

Atoning for sins of his father

Ex-mobster rallies public with life story

JUST BEFORE Christmas, former Colombo crime family father-and-son capos Sonny and Michael Franzese were in Ohio. They didn't get to share any holiday cheer.

Born-again son Michael addressed the Ohio State football team, recounting his life (of crime) story as a warning to the Big Ten champions before their national championship game against LSU.

Jailed-again dad Sonny remained inside the federal penitentiary at Elkton, Ohio, his new home after another of his sons ratted him out.

The Franzeses, once a tightly knit clan with major gangland clout, are as dysfunctional as the 21st century Mafia itself this holiday season.

Sonny can't see his seven grandkids, son John is hiding out, and Michael wonders if his brother will resurface to put their 90-year-old dad behind bars for the rest of his life.

"I know there's talk about that, and it's not pleasant to think about," said Michael Franzese, once ranked by Fortune magazine as No. 18 on its list of the nation's 50 most powerful mobsters. "It's in all of our thoughts. We're waiting to see if the other shoe drops."

Michael — a made man at 24 — and brother John followed their dad into the Colombos, where the old man was known as a standup guy who would always do the time and never drop a dime.

The elder Franzese, a contemporary of family namesake Joe Colombo, was reportedly among the investors in the infamous porno movie "Deep Throat."

Despite his advancing age and years behind bars, the Brooklyn native stayed involved with the mob into the new millennium, the FBI says.

Sonny's legendary Mafia career was interrupted by a 1967 bank robbery conviction and jail term — a crime many believe he didn't commit. He was paroled after doing 11 years.

There's no denying Sonny returned to La Cosa Nostra. He was jailed five times in the past 25 years for parole violations after consorting with mobsters.

When he wasn't doing time, he was a regular fixture at downtown get-togethers to watch Pay-Per-View boxing matches. He was part of a crowd that included — though not necessarily all at the same time — a top police official, a retired FBI agent, a former boxing champion and some great and not-so-great writers.

His most recent parole violation was in May, when Sonny was

EXCLUSIVE

BY LARRY McSHANE
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

popped for sharing breakfast pastries with reputed bad guys.

Michael and his father are aware that John was identified as turning Sonny in to the feds. "He knows that's what the word is, but it's a sore subject," said a Long Island neighbor of Sonny.

While his father never left New York, Michael quit the mob and launched a new life: born-again Christian, father of seven, Little League coach living in California. His time as a mob capo collecting up to \$9 million a week was in the past.

Michael, whose age and acumen led to his nickname "The Yuppie Don" during his mob days, tells his don't-follow-in-my-footsteps story to athletes, businessmen, church groups. He's spoken to Major League Baseball players, NBA players and colleges from Nebraska to North Carolina.

Those audiences listen.

His pleas for his dad to embrace a new lifestyle fell on deaf ears.

"He says, 'What do you want me to do? I don't know anyone who's not a felon,'" Michael recounts with a rueful laugh. "He told me, 'Even you're a felon.'"

The pair rely on short but frequent phone calls from prison to stay in touch. Michael is in Los Angeles, while Sonny's cell is 45 miles northwest of Youngstown, Ohio, and in the middle of nowhere.

"My kids are kind of broken up," Michael says. "My 9-year-old asks, 'When am I going to see grandpa again?'"

"That's tough."

