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Whitacre's heroism doesn't come through, FBI agent says

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When Dean Paisley found out Mark Whitacre was about to face the Florida panhandle media, the retired FBI agent didn't hesitate to fly south to join the former ADM executive.

Whitacre's story about working as an ADM insider for the FBI is told in "The Informant!" The film was No. 2 at the national box office last week.

Whitacre had Paisley by his side as he talked with television, newspaper and radio reporters in Pensacola, where Whitacre is working for Cypress Systems Inc.

"We're rather anonymous down here," Whitacre said, "but on Friday when the movie was finally coming out, they started connecting the dots. They told us they'd have articles whether we cooperated or not."

Paisley had his own reasons for wanting to do the interviews.

"My wife said, 'You need to see it, because people are going to be asking you about it,' " said Paisley, now a Chatham-based private investigator. "At first watching it, I was shocked. But they bought the rights to the story and they can do what they want. The thing is, they didn't tell 90 percent of the story."

"I've known Mark and his family for 17 years, and they live in a small community. For some of them, if they see this film, they know it's about Mark Whitacre and that's all they know, and that's all they'll ever know. I wanted to help set the story straight."

"He did the work, and he is a national hero. That didn't really come through. It's based on a true story, and it shows the essence of what he did. He was standing up to a corporation committing fraud."

So while some of the comedy came out of reality, Paisley insists, "There's nothing funny about this case. Some funny things happened."

For example, in a scene widely seen because of its use in commercials, Whitacre is seen loudly tapping on a clicking tape recorder.

"They exaggerate things," Paisley said, "and I know they do that to sell tickets. He had some irrational behavior, and that was their purpose in presenting things like that. The thing with the briefcase actually did happen. But Mark was so discreet about it, nobody knew what he was doing. And there was nobody sitting close to him."

Overall, while Paisley was fine with the film, he didn't enjoy it.

"I'm not criticizing the movie," he said. "It's their job to sell seats. They did a good job with the demeanor for the agents.

"But I'm relieved the person who played me was never identified as me. And they had some people saying things that other people actually said. I retired before the thing went over.

"All in all, I'd give it one star. I'm not a fan of dark comedy."

In 18 months, Whitacre will be eligible to apply for a full pardon, and Paisley has vowed his support for whenever Whitacre wishes to apply for one.

Paisley backed his efforts for a pardon while Whitacre was in prison, and that effort was later joined by FBI agent Brian Shepard (portrayed in the film by Scott Bakula). Shepard has yet to speak publicly about the film.

"(Whitacre) did everything we asked him to do," Paisley said. Acknowledging Whitacre's embezzlement, he added, "That doesn't detract from him doing everything we asked. The system didn't give him any credit for the way he helped. He stopped prices from going up, and that saved consumers billions of dollars.

"People don't think of it that way, but farmers and corporations have to buy the raw products, and they'd be passing those prices along. With Mark, we caught that on the front end. If it hadn't been caught, it would still be going on now, and that's \$20 or \$30 billion over 17 years.

"What he did was wrong and he paid for it. But what he did right outweighs what he did wrong, and nobody's giving him credit for it."

Whitacre doesn't necessarily want credit, but he has some things he wants.

"I wish I could apologize to all of the people in Decatur for everything I did wrong while I was there," he said. "At the same, I never thought my (near-nine-year prison) sentence was supposed to be a life sentence, either.

"I'm lucky. I've got the same friends coming out as I had going in."

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