



## **Film 'I Am Jane Doe' gives voice to the violated**

**By Amy Biancolli**

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As an American, as a mother of two daughters and a son, and as a human being, I have to believe that child sex trafficking isn't legal in the United States. It can't be. How could it be? Every law on the books and in our collective guts says it isn't. That's obvious, right?

Right.

And yet minors have been sold regularly — repulsively, outrageously — in barely coded online classifieds at Backpage.com, which then managed to shrug off culpability by maintaining it had nothing to do with it. See, Backpage was only the host, or so it has claimed since becoming the main hub for online sex ads after Craigslist shuttered its "adult" section in 2010. What, that racy ad featuring an underage girl? Not the website's fault. Someone else uploaded it.

It's a weak argument, but that never prevented the company from getting away with it. Thanks to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, the courts repeatedly allowed Backpage to shirk responsibility and slither back into a dank corner of online commerce where children are hawked like meat.

This is the most startling revelation of Mary Mazzio's "I Am Jane Doe," a new documentary that opened theatrically earlier this year and is now poised to hit iTunes and Google Play on May 12 (and Netflix on May 26).

I attended a screening and discussion — with Mazzio, attorney David Boies and broadcast journalist Soledad O'Brien — at the Hearst Tower in Manhattan a few weeks back, and I sat there dumbfounded. I'd read about some of this. I'd considered myself aware. But the extent of the problem, and the degree to which Backpage has been given a pass, both sickens and astounds.

Around 1.6 million kids are homeless in the U.S. annually; of those, well over 100,000 (200,000? 300,000?) are lured into sex trafficking with drugs and promises. "I Am Jane Doe" zeroes in on a few of those victims — in Seattle, St. Louis and Boston — who were roped into the sex trade as minors, sold on Backpage and raped repeatedly before escaping with their lives, returning to their families and initiating lawsuits. In 99 jam-packed minutes, Mazzio bounces from city to city, talking to these traumatized, poised girls and their distraught, crusading mothers about the realities of the child-sex trade and the complex array of legal issues tangling the struggle to end it.

We hear from lawyers, advocates, a Backpage moderator, a pimp. We learn about Section 230, which shields online providers from liability for content added by outside parties; the string of lawsuits and subsequent decisions by apparently clueless judges; the backstory to Backpage, once (but no longer) an arm of the Village Voice; Backpage's alleged role in shaping and cloaking child-sex ads; the anti-trafficking efforts by a Chicago sheriff later sued by Backpage; the 2015 Senate hearing where Backpage CEO Carl Ferrer refused to show; and finally, this past January, Backpage's decision to shut down its adult ads, right around the time Ferrer took the Fifth at a subcommittee hearing on sex trafficking.

And that's not the half of it. By the end, crushed and demoralized by the pile-up of facts, all I could think was this: So I guess little girls count for nothing. It made me wonder about misogyny, about the devaluation of women and the cultural sheen romanticizing prostitutes.

As Mazzio noted during the Q&A, the "Pretty Woman" mentality still prevails. "I think if this crime were murder for hire, the tech companies wouldn't stand for it, the American public wouldn't stand for it. But because it's kind of, sort of prostitution — the world's oldest 'victimless' crime — it's kind of, sort of OK."

It isn't. As one of the girls asks in the film: "What if it was your daughter? How would you feel then?"

At the close of the Q&A, an audience member stood and identified herself as the mother of a young woman trafficked on Backpage, then urged everyone in the auditorium to get their friends to watch the film. I chased her down afterward: She was Jacqueline Long of Denver, creator of Callie's Backyard Foundation, a nonprofit aiding at-risk youth. She named it after her daughter lost to the sex trade. By the time she found her, Callie was dead.

Long told me this in the midst of a noisy throng. What can a reporter say in such circumstances? What can anyone say? "I'm sorry."

"Me, too," she replied. "So I hope someone will just talk. Just talk about it. I mean, if every one of these people sitting here got off their asses and did exactly what I said — tell 10 of your friends to view this movie — it would be a start."

A start, yes. Awareness of a problem isn't the same as solving it, but no scourge has ever been overcome without recognizing it first. For that reason, Mazzio has packed her film's website ([IAmJaneDoeFilm.com](http://IAmJaneDoeFilm.com)) with links to resources and opportunities for action, urging visitors to contact members of Congress, assist anti-trafficking organizations, craft pithy tweets and express their displeasure to the CEOs of Facebook, Google and Microsoft for supporting Backpage in the name of internet "freedom."

This is another of Mazzio's points in "I Am Jane Doe": No one is saying the internet shouldn't be free. If you badmouth your history teacher on Facebook, Facebook shouldn't get sued — and won't, thanks to Section 230. Nor is this a free speech issue."

There's no First Amendment protection to engage in criminal activity," said Boies, who represented Gore in Bush vs. Gore, helped flip the gay-marriage ban in California and recently filed

lawsuits against Backpage in Florida and Arizona. "If so, every time you tried to prosecute somebody for conspiracy they would say, 'Well, we were doing it by talking,' and talking is protected by the First Amendment. That's nonsense."

Telling the tale of those three Jane Does "was an extraordinary journey," Mazzio said. "When I met these children, I mean, the kind of crime that we're talking about is person-breaking. Shattering. And these children will be recovering for the rest of their lives."

Early on, she said, one of her subjects asked to interview Mazzio. "She said, 'You know, what are your goals? What do you plan to do? Why are you doing this? This is going to be extraordinarily painful for me. I need to know exactly what you're up to before I participate.' And so I said: 'Here's my goal: I think I want to do the very best that I can to amplify your voice. You are suing Backpage, you're looking for legislative change. I'd like to create a story that elevates that story – so that more people hear about what's going on.'

"And she looked me up and down, and she said, 'Well, OK. You seem, like, honest. I think I'm gonna do this.' And she said, 'Do you have a daughter?' And I said, 'Yes, I do.' She said, 'I'm gonna be doing this for your daughter. Would your daughter do this for me?'

But she didn't just do it for Mazzio's daughter. She did it for my daughters. Your daughters. Everyone's daughters. Everyone who is a child, cares about a child or simply believes that a child should be loved and protected, not sold and raped.

And shouldn't that be obvious?

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