


EXHIBIT K

To the World, He Is an Anti-Trafficking Hero. Women Tell a Different Story.

Tim Ballard’s work on sex trafficking became the basis of the hit movie “Sound of Freedom.” But a series of women, in lawsuits and interviews, have accused him of being a sex predator.

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By Mike Baker

Reporting from Salt Lake City

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Tim Ballard had fashioned himself into a made-for-Hollywood hero.

For years, he led a nonprofit that proclaimed daring undercover missions to rescue children from the horrors of international sex trafficking. Politicians embraced his call for more barriers on the southern border to block smuggling. President Donald J. Trump brought him on as an adviser. Last year, the hit movie “Sound of Freedom” showcased his life and work, making more than \$250 million and becoming one of the most successful independent films of all time.

But while the world knew him as a champion of the vulnerable, many of the women he worked with now tell a much darker story: that Mr. Ballard himself was grooming, manipulating, harassing and sexually assaulting women. In lawsuits beginning last year, the women said that Mr. Ballard preyed on their desire to help trafficking victims, coercing or forcing them into sexual encounters as part of their undercover work in brothels, strip clubs and massage parlors.

A former Homeland Security agent, Mr. Ballard had built his nonprofit, Operation Underground Railroad, at a time when the issue of child sex trafficking was already on the rise. High-profile cases — some of them appallingly real, some of them inventions of conspiracy theorists — drove outrage about minors being forced into sexual servitude and exploited by U.S. elites.

Mr. Ballard won credibility across the varied worlds of religion, law enforcement, media, politics and entertainment. By 2020, Operation Underground Railroad was raising nearly \$50 million a year in donations, with a roster of supporters that included the conservative media mogul Glenn Beck, the motivational speaker Tony Robbins and the Pittsburgh Steelers coach Mike Tomlin.

In Utah, where the organization's leadership is based, Mr. Ballard talked up his close connections to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, at times appearing alongside one of the church's 12 powerful apostles.



“The Sound of Freedom” starred Jim Caviezel as Mr. Ballard. Angel Studios

As concerns about his conduct began percolating last year, the empire he created appeared to be crumbling. In June 2023, he stepped down from Operation Underground Railroad. The Latter-day Saints church last September denounced Mr. Ballard’s “morally unacceptable” activities in a statement to VICE News, which had published a series of stories raising questions about the nonprofit’s operations.

And yet, in many conservative circles, Mr. Ballard’s star keeps rising.

At the Conservative Political Action Conference in February, Mr. Ballard was onstage, arguing that failure to manage the southern U.S. border has turned federal agencies into “a child-sex-trafficking delivery service.” He received a “Heroic Patriot” award at a Catholic Prayer for Trump event at Mar-a-Lago in March. And in July, Mr. Trump’s former lawyer, Rudolph W. Giuliani, hosted Mr. Ballard on his broadcast from the Republican National Convention, encouraging him not to be “discouraged” and assuring him that he had many allies and a promising future.

But questions about Mr. Ballard’s conduct at Operation Underground Railroad have continued, and more women have come forward. The New York Times interviewed 10 who worked with Mr. Ballard at the organization and now describe their time there as a nightmare of sexual harassment, coerced sexual contact and sexual assault.

Many had long ties to the Latter-day Saints and said in lawsuits and interviews that they initially trusted Mr. Ballard because of his broad acclaim and the support he had received from the church leadership, and they believed deeply in the cause of saving children.



Mr. Ballard, left, with Donald Trump during a meeting about human trafficking on the southern border at the White House in 2019. Joshua Roberts/Bloomberg

In interviews and legal papers, the women described similar scenarios: Mr. Ballard recruited them to act as his romantic partner in undercover operations in which they would pose as wealthy sex tourists, a tactic he referred to as a “couple’s ruse.” It had two purposes, he told them: It provided an easy excuse to avoid having sexual contact with the sex workers, and some people might be more open to confiding in a woman.

But many of the women say that Mr. Ballard turned the “ruse” into an opportunity to assault them.

Six women filed lawsuits accusing Mr. Ballard of sexually assaulting them, with some describing situations in which he used his strength to overpower them despite their explicit pleas to stop.