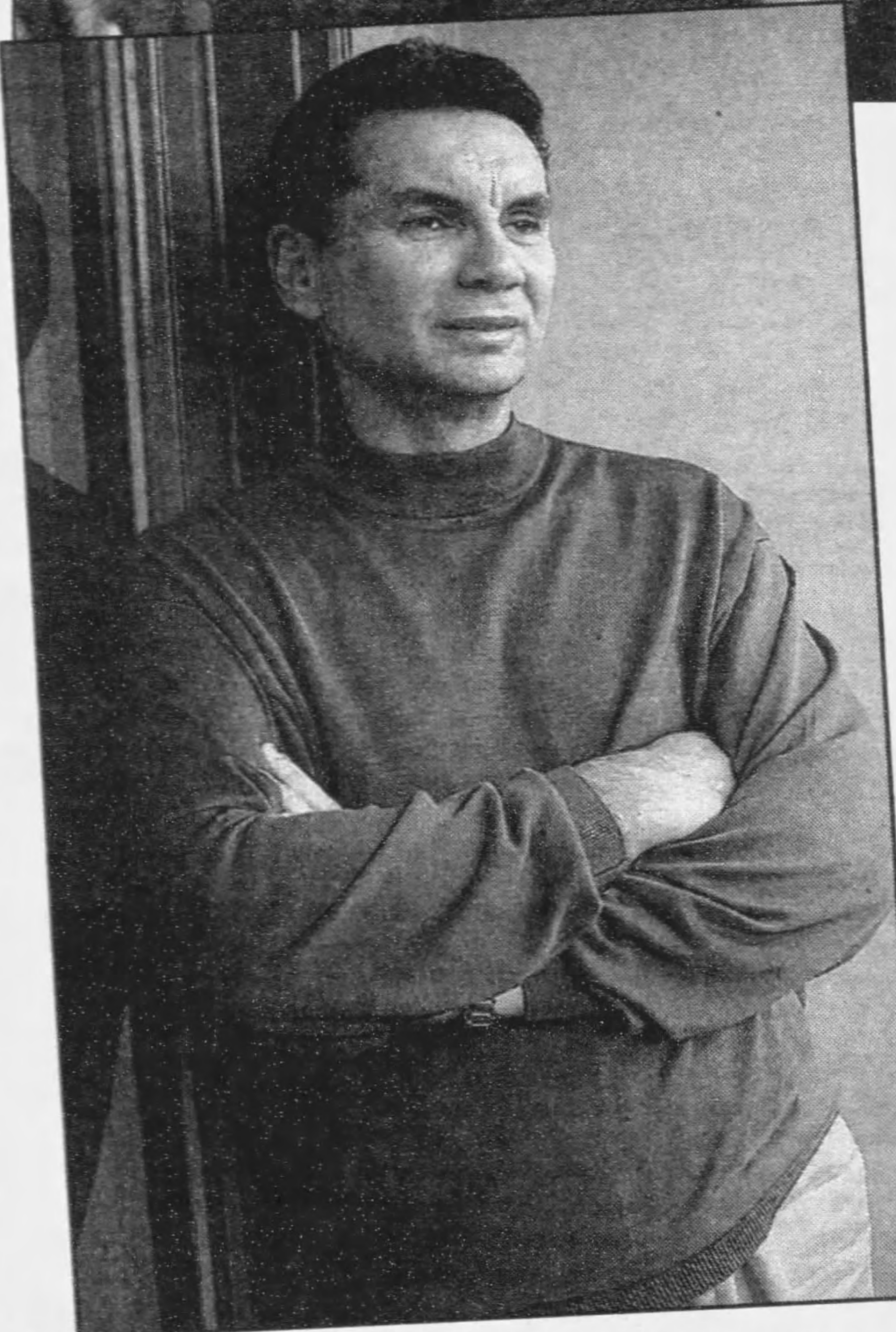
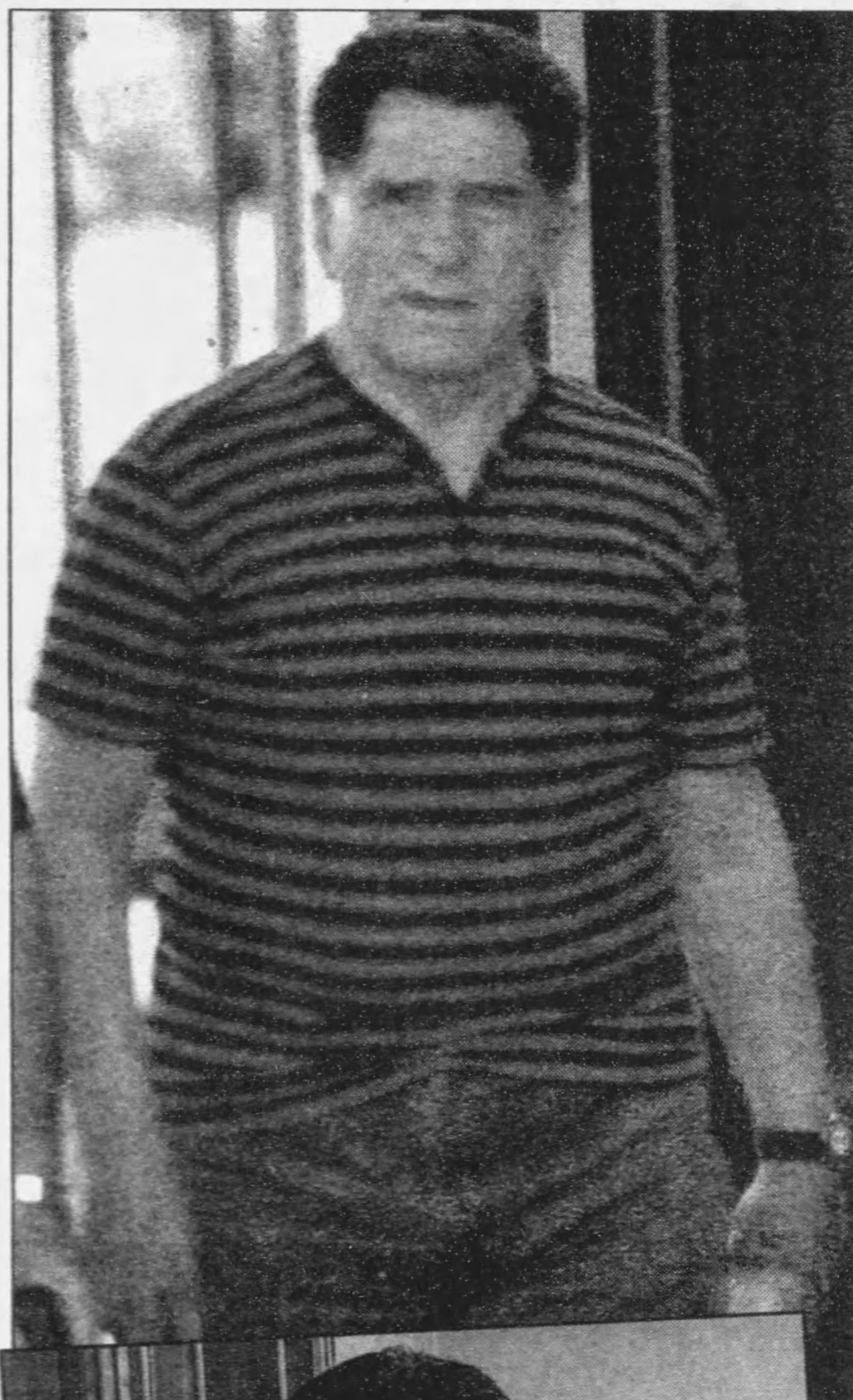
Not that Franzese wants or expects any sympathy for Sonny: "Who's going to feel sorry for my dad? Nobody, unless it's his family."

