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Lifestyle Good Weekend

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Making a killing

Frank Robson
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Once described as the biggest Mob earner since Al Capone, Michael Franzese has turned his back on the Mafia, founded a Christian ministry ...and, amazingly, lived to tell the tale.

Even now, more than 20 years after finding God in solitary confinement, ex-Mafia boss Michael "Mikey" Franzese still weighs the odds like the wily mobster of old. In his current incarnation as a pew-packing evangelist decrying the evils of his old life, part of the deal is that he gets to go to heaven and live forever with Jesus.

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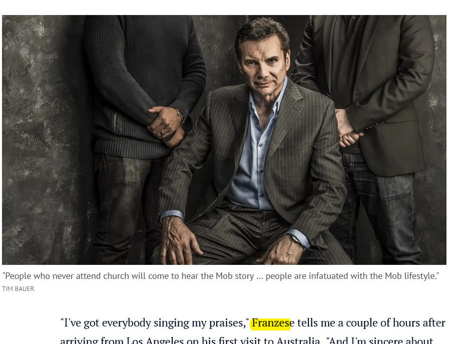
Leaving the mafia and living to tell the tale

Michael Franzese was set to be a mob boss. But meeting a young lady of faith changed everything.

"The way I see it," Franzese reasons, "if Christ isn't a saviour, then when I die I'm dead anyway, so what do I have to lose? And if all this Christian stuff is right, then I'm going to heaven. To me, that's a win-win situation."

In fact, it's a win-win-win-win situation, because Franzese is paid handsomely as a motivational speaker and author, as well as being admired and feted by his audiences, church leaders, corporate image-makers, US professional sports leagues (whose games he used to fix), and even the law enforcement agencies that once tried so hard to put him in prison for life.



"People who never attend church will come to hear the Mob story ... people are infatuated with the Mob lifestyle." TIM BAUER

"I've got everybody singing my praises," Franzese tells me a couple of hours after arriving from Los Angeles on his first visit to Australia. "And I'm sincere about what I'm doing. I pulled a lotta scams in my life, but you don't pull a scam on God."

Once a feared caporegime, or captain, in New York's Colombo crime family - and the biggest Mob "earner" since Al Capone - Franzese is here to publicise two Australian speaking events, in Sydney on July 22 and Melbourne on July 23. Promoted as "An Evening with The Godfather", the tour was delayed while Australian immigration authorities pondered "character" issues before granting Franzese's visa.

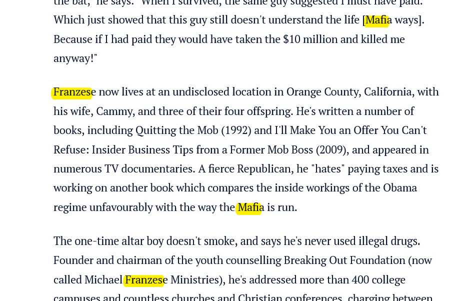
We talk for several hours in the foyer of his Sydney hotel, where the reformed mobster consumes a range of toasted snacks - "Boy, dese are good!" - while covering such themes as his father's advice for disposing of body parts in microwave ovens, and the Mob execution of his closest friend for having an affair with Franzese's sister.

At 64, the ex-athlete is slim, dapper and effortlessly charming. A silver crucifix appears prominently at his throat. He has deep-set, dark eyes that appear at times quite expressionless, and a cap of crow-black hair which may or may not be dyed. (If you're so curious, ask him yourself.)

Franzese with his wife Cammy, far right, daughters Julia, Amanda and Miquelle, and granddaughter Olivia. COURTESY OF MICHAEL FRANSEZE

The two questions most people want to ask Franzese are whether he personally killed anyone, and why - given that the Mafia put a contract on his life for quitting the Colombo family and denouncing organised crime - he's still alive.

As Franzese likes to point out, no one of his status has ever before turned on the Mob and lived to tell the tale. (Let alone turned the tale into a lucrative industry.) He scoffs at suggestions that he actually paid Mafia bosses $10 million dollars in advance not to kill him.



Goodfellas: Michael Franzese with his Mob family. COURTESY OF MICHAEL FRANSEZE

"That came from one of my old prosecutors, who predicted my death right off the bat," he says. "When I survived, the same guy suggested I must have paid. Which just showed that this guy still doesn't understand the life [Mafia ways]. Because if I had paid they would have taken the $10 million and killed me anyway!"

Franzese now lives at an undisclosed location in Orange County, California, with his wife, Cammy, and three of their four offspring. He's written a number of books, including Quitting the Mob (1992) and I'll Make You an Offer You Can't Refuse: Insider Business Tips from a Former Mob Boss (2009), and appeared in numerous TV documentaries. A fierce Republican, he "hates" paying taxes and is working on another book which compares the inside workings of the Obama regime unfavourably with the way the Mafia is run.