Three of the women told The Times that they witnessed Mr. Ballard engaging in erotic encounters with sex workers, ranging from lap dances to oral sex.

The women recalled being stunned and confused by Mr. Ballard's conduct, alarmed not only by how he acted on operations but how much he expected the women to "practice" their romance in private. Many described feeling isolated and fearful as Mr. Ballard warned that disclosing operational details could allow powerful traffickers to identify and kill them.

Amy Morgan Davis, a former Miss Utah who worked as Mr. Ballard's makeup artist on a variety of occasions over several years, is among the women who said that Mr. Ballard exploited her desire to participate in the cause of rescuing children. She recalled meetings with Mr. Ballard in which he repeatedly told her to prove that the two of them had a "connection" and then made escalating sexual advances that included caressing her body with his hands.

"It's hard to wrap your head around that because you really, in your mind, want him to be the hero," she said, sharing her story publicly for the first time.

While the courts have dismissed some of the legal claims against Mr. Ballard, the six sexual assault claims filed by the women are being actively litigated, and the Salt Lake County District Attorney's Office said it was aware of "pending criminal investigations into Tim Ballard." At least one was opened in a nearby county after one of the women filed an assault report with the police.

Mr. Ballard, who declined to be interviewed for this article, has insisted that he did not engage in any misconduct but that in the gritty world of the international sex industry, it was essential to maintain believable covers. He contended that the women accusing him had come together to "repeat each other's lies" and were now out to get millions of dollars. He or his lawyers have said some of the women were the ones acting inappropriately and that their stories have been inconsistent.

Mr. Ballard said one of his chief concerns was that the accusations had done grave harm to the mission of rescuing children. "I just find it so sad that everybody who has come out with negative smears, lies, lawfare — they are accomplices to child

trafficking,” he said in an online video. “Their actions are causing children to suffer, to be raped, to be tortured.”

Rescue Teams and Undercover Video

As he left the Department of Homeland Security in 2013 to build his nonprofit, the issue of child sex trafficking was drawing more attention in the conservative political community. Mr. Ballard quickly won the support of commentators like Mr. Beck, who said on one of his shows that the cause was so important that supporting it “may be one of the reasons why you were born.”

Mr. Ballard had already gained a following for his writings and television shows about the Mormon faith. Ryan Fisher, who worked with him on a television series exploring Latter-day Saints history about a decade ago, said he attended a meeting in 2016 with Tim Ballard and the church elder, Apostle M. Russell Ballard, who are not related. The apostle, Mr. Fisher said, talked about using television to make Mr. Ballard into “an American hero” who could help the church achieve its goal of appealing to mainstream evangelicals. Church officials declined to discuss Mr. Ballard’s relationship with Apostle Ballard in detail but said in a statement last year that he had “betrayed their friendship.”

With video cameras documenting their operations, Mr. Ballard’s nonprofit ranged widely in its search for trafficking victims, going into countries like Haiti, Colombia and Mexico with rescue teams that included former Navy SEALs. Mr. Ballard and his partners would fly in and offer cash to people who could bring young girls to a party. The idea was to identify both traffickers and victims, collecting information for law enforcement agencies to pursue; some of the operations led to major armed raids, captured on camera and later broadcast to the world. “Sound of Freedom” featured one such mission in Colombia.



Mr. Ballard attended the premiere of “Sound of Freedom” in Vineyard, Utah, in 2023. Fred Hayes/Getty Images for Angel Studios

As Operation Underground Railroad’s prominence grew, its overall strategy became a point of debate among anti-trafficking experts. Some grew concerned about the organization’s emphasis on the idea that children were being snatched into trafficking and that the solution was to snatch them back.

It was a simple narrative that donors liked, said Bridgette Carr, the director of the Human Trafficking Clinic at the University of Michigan Law School, but neglected the deeper reality that most victims of trafficking are brought into that world by people they know, and that combating the problem requires long-term investments, often in reducing poverty.

“I don’t think any legitimate evidence-based organization would support the tactics of Operation Underground Railroad,” Ms. Carr said.

