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'Against All Odds' earns approval of subject

By HUEY FREEMAN - Staff Writer Herald-Review.com | Posted: Sunday, January 17, 2010 7:00 pm | No Comments Posted

DECATUR - Millions of people have seen the movie on the FBI mole who secretly taped executives at Archer Daniels Midland Co., as they conspired to fix prices on an animal feed ingredient.

But Mark Whitacre, who was portrayed by Matt Damon in "The Informant!", believes a recent book, written by a friend he met in prison, does a better job of showing the kind of man he is today.

"Mark Whitacre, Against All Odds," is an authorized biography focusing on Whitacre's prison years, his Christian conversion and his early life in a small town in Ohio.

The author is Stevin Hoover, who served 10 months with Whitacre at the Federal Prison Camp, Pensacola, Fla. Early editions were released under his pen name, Floyd Perry.

Whitacre, 52, who served 8 years, 9 months in federal prisons - from March 1998 to December 2006 - has been speaking publicly in recent months about his Christian faith, which sustained him through most of his sentence. He was incarcerated for stealing from ADM and taking part in the price-fixing scheme.

While Whitacre has expressed approval of the movie and the two books on his case, he views those works as portraying a man he left behind. While he was once obsessed with climbing the corporate ladder and possessed by greed, he said he learned in prison to serve others instead.

"I was happier making \$20 a month, because Christ was in my life and I was helping people," Whitacre said, comparing that to his former executive salary of \$30,000 a month. "I was teaching people to read. I was helping people to get their GED."

Hoover said Whitacre impressed him for several reasons during the months they were incarcerated together. Despite that Whitacre was well-known as an informant - which usually inflames fellow inmates -

he was highly respected by every other inmate, with no known enemies. Hoover was also impressed that Whitacre was never issued one "shot," or disciplinary action, during his entire prison sentence.

The tone of Hoover's book is admiration for Whitacre, partly because he observed that Whitacre's family remained close throughout his long imprisonment. Ginger Whitacre is portrayed as an incredibly dedicated wife, who was in the prison, often with their children, every minute of every visiting hour.

While Hoover wrote the book partly to launch a new career as a writer, Whitacre said he originally thought of it as a way to share his faith journey with friends and family.

"This is the rest of the story," Whitacre said in a phone interview from his home in Pensacola. "This is the family story. It was our way to tell how we survived it. It's a Christian story about a family surviving the eye of the storm."

The book is filled with poignant scenes, including when Ginger Whitacre and her three children stood vigil all night outside Mark's hospital room after his suicide attempt, before he is about to begin his prison sentence. They waved "huge signs readable from his ninth-floor window that said, 'Hang In There Daddy!' and 'We're With You Forever!'"

A few months later, on the floor of a cell in the Atlanta Federal Transfer Facility, Mark Whitacre was overwhelmed by a sense of despair.

"This is when I really got down on my knees and was in tears," Whitacre recalled. "I said: God, I can't sleep at night. I can't do nine years like this."

Whitacre asked God to lift four specific burdens from him: to keep his family together, provide financially for his wife and children, reconcile him with FBI agents he had alienated, and provide employment after his release.

All of his prayers were answered. Food companies that won huge settlements by suing ADM donated money to help Whitacre's family. His former FBI handlers befriended him and have been lobbying for his pardon. And Whitacre was hired by a nutritional products company, Cypress Systems Inc., one day after leaving prison. He now serves as the company's president.

He also prayed for peace and contentment, such as he had observed in Ginger.

"From June of '98 until I walked out of those gates, that sentence was done with peace and contentment," Whitacre said.

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Posted in Local, Lifestyles on *Sunday, January 17, 2010 7:00 pm* Updated: 12:51 pm.

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