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Statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Human Trafficking

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[AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio]

Thank you. It is an honor to be here.

As a young man, raised and -- and brought up in the public school system, I pledged my allegiance to that flag every single day. And the honor -- maybe one of the greatest honors of my life today is to be here, and leverage the work that -- that I've done as testimony that may in some way benefit this nation that I love.

I'd like start by saying thank you to Chairman Corker for your leadership in this endeavor, and to Senator Cardin. Your leadership has been extraordinary. And I'd like to also say thank you to the rest of the committee that has supported this effort. This is a bipartisan effort. And in a country that is riddled with bipartisan separation on so many things, slavery seems to come up as one of these issues that we can all agree upon. And I applaud you for your agreement, and I believe in you and your leadership and your ability to take us out of it.



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I'm here today to defend the right to pursue happiness. It's a simple notion, the right to pursue happiness. It's bestowed upon all of us by our Constitution. Every citizen of this country has the right to pursue it and I believe that it...is incumbent upon us as citizens of this nation, as Americans, to bestow that right upon others -- upon each other, and upon the rest of the world.

But the right to pursue happiness for so many is stripped away. It's raped. It's abused. It's taken by force, fraud, or coercion. It is sold for the momentary happiness of another.

And this is about the time when I start talking about politics -- that the internet trolls tell me to stick to my day job. So I'd like to talk about my day job. My day job is as the chairman and the co-founder of Thorn. We build software to fight human trafficking and the sexual exploitation of children. And that's our core mission. My other day job is that of the father of two, a 2-month-old and a 2-year-old, and as part of that job that I take very seriously I believe that it is my effort to defend their right to pursue happiness and to ensure a society and government that defends it as well.

As part of my anti-trafficking work, I've met victims in Russia. I've met victims in India. I've met victims that have been trafficked from Mexico, victims in New York, and New Jersey, and all across our country. I've been on FBI raids where I've seen things that no person should ever see. I've seen video content of a child that's the same age as mine being raped by an American man that was a sex tourist in Cambodia. And this child was so conditioned by her environment that she thought she was engaging in play. I've been on the other end of a phone call from my team asking for my help because we have received a call from the Department of Homeland Security telling us that a 7-year-old girl was being sexually abused and that content was being spread around the dark web and she had been being abused and they've watched her for three years and they could not find the perpetrator, asking us for help. We were the last line of defense, an actor and his foundation were the potential last line of defense.

That's my day job and I'm sticking to it.



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I'd like to tell you a story about a 15-year-old girl in Oakland. We'll call her Amy. Amy met a man online, started talking to him; a short while later they met in person. Within hours Amy was abused, raped, and forced into trafficking. She was sold for sex. And this isn't an isolated incident. There's not much that's unusual about it. The only unusual thing is that Amy was found and returned to her family within three days using the software that we created, a tool called Spotlight.

And in an effort to protect its capacity over time, I won't give much detail about what it does. But it's a tool that can be used by law enforcement to prioritize their case load. It's a neural net. It gets smarter over time. It gets better and it gets more efficient as people use it. And it's working. In six months, with 25% of our users reporting, we've identified over 6,000 trafficking victims, 2,000 of which are minors. This tool is in the hands of 4,000 law enforcement officials in 900 agencies, and we're reducing the investigation time by 60%. This tool is effective. It's efficient. It's nimble. It's better. It's smarter.

Now there's often a misconception about technology: that in some way it is the generator of some evil; that it's creating job displacements; and that it enables violence and malice acts. But as an entrepreneur and as a venture capitalist in the technology field, I see technology as simply a tool -- a tool without will. The will is the user of that technology, and I think it's an important distinction. An airplane is a tool. It's a piece of technology. And under the right hands it's used for mass global transit, and under the wrong hands it can be flown into buildings. Technology can be used to enable slavery but it can also be used to disable slavery, and that's what we're doing.

I alluded [to] a phone call that we got from the Department of Homeland Security about this girl that was being trafficked on the dark web. Now, it's interesting to note that the dark web was created in the mid-90s. It was a tool that was created by the naval research lab called Tor, a tool with absolute purpose and positive intention for sharing intelligence communications anonymously. It's also been used to help people who are...being disenfranchised by their government within political dissent in oppressive regimes. But on the other side, it's used for trafficking -- for drug trafficking, for weapons trafficking, and for human trafficking; and it's also the warehouse for some of the most offensive child abuse images in the world.



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Now when the Department of Homeland Security called us and asked for our help, and asked if we had a tool, I had to say no. And it devastated me. It haunted me because for the next three months I had to go to sleep every night and think about that little girl that was still being abused; and the fact that if I built the right thing, we could save her.

So that's what we did. And now if I get that phone call -- and Greg, wherever you're at -- the answer would be yes. We've taken these investigation times of dark web material from three years down to what we believe can be three weeks. The tool's called Solace. And once again I won't go into too much detail about the tool. But it's being used by 40 agencies across the world today, in beta, and we believe that this can yield extraordinary results. And just like Spotlight, it gets smarter and more efficient and more cost effective over time.