Jordana Bree Righter, who had a career in the Marine Corps and law enforcement before a decade of social work caring for survivors of sex trafficking, worked for a time with Operation Underground Railroad as an independent contractor.

In an interview, she said she was invited by Mr. Ballard to go out on operations and was appalled to see the organization handing out hundreds of dollars and telling potential traffickers that there was more money to be had if they could bring girls to them.

“If you’re in an impoverished area and you hand a pimp a bunch of money and tell him to get you underage girls, he’s going to get you underage girls,” she said. “That is like textbook creating a market.”

The Fake Romance Tactic

Kira Lynch was a hairdresser in the Salt Lake City area, brought in one day to a private home where Mr. Ballard was staying to cut and dye his hair.

In an interview with The Times and in a lawsuit, she described listening with interest as he talked about his relationship with Mr. Trump, his friendship with Apostle Ballard and about the children he had rescued from sex slavery. Then he had a question: Would she like to be involved?

He told her he was looking for a new female partner to help him on operations, acting as his pretend girlfriend.

God had brought him the idea for that “couple’s ruse,” Ms. Lynch recalled him saying. While she was initially wary of the idea, Mr. Ballard reassured her that there were strict rules — no kissing, no touching of private parts — and that it had all been sanctioned as a means of saving children by Apostle Ballard, considered by the church to be a living prophet whose teachings reflected the will of God.

She said he told her not to discuss full details of the new job prospect. But that night, when she went to dinner at her parents’ home, she shared that Mr. Ballard had been a new client.

Ms. Lynch’s mother jumped up out of her chair and ran to the bookshelf in the living room, pulling out tomes on Latter-day Saints thought and history that Mr. Ballard had written. As her mother praised his work, her father said they had watched and admired the television series about the church that Mr. Ballard had done with Mr. Fisher.

“They were thrilled,” Ms. Lynch said. “They just really thought he was this spiritual giant.”



Kira Lynch Rachel Bujalski for The New York Times

Many of the women described, in lawsuits and interviews, similar initial interactions with Mr. Ballard. Then, once he won the women’s initial interest, they said, he began talking graphically about sexual scenarios they might encounter, based on his past experiences. “How far would you go to save a child?” he asked many of them.

In text messages with one woman filed as part of a lawsuit, Mr. Ballard asked about increasingly personal topics — pubic-hair waxing, what made her feel sexy, what her face looks like during an orgasm. He has said such messages were sent as part of his undercover persona.

Some of the women said they felt increasingly uneasy when he insisted it was necessary to keep up the ruse of the fake romance even when they were alone, in his office, or in hotel rooms, or vehicles. But Mr. Ballard warned them that sex traffickers had extensive networks and could be monitoring their every move, looking for any signals that their couple act might not be genuine.

In that case, he warned, they risked being killed, or their efforts to save children might be undermined. Secrecy was paramount: Many of the women recalled being told that not even their families or other co-workers at the nonprofit were to know the details of the operations.

Things quickly turned physical, several of the women said. One of them, Mary Hall, said in both an interview and court records that she met Mr. Ballard in his office early on, and he began groping her, kissing her stomach and tugging at the waistline of her pants before being interrupted by the entrance of another executive. She initially thought it was a test of her ability to endure intimate situations, but she later expressed concern about Mr. Ballard to others in the organization and was not invited to proceed on a mission.

Another woman, Sashleigha Hightower, said in an interview and in court papers that she tensed up when Mr. Ballard began rubbing her inner thigh and nuzzling her neck not long after she discussed her history as a rape survivor.

The situation felt weird, she said, but she was an actress, not an undercover operative. She assumed based on Mr. Ballard's reputation that this was part of the professional process. "He knows what he's doing," she said she told herself. "He's assured me this is all normal. He's got other people backing him up about this couple's ruse thing."

Success and Concerns

Mr. Ballard has claimed that “thousands” of trafficking victims were rescued over the years, though most of the women who spoke with The Times said they had not seen anyone rescued.