The one-time altar boy doesn't smoke, and says he's never used illegal drugs. Founder and chairman of the youth counselling Breaking Out Foundation (now called Michael Franzese Ministries), he's addressed more than 400 college campuses and countless churches and Christian conferences, charging between $US5000 and $US10,000 for a religious engagement and more for corporate events. "Pastors tell one another that having me speak means people who never attend church will come in to hear the Mob story," he chuckles. "And it's true: people are infatuated with the Mob lifestyle."

Serendipitously, it seems, Franzese's moral crusade happens to embody one of the best-selling entertainment themes ever. Ordinary, law-abiding citizens can't resist a good, inside-the-Mob yarn, as The Godfather, Goodfellas and The Sopranos attest. The key ingredients are Brooklyn accents, dangerous sex, pitiless violence and the whatever-it-takes pragmatism Mob bosses hone by studying the works of their "champion": 16th-century Italian philosopher, diplomat and apparent sociopath, Niccolo Machiavelli.

Franzese's contribution to the genre heightens the vicarious thrills by being real. One of his oft-used lines is the question his enforcer father, John "Sonny" Franzese (still in prison at 98), asked him before he took the Mafia oath and became a "made" man: "He said, 'Mike, if you ever had to kill anybody, could you do it?' And I said, 'Dad, if the circumstances were right, I could.'"

Born in Naples in 1917, Sonny was described in a 1991 Vanity Fair article as "a shark-eyed, bull-necked hoodlum ... a legendary enforcer given credit for dozens of murders; a man who had been tossed out of the US Army as a 'psychoneurotic with pronounced homicidal tendencies'. "

This was the figure Michael Franzese idolised as a child. "Sonny was everything to me," he says. "He was my hero." He didn't believe what kids at school said about his father being a violent mobster, and it wasn't until the early 1960s - when law enforcement agencies targeted Sonny, and their Long Island home was under constant surveillance - that reality dawned.

Until a few years ago, Franzese believed he'd been adopted by Sonny, and that his real father was one Frank Grillo. But it turns out that his late mother, Christine "Tina" Capobianco, had been a 16-year-old cigarette girl at the Stork Club in Manhattan when Sonny, already married with three kids, got her pregnant with Michael.

She married Grillo to avoid a scandal, and later, after the Mob gave Sonny permission to divorce his first wife (who'd left him and the kids), Grillo "disappeared", and Sonny and Tina got married.

"So then my mother suddenly had all these kids in the house, and she didn't treat them very well, not well at all," Franzese says gravely. "Thinking Sonny was my stepfather, I was always worried that he was gunna turn on me, like my mother did with his kids.

"That's one of the reasons I did everything I could to please him. He wanted me to be an athlete; I was an athlete. He wanted me to be a doctor; I went to college to be a doctor. That became the motivating force in my life: to please him, because I was so grateful he never turned on me."

In 1970, Sonny was jailed for 50 years for bank robbery. Five years later, aged 24, Franzese quit his medical studies and took La Cosa Nostra's oath of silence in the back room of a catering hall in Brooklyn.

"I loved that I'd become part of something so special to my dad," he says. "Now we were both 'made' guys, and from then on I wanted to be the best possible Mob guy I could be. I wanted to get my dad outta jail, and I wanted to make money."

The first part didn't work out - apart from a few years of freedom here and there, Sonny has been inside ever since - but Franzese turned out to be an absolute whiz at making dodgy money. By the time he was 35, and a caporegime like Sonny, he was pulling in more bucks than any Mob boss since Capone in the 1940s. (In 1986, he was the youngest individual listed in Fortune magazine's survey of the "Fifty Most Wealthy and Powerful Mafia Bosses".) His empire included car dealerships, gambling rackets, high-rise construction and the production of B-movies. But most of the loot came from an audacious bootleg gasoline scheme that generated almost $US50 million a month and brought him, personally, $US2 million a week.

The scam involved a process for circumventing state and federal excise tax (then 40¢ a gallon), which allowed Franzese to undercut the competition. He soon controlled 350 gas stations, storage terminals and fleets of tankers.

"We hadda get rid of [competitors]," Franzese says. "I mean, get them outta the business ... a lot of Arabs and Turks were in the business then, and we blew up a couple of their gas stations and stuff like that."

The Yuppie Don, as the media called the foppish gangster, bought homes on Long Island and in Florida and California, a private jet and a helicopter he used "instead of a car" because it could zip him away from FBI surveillance teams. Among the movies he financed was Knights of the City, a teen-gang musical. On the set he met the beautiful Cammy Garcia, a 19-year-old born-again Christian dancer who became his second wife early in 1985.

Only a few months later, with Cammy and her mother praying for his mortal soul - "At that stage I wasn't really buying into the Christian stuff"- Franzese was indicted on a range of charges related to his gasoline dealings. He cut a deal, pleaded guilty to some charges and got 10 years in prison. He was released after five years, after denouncing the Mob and agreeing to testify against his partners in crime (a deal he never kept), but was returned to jail for a further three years for breaching his parole and was finally freed in 1994.

