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The Call of the Entrepreneur

Wichita, with an entrepreneurial spirit that can be traced back to the pioneer days of the wild west, views its innovators, inventors and risk-takers of the business world far differently than most places.

At least that's the message that can be drawn from "The Call of the Entrepreneur," a 53-minute documentary that was created to dispel the perception that entrepreneurs are driven more by greed than altruism.

The documentary, which premiered locally Wednesday at the **Orpheum Theatre** and can be shown at special screenings upon request, was created by the Grand Rapids, Mich.-based Acton Institute for the Study of Religion & Liberty.

Wednesday's screening was sponsored locally by the **Flint Hills Center** for Public Policy, which provided no monetary support to the event, but promoted it for the Acton Institute.

"There seems to be a lot of sensibility in Wichita," says the Rev. Robert Sirico, who has represented the Acton Institute at premieres all over the world. "We wanted to go to places we thought there were bases of support so we could erase the cynicism. The free economy is the engine of productivity."

An Entrepreneurial Past

"Wichita has had a lot of successful ventures," says Tammy Ensey, vice president of operations at the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, which describes itself as being dedicated to the constitutional principles of limited government, open markets, and individual freedom and responsibility. "We're in a different market. There is a lot of entrepreneurial spirit here."

"The Call of the Entrepreneur" tells the tale of three men -- Brad Morgan, a dairy farmer from Michigan; Frank Hanna, a merchant banker in New York; and Jimmy Lai, a refugee from Communist China. Each risked his livelihood in the pursuit of fulfilling an idea.

The documentary's three examples of business success could easily be compared with those of Dan and Frank Carney and **Pizza Hut**, Tom Devlin and **Rent-A-Center** or Jack DeBoer and his hotels, among others -- tales that have become part of Wichita's enterprise lore.

DeBoer, who is considered one of the founders of extended-stay hotels after starting four chains, including **Value Place Inc.**, says there are three types of people in the world: Managers, leaders and entrepreneurs. All are necessary to a successful company, but it all starts with the entrepreneur.

"Entrepreneurs are born, they're not made," he says.

Devlin agreed, adding that Wichita's collective mindset plays a role in encouraging innovative thinking.

"There are always going to be new ideas," Devlin says. "The thing that makes Wichita so successful is people don't take no for an answer. They're always trying. They're always looking for something. They're willing to take a chance."

A Negative Perception

The Acton Institute for the Study of Religion & Liberty is an organization whose ideas are influenced by natural law theory, Christian social thought and free market economics.

Sirico, the organization's co-founder and president, says the negative public perception of people who make their fortune in the business world just isn't warranted.

How entrepreneurs are viewed, he says, shapes the destinies of individuals and nations. In a free-market society, the Acton Institute believes entrepreneurs are necessary for business and society to evolve.

Hence, the documentary.

Part of the problem, Sirico says, is Hollywood's demonization of entrepreneurship and business ventures. Consider greed-motivated movie characters like Ebenezer Scrooge or Henry F. Potter from "It's a Wonderful Life." More recently, the conniving Gordon Gekko, played by Michael Douglas in the movie "Wall Street," refers to business as a "zero-sum game," meaning the only way someone can find success is at the expense of someone else.

"That's one of the biggest misconceptions in business," Sirico says.

Conversely, he says, many entrepreneurs come up with their ideas for the betterment of a community. They see a need and fill it.

"They see things others don't," Sirico says. "Often times, they place their own well being at risk in order to produce something there isn't even a market for yet. It's an admirable trait."

And it's a giant risk. That's the prevailing theme of "The Call of the Entrepreneur," which critics have called an hour-long infomercial for capitalism. Sirico scoffs at that depiction, saying the stories of the three men featured in the documentary, which depict their struggles, their risks and their ultimate triumphs, "are noble."

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The three entrepreneurs come from different social classes, cultures and upbringings. Sirico says each was necessary to the documentary to give a full view of entrepreneurialism.

"In different ways, I found each of them a vital part of this," Sirico says. "Frank Hanna carries the intellectual weight of how a market functions. I am charmed by the farmer. And Jimmy Lai is the emotional heart of the story."

"The Call of the Entrepreneur"

Creator: The **Acton Institute of Grand Rapids**, Mich.

Premiere cities: Honolulu, London, Nairobi, Chicago, Charlotte, Houston, Washington D.C., Atlanta, Manila, Kansas City, New York and Wichita.

Screenings: The Acton Institute is filling requests to colleges, churches and businesses for special screenings of the documentary.

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