Allies of Mr. Ballard said that pretending to be a couple during the operations had proven to be effective. Alex Acosta, who began working with Mr. Ballard in 2021, focusing mostly on Latin America, said that in his experience, the team would discuss strategy beforehand. He said that relationships between Mr. Ballard and the women on the team always appeared to be kept within professional boundaries.

“Every time I saw this enacted, there was a clear line and it was never crossed,” he said. He added that in his two years at the organization, he saw well over 100 sex-trafficking victims rescued.

Victor Hugo Enriquez García, a secretary of public safety for the Mexican state of Sonora, said Mr. Ballard proved adept at collecting information about trafficking venues and then shared that information with law enforcement. His tips sometimes led to arrests of pedophiles operating in Mexico and the rescue of minors, he said.

Mr. García said the allegations against Mr. Ballard rang untrue to him. He found Mr. Ballard to be professional and never witnessed any inappropriate behavior.

But records show there were internal concerns about some of the conduct on the nonprofit’s operations, and not just Mr. Ballard’s.



At the Conservative Political Action Conference in February, Mr. Ballard was onstage, arguing that failure to manage the southern U.S. border has turned federal agencies into “a child-sex-trafficking delivery service.” Zach Roberts/NurPhoto, via Associated Press

Investigators in Utah reported reviewing undercover video of an operation nearly a decade ago in Cabo San Lucas that included Paul Hutchinson, a businessman from Utah who was an important investor in “Sound of Freedom.”

On that operation, a man presented Mr. Hutchinson’s team with a girl who someone on the video described as 16 years old. Mr. Hutchinson approached the girl and put both his hands on her bare breasts, according to a law enforcement summary of the video.

The operation team members could later be heard discussing the girl’s age, seeming to agree that she was a minor, although Mr. Hutchinson now says he believes she was an adult.

Melissa Cannon Johnson, who worked in the film industry and was later invited to follow the organization on a trip to Haiti, recalled phoning Mr. Ballard to express concern that a team member had behaved inappropriately around her and children at an orphanage. In a sworn court statement, Ms. Johnson said she was surprised when Mr. Ballard quickly guessed that Mr. Hutchinson was the person she was talking about.

“Ballard explained that Paul was sexually disturbed and that everyone at OUR knew that,” she wrote in her statement. “Ballard told me he had to put up with Hutchinson because of his wealth and because Paul could use his influence.”

Mr. Hutchinson has since founded the Child Liberation Foundation, a new organization to conduct rescue missions.

In a video statement responding to the incident in which he was seen touching the girl’s breasts, Mr. Hutchinson said it had been a dangerous undercover situation and that he had made a split-second decision to touch the girl to make it appear real.

He strongly denied that anything improper happened at the orphanage in Haiti. “I had a team of operators around me every day of that mission and never once acted inappropriately with anybody,” he said in an emailed statement.

He noted that he had “made a very clear separation” from Mr. Ballard “for reasons that are now in the public view about him.”

‘No clear purpose’

In interviews and statements filed in court, the women said that, once recruited, they found themselves accompanying Mr. Ballard to strip clubs, massage parlors and other sex-worker hotspots, looking for underage purveyors — sometimes locally in Utah, other times in places like London; Puerto Vallarta, Mexico; or Guayaquil, Ecuador.

They said they went along with what they were being asked to do despite growing reservations, telling themselves that they needed to trust Mr. Ballard if they were to succeed in freeing the children who were trapped there.

Some of the women now say they became concerned that many of the meetings they were having with sex workers focused less on gathering information and building trust with the workers and more on letting sexual encounters evolve.

One of the women, Celeste Borys, filed a lawsuit against Mr. Ballard and Operation Underground Railroad accusing them of sexual assault and battery, fraud, intentional infliction of emotional distress and other claims.

She said she had been working an office job at the nonprofit when Mr. Ballard approached her to say he had experienced a vision about her, and proposed expanding her role.

On what she was told would be something like an introductory operation in Ecuador in 2022, she said, Mr. Ballard surprised her with a couple's massage with him in a hotel room. Two girls who looked to Ms. Borys to be about 15 or 16 entered the room, and Mr. Ballard got naked and lay on the bed, she said. Ms. Borys lay down with her clothes on, and he asked why she had not stripped down.