So where do we go from here? What do we need?

Obviously we need money. We need financing in order to build these tools. Technology is expensive to build but the beauty of technology is once you build the warehouse, it gets more efficient and -- and more cost effective over time. I might be able to present to you a government initiative where next year I come back and ask for less -- and to me that -- that's is like, it seems extraordinary. The technology we're building is efficient. It works. It's nimble -- because traffickers change their modus operandi and we can change ours as well just as efficiently, if not more efficiently, as they can. It's enduring and it only gets smarter with time.

We also are collecting data. We have KPIs [Key Performance Indicators]. We actually understand that if we're delivering value, we can increase our efforts in that area. If we're not delivering value, we shut it down and it's a quantifiable solution. One of my mentors told me, "Don't go after this issue if you can't come up with a quantifiable solution." We can quantify it and we can make the work that we're doing and the initiatives that you put forth accountable.

My second recommendation is to continue to foster these private-public partnerships. Spotlight was only enabled by the McCain Institution¹ and the full support of Cindy McCain; and a man that I find to be not only a war hero but a hero to this issue, John McCain. It wasn't just created by them. There was extraordinary support from the private sector. The company Digital Reasoning of Tennessee stepped up to the plate. They offered us effort. They offered us engineers.



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They offered us support and pro bono work. We've had the support of companies that often times war with each other from Google to Microsoft to AWS to Facebook; and some of our other technology initiatives include many, many other private companies. It's vital to our success. These private-public partnerships are the key.

The third thing I'd like to highlight is the pipeline. You know, we sit at the intersection of discovery of these victims but the pipeline in and the pipeline out are just as vital, and just as important, and addressing them are just as important. I'd like to highlight one thing in particular, that being the foster care system. There are 500,000 kids in foster care today. I was astonished to find out that 70% of the inmates in the prison across this country have touched the foster care system; and 80% of the people on death row were at some point in time exposed to the foster care system; 50% of these kids will not graduate high school and 95% of them will not get a college degree.

But the most staggering statistic that I found was that foster care children are four times more likely to be exposed to sexual abuse. That's a breeding ground for trafficking. I promise you that's a breeding ground for trafficking. But the reason I looked at foster care is that it's a microcosm. It's -- It's a sample set that we have pretty extraordinary data around to date, even though we can't seem to fix it. It's a microcosm for what happens when displacement happens abroad, as the unintended consequences of our actions or inactions in the rest of the world. When people are left out, when they're neglected, when they're not supported, and when they're not given the love that they need to grow, it becomes an incubator for trafficking. And this refugee crisis, if... we want us to be serious about ending slavery, we cannot ignore it. And we cannot ignore our support for this issue in that space because otherwise we're going to deal with it for years to come.

The outbound pipeline. There's just not enough beds. The bottom line is, once...someone is exposed to this level of abuse, it's a mental health issue -- and there aren't enough beds, there's not enough support, and we have to have the resources on the other side. Otherwise, the recidivism rates are through the roof. It's...astounding because when Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs are not being met, people will resort to survival, and if this is their means of survival and the only source of love that they have in their life, that's what they go for. So we have to address the pipeline out and we have to create support systems on the other end. It's not an entitlement. It's a demand to end slavery.



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My fourth and final recommendation is the bifurcation of sex trafficking and labor trafficking. They're both aberrations. They're both awful. They're both slavery. And they're both punitive, in fact. But the solution sets are highly differentiated. When you look at sex trafficking, a victim is most often present at the incident of commerce and -- and this -- this provides an opportunity for -- for drastic intervention; whereas in labor trafficking, the victims are being hidden behind the manufacturers and the merchandisers, and it requires an entirely different set of legislation, and proactivity, and enforcement in order to shut it down.

Now there's a lot of rhetoric that's going on in the world right now about job creation in the United States. Well, if we want to create jobs in the United States I would ask you to consider eliminating slavery from the pipelines of corporations because a lot of that slavery is happening abroad. And if we ask those corporations, under extreme pressure, that "If you don't change it, you are going to be penalized." "And if you don't clean up that pipeline, it's going to mean trouble." And they're forced into a decision: They can either clean up the pipeline abroad, or, they can move the jobs to the United States of America where they can be regulated and supported. Bringing jobs to America can be the consequence of doing the right thing, or it can be the consequence of doing the wrong thing. But that choice is up to you.

Now it -- it's not lost on me that all of this disruption in our marketplaces is going to have economic backlash, like that is not lost on me at all. But I ask you, do you believe that Abraham Lincoln had to consider the economic backlash of shutting down the cotton fields in the South when he shut down slavery, because I'm sure that weighed on his mind.

You know, happiness can be given to no man. It must be earned. It must be earned through - through generosity and through purpose. But the right to pursue it -- the right to pursue it is every man's right. And I beg of you that if you give people the right to pursue it, what you may find in return is happiness for yourself.

Thank you.

¹ Strictly, the "McCain Institute for International Leadership"