lickety-split slick, fast and smooth, his anecdotes sobering and savvy. And when he gets the chance, Abagnale slips in a poignant message about cherishing family, about being a responsible, caring person. This, to him, is the ultimate payoff.

“On a scale of one to five, with five being tops, Frank as a speaker is a seven-plus,” claims Greg Litster, a colleague and friend whose company, SafeChecks, boasts a 16-feature secure instrument called the Frank W. Abagnale SuperBusinessCheck. “He’s consistently shown over 35 years that he’s the real deal.” Tom Hanks calls Abagnale’s lectures “the best one-man show you’ll ever see.” After reading *The Art of the Steal*, Hanks invited Frank to give a fraud prevention presentation to 300 Hollywood actors (folks who are often rip-off targets). The crowd, including Jack Nicholson, Penny Marshall, and John Lovitz, was enrapt. Courtney Love still calls Abagnale’s office with questions (unfortunately, usually at 3 a.m.).

UNDER THE SPEED LIMIT

Despite the applause, Abagnale’s polished



Frank with his family in Montreal during the shooting of the final movie scenes in France. Top: Abagnale had a cameo role as the French arresting officer.

friend and a colleague of 15 years, Slotter was blown away after first hearing Frank speak at an FBI conference without knowing anything about who he was. “He was phenomenal,” Slotter adds. “Frank has retooled himself as a self-styled expert in a wide array of frauds. He is one of the best speakers and one of the most gracious and honest people you’ll ever meet.”

“Modesty is not one of my virtues. At the time, virtue was not one of my virtues.”

—Frank Abagnale, from *Catch Me If You Can*



manner, layered over his notorious history, means he also remains suspect. There continue to be those who discount him as a colossal fake and perpetual criminal. “I live with the burden every day that there are people who don’t trust me,” Abagnale admits. “I’ve spent 35 years doing the right thing, and people still act as if I committed (the fraud) yesterday.”

“Frank Abagnale is totally above board, a man of integrity,” affirms Slotter. Both a

Abagnale continues to spend three or four days a week traveling across the country volunteering his services to the FBI decades after fulfilling his end of the deal. “He insists on paying for everything—travel, meals, parking, everything,” says Malinchak. And Abagnale hired investigators to uncover every stolen dollar from his felonious foray, which he then paid back, even though there was no restitution clause in his sentence. “It is important to me that my kids

knew I paid it all back,” he says.

Raised a Catholic in Bronxville, New York, Abagnale credits his family (contrary to the movie version, he was one of four children), his father’s example, and his parochial school upbringing with giving him the moral bearings so evident today, if less so 40 years ago. “I’ve never ever heard Frank swear. He doesn’t drink or smoke, never has. The guy doesn’t even break the speed limit,” says Litster.

Abagnale never intended to become a con artist. Devastated by his parents’ divorce, he hit the road. “It started out as a means of survival, it turned into an adventure, then it became a chase,” he explains. Despite blatant wrongdoing, Abagnale always abided by a certain code of ethics: he never swindled an individual or someone who might lose their job because of his cons; he only bilked large institutions. “I never had pride that I got away with this; there was no real satisfaction in walking out of a bank or situation when I had deceived someone. If anything, I felt guilt,” he confesses. “I always knew I was wrong and that I’d get caught. Towards the end, I almost wanted to be caught. It was a very, very lonely way for a teenage boy to live.”

THE TURN AROUND

So how did one of *TIME* magazine’s All-time Top 10 Imposters become a trusted FBI colleague and get named a distinguished “Pinnacle 400” member by CNN Financial News? “I could say I had a born-again experience, or that prison reformed me, but that’s not the truth,” explains Abagnale, now 62 and finally grown into the premature gray that served him well decades ago when duping folks who thought he was older. “The truth is: it was a long process. I met my wife, got married, matured. I was lucky enough to find someone who believed in me. Then there was the responsibility of having children—that’s what changed me.”

Abagnale met his wife, Kelly, while on an undercover assignment for the FBI, investigating an orphanage where Kelly, a Houston native with a master’s in child psychology, worked. When the assignment was over, but



Frank, who moved to Charleston in 2009, spoke at the Chamber of Commerce’s Homeland Security Conference last spring and will be headlining a benefit next month for MUSC Children’s Hospital. “If I can be an asset to the community here, I welcome that opportunity.”

Frank knew he wanted to continue the relationship, he had to break cover with Kelly. “So what you’re telling me is that you’re a government agent?” she asked. “Yes, but not by choice...” Frank replied. They settled in Tulsa and raised three sons there, including the oldest, Scott, who gave Frank one of his proudest moments when he walked across the dais to graduate from the FBI Academy.

Their middle son, Chris, and his wife live in Charleston, where they co-own the fashionable House of Sage boutique on George Street. Sean, the youngest, lives in China, speaks fluent Mandarin, and places teachers for a Princeton University program.

“I’m sentimental; I had no emotional ties to Tulsa, but I didn’t want to leave the house that my kids grew up in,” says Frank.

But Kelly loved Charleston and prevailed. They both like the walk-ability of the city, a stroll for dinner at FIG or Fulton Five, and enjoy taking their boat out to explore the local waterways. “People would tell me, ‘Oh, you’ll fit right in in Charleston; there are lots of characters there,’” Frank laughs, acknowledging that a year after moving here, it’s beginning to feel like home, and the Tulsa house is finally on the market.

The move to Charleston has also given Abagnale another fresh start. “When we lived in Tulsa, I never accepted invitations to speak in Oklahoma.” He was intent on keeping his family life private and distinct from his public and professional life, to shield his children from being burdened by his notoriety or exposure to potential push-back from his past. “Now that the kids are grown, coming here gives me a chance to start over in regards to that,” he says. “If I can be an asset to the community here, I welcome that opportunity.”

He has accepted an invitation to speak, gratis, for an MUSC fundraising dinner to benefit the Children’s Hospital. And he worked with the Chamber of Commerce last spring, appearing at a Homeland Security Conference they hosted. “I would like to do whatever I can to help out,” says a humble and grateful Abagnale. “When I look back 40 years ago, I’m not fascinated by what I did. To me, the important part is that I came out and turned it into this, something positive and productive. That says so much about our country, that it gives you a second chance.”

**A Night with
Frank W. Abagnale Jr.
Benefiting MUSC Children’s
Hospital**
*Thursday, October 7.
Memminger Auditorium,
56 Beaufain St. \$200.
To purchase tickets or for more
information, call (843) 792-7540
or e-mail Wanda Bazemore at
bazemore@muscedu.*