Celeste Borys. Rachel Bujalski for The New York Times

Instead of working to help the girls, Ms. Borys said, Mr. Ballard began talking about masturbation. One of the girls proposed demonstrating her methods on Ms. Borys. Mr. Ballard rolled Ms. Borys on her back and started removing her shorts. Realizing what was about to happen, she said, she closed her eyes to try to escape; she said she heard him comment that he had never watched what was transpiring in such close proximity before, and at one point penetrated her with his fingers.

Ms. Borys eventually escaped to the bathroom, taking refuge in the shower, where she sobbed. Mr. Ballard later came in, she said, claiming that he had obtained valuable information from the girls: “We are going to save so many children,” he told her.

Two months later, the team was at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Mexico City, and Ms. Borys found Mr. Ballard with a professional escort in the hotel room they shared. The escort's bathing suit was on the floor, she related in her lawsuit. Ms. Borys said the woman, chatting with her via a translation app before departing, told her that she'd had sex with Mr. Ballard. Ms. Borys provided The Times with a photo of herself and the escort.

Mr. Ballard insisted that it had not gone that far but acknowledged some sexual activity, Ms. Borys said. When she objected to his actions, she said, he began screaming and cursing.

"He goes, 'This is what I get for saving effing kids? You're criticizing me on how I effing save kids?'" Ms. Borys said. She said she began wishing that she could take back her remarks, wondering why she had questioned his methods.

Ms. Borys said Mr. Ballard's intimate interactions with sex workers continued, including at a luxury hotel in Pasadena, Calif., where she recalled walking into a room to find a woman hired for the day giving Mr. Ballard oral sex.

Ms. Borys said Mr. Ballard not only placed her in inappropriate situations with sex workers but himself engaged in unwelcome sexual acts with her on at least two dozen occasions, sometimes when they were alone and not conducting any operation. On one such occasion, she said, Mr. Ballard, warning that traffickers might be watching through a hotel window, pushed her onto the bed and, despite her objections, penetrated her until she was able to use enough strength to push him away.

For months, Ms. Borys said, she was confused about how to think about Mr. Ballard's conduct, because over time it began feeling like a routine part of the job. She initially defended Mr. Ballard as concerns about his behavior began to percolate at the nonprofit and he resigned. "I have never been taken advantage of," she wrote in an email that Mr. Ballard has filed as an exhibit in court. It was sent to Mr. Ballard and an executive of the organization and addressed to "To Whom It May Concern."

In fact, she said, she was already having doubts about him, and wrote the email because Mr. Ballard had pressured her to do so. She was beginning to distance herself from him, she said, and asking herself hard questions.

“I believed it. I believed it worked. I believed Tim. I believed the mission. I believed. I literally was in a cult,” she said. “I did remember thinking throughout my time with him like, ‘Why am I feeling sorry for myself?’ Like, I come home at night. People who are victims or trafficked, they don’t get to come home at night.”

Mark Eisenhut, a lawyer for Mr. Ballard, said Mr. Ballard did not harass or physically assault any of the women he worked with, nor did he have any inappropriate contact with sex workers. The women’s claims against Mr. Ballard, he said, have been “ever evolving and ever-morphing,” becoming more serious over time.

“He has never been charged with a crime and every court considering a complaint against the Ballards so far has ruled in their favor,” Mr. Eisenhut said.

Mr. Ballard scored a legal victory in June when a judge dismissed Ms. Righter’s claims of fraud and conspiracy related to the couple’s ruse. The judge found that there were insufficient facts to prove that Mr. Ballard and other leaders of the organization had planned the ruse tactic as a ploy for sexual misconduct. Ms. Righter was not among those who alleged assault by Mr. Ballard.

Other women besides Ms. Borys said they also began having serious doubts.



Krista Kacey Rachel Bujalski for The New York Times

Krista Kacey, a hair and makeup artist who initially met Mr. Ballard on a film set and later went with him on international operations, joined several other women in a lawsuit over her experience with the organization. She described in her suit and in an interview a mission in the Dominican Republic in March 2022. There, the two of them stayed at a dedicated sex house, and Mr. Ballard brought in two sex workers to the room they were sharing.