Michael spoke of his father's woes to the Buckeye football team. The two couldn't meet before his Columbus appearance because it wasn't visitors' day at Elkton.

Michael is certain of one thing: Sonny Franzese will do his time with his mouth shut. Even if it means Christmas — maybe his last Christmas — behind bars.

"Look, he's strong," Michael says. "You will never ever see Dad cooperating. It's not even in his thought process. But this time of year, it's tough. I can hear it in his voice."

lmcshane@nydailynews.com



As capo dad Sonny Franzese (top) sits in an Ohio prison cell, son Michael Franzese inspires pro and college teams with his how-he-got-out tale. Photos by Gangland News (top) and Stefano Paltera

Site helps people find true gloves

BY LARRY McSHANE
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

WHAT'S BETTER for the holidays than reuniting with a lost loved one?

Through a Web site launched this month, New Yorkers can find a helping hand in locating gloves left behind on subways, street corners and park benches.

The www.onecoldhand-nyc.com site hopes to make a glove connection for folks left disconsolate by their missing mittens.

It's the second such site to open, following in the fingerprints of one launched last month in Pittsburgh by a Carnegie Mellon University art student.

The New York site offered three gloves in search of their partners: an adult brown suede glove spotted in Manhattan's Financial District, a cotton work glove discovered in Williamsburg, and — saddest of all — a kid's glove found in Crown Heights.

The Pittsburgh site is already a huge hit, collecting more than 55,000 hits in 10 days after word of its mission spread. Four glove owners have already found their missing mates through the site.

Additional sites were set to open in Philadelphia, as well as Italy and Canada, said original site developer Jennifer Gooch.

"It's been amazing," said Gooch. "Once the surprise thing kind of waned, I realized that it's something a lot of people can relate to, and for different reasons."

lmcshane@nydailynews.com

Girl, 4, struck by SUV is improving

ONE OF THE TWO BROOKLYN sisters run down by an out-of-control SUV Friday evening was improving yesterday and transferred to Schneider Children's Hospital on Long Island, officials said.

Evelyn Esquivel, 4, and her 10-year-old sister, Alin, were walking to their Red Hook home with their mother at 7:45 p.m. Friday when an SUV hopped a curb and plowed into them.

Evelyn was listed in critical but stable condition at Lutheran Medical Center in the hours after the accident but has now improved enough to be moved to the New Hyde Park children's hospital, officials said.

Alin was treated and released from Lutheran Friday night.

No charges have been filed against its 48-year-old SUV driver, who suffered minor injuries in the accident. Police said their investigation was ongoing.

John Lauinger
and Jonathan Lemire