What ensued was a night that Ms. Kacey described as “horribly traumatic.” For hours, she said, they were physically interacting with the sex workers — touching and groping without technically having sex — with no apparent progress in gaining information about child victims. Afterward, she recalled, Mr. Ballard bragged that they had managed to have what amounted to an orgy without engaging in full sex — a claim she knew was only technically true. After that, she made a decision to avoid working with Mr. Ballard on undercover operations.

“It became very clear to me that we were not getting intel,” Ms. Kacey said. “There was no clear purpose.”

Ms. Lynch, the Salt Lake City hairdresser, said she grew wary about Mr. Ballard after his escalating physical touches and a night spent at a local strip club, where he asked her to give him a lap dance — all in the name of practicing for missions.

She said she had been working for several months with Mr. Ballard — whom she considered a close friend — when he began displaying increasingly erratic behavior.

Then one night in January 2022, as she described it in court records, he came to her house to get his hair cut and was acting particularly disconnected. He told her that he believed the two of them had been married in another life, she said, and he started to pull her clothes off. She repeatedly told him to stop and tried to escape his grasp, she said, but he pinned her on the stairs and forced himself on her.

Mr. Ballard, through a lawyer, has said that no such assault occurred, instead contending that Ms. Lynch had made advances to him. Ms. Lynch’s initial request for a protective order to keep Mr. Ballard away from her was dismissed by a judge

who referred to the case as a “colossal he said, she said,” and noted that Ms. Lynch had made some “inconsistent statements.” She added that victims often do not immediately report everything that happened to them and that it would take an evidentiary hearing to fully determine the facts.

But Ms. Lynch said the encounter at her house had left her feeling deeply ashamed and disillusioned.

“I thought he was an amazing human,” she said. “And he did this to me.”

External Acclaim and Internal Concerns

The “Sound of Freedom” movie had languished as an unfinished project for years. Filming was completed in 2018, with the actor Jim Caviezel starring as Mr. Ballard. But the filmmakers, including the Mexican director Alejandro Monteverde, had struggled to find a studio or platform that would bring it to the public.

That changed when Angel Studios, a company that had found success distributing the television series “The Chosen” about the life of Jesus, acquired the rights last year. The company managed to raise \$5 million from thousands of investors to distribute and market the film. It gained further traction with a unique pay-it-forward campaign that asked filmgoers to help fund tickets for even more viewers. At his golf club in New Jersey, Mr. Trump hosted a screening of “Sound of Freedom.”

The movie depicted Mr. Ballard as a savior driven to action by moral fury, willing to risk his life to save children from sex slavery. “God’s children are not for sale,” his character says in what became the film’s tagline.

But before the movie was released, the concerns about Mr. Ballard were intensifying inside his nonprofit. Records show that one female employee, who is not part of the current litigation, filed an internal complaint at Operation Underground Railroad describing Mr. Ballard as a “master manipulator” and detailing graphic sexual scenarios that he had her perform as part of their undercover operations.

After the organization cut ties with Mr. Ballard, Mr. Beck, who had been a longtime friend and supporter of Mr. Ballard, said on his podcast that he found reports about Mr. Ballard’s behavior to be “disturbing” and described himself as feeling “completely duped.”

“Sound of Freedom” nonetheless turned into one of the year’s most successful films, out-earning the latest “Mission Impossible” and Taylor Swift’s concert film in domestic box office sales.

One of the people who was excited to see “Sound of Freedom” was Ms. Lynch’s mother, Jill Peterson, who had long followed Mr. Ballard’s career. Ms. Peterson invited her daughter to see it in a theater.

Ms. Lynch declined, but it was not until two months later that she found the courage to explain why. She drove over to her mother’s house.

“I’ve been trying to tell you something for a while,” she said then, sobbing.

Ms. Peterson said that what her daughter went on to share that day took her breath away. She pulled her daughter onto her lap, holding her tight. She remembers her daughter expressing a wish to die, and herself feeling waves of regret and betrayal wash over her.

“I believed in the cause. I believed in the man,” she said.

Edgar Sandoval contributed reporting.

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