Franzese maintains he never intended to testify about anything serious, but tricked investigators into believing he would. "I had immunity, so I just talked mostly about what I did, and tried to keep everybody else out of it. I was walking a fine line and it was nerve-racking. But in the end, thanks to a few lucky breaks, it worked out."

Franzese still makes dramatic play of the contract the Mob took out on his life around this time, and how his own father approved the hit from prison. But the fact that no "made" men went to jail because of him goes a long way to explaining why he's still alive.

Another reason was a concerted crackdown on Mafia crime that caught up most of those who wanted him dead. "I just outlasted everybody!" he laughs. "Everybody else is in prison for life, or dead. But look, I'll never be outta the woods, which is why I changed my whole lifestyle.

"I don't go to clubs anymore. I don't walk my dog at the same time every morning, or go to the same restaurant every Tuesday night, in case someone is scoping me out. If it [a hit] does happen, it'll be by some wannabe guy trying to make a name for himself."

Did Franzese ever kill anyone himself?

He smiles in a practised way. "Listen," he says, "The Life is very treacherous. If you're part of it, you're part of the violence. There's no escape. I was a captain at a very high level, and I saw my share of things, let's put it that way."

What about Lawrence "Champagne Larry" Carrozza, a member of Franzese's crime crew who was murdered in 1983 for having an affair with Franzese's sister, Gia. Did he kill him?

Franzese: "Obviously not, because I was in Florida and three guys later admitted to it." (At that time, to commemorate the launch of Franzese's movie production company, Miami Gold, Miami Beach gave him the keys to the city and actually made him an honorary police commissioner.)

"They claimed I ordered Carrozza's murder," he says. "But I didn't. My sister and he were in love,

but they were both married. And he was like my brother, that close. I said to him, 'Have you lost your freakin' mind? I can't even save you now!' Did I want it to happen? No way. Am I responsible? Well, I knew it was going to happen, and I didn't save him." He shrugs.

Franzese says he declined a suggestion from his boss in the Colombo family that he kill Carrozza himself. "He said, in that case, they'd handle it, and that's how it went down. Larry also had a drug habit which was another no-no. They told him they were taking him somewhere to help him straighten out. Larry was driving. They told him to pull over, then - boom - they shot him in the back of the head." Gia, who never recovered from Carrazzo's murder, took her own life nine years later.

In his earlier years Sonny Franzese was obsessive about secrecy, often taking Michael into the bathroom so they could talk with their heads near gushing taps. "He said to me, 'Mike, if you and I went out and killed somebody, one second later - if you asked me about it - I'd say, Whattya talkin' about?' That's how he brought me up," says Franzese.

To his horror, all that changed in 2008-09 when two undercover police informants wearing bugging devices recorded 200 hours of Sonny singing like a bird about Mob crimes, including murders and the importance of properly disposing of bodies. Even worse: one of the undercover agents was his own son, John Franzese jnr. Nine years younger than Michael, John jnr, a drug addict from age 18, went on to testify against his father in an extortion case that led to Sonny's current jail term. John jnr is now in a witness-protection program.

"I love my brother," says Franzese, "but he's been a selfish kid his whole life. I think he was always resentful that he never made it to another level [in the Mob]."

Of Sonny's sudden attack of loose lips, he adds: "Dad hurt himself real bad ... One of the things he talked about [on tape] was something he told me years before. He said, 'Mike, you're gonna kill somebody, you can't leave any evidence. You ever do any work like that, you should take whoever to the basement, kill them, put the body in a little kiddie pool, chop it up, then put the bits in a microwave oven and disintegrate them.' "

Me: "Sounds pretty time-consuming."

Franzese: "That's what I told myself at the time!"

When he visited the old man inside and asked why he'd blabbed so appallingly, Sonny reverted to denial mode. "He said, 'It wasn't me. They doctored the tapes.' And I said, 'Dad, I heard the tapes. It was you.' "

Franzese rolls his eyes as though discussing an errant child. "Let me tell you something," he says. "Sonny's a character. He's unique, believe me."

As Franzese tells it, he found his faith during his last three-year prison term, most of which was spent in solitary confinement, or "The Hole" as prisoners know it. "Cammy sent me about 400 books, and I studied every faith out there," he says. "The evidence for Christianity is very strong, and it just became real for me. I can't explain ... it was just a transformation of the heart."

He points out that he didn't leave jail as an evangelist: "I was recruited from outta prison by pro baseball leagues to come and speak to their athletes about gambling. It was years before I started speaking in churches."

Yet although he's passionate about the evils of the Mafia - "I don't know one family that's part of that life that hasn't been totally devastated!" - Franzese can switch, in a moment, to nostalgia for the homicidal brotherhood. "I miss it still," he confesses. "I'm a guy's guy. I like being around men and having their camaraderie ... we had good times, I won't deny it."

As our time draws to a close, he says it was God's intervention, "working together" with the more earthly factors he cited earlier, that saved him from going back on the streets and being killed by the Mob: "Did I have another purpose in life? I believe I did."

In the Mob, as he freely admits, his entire focus was to make money, a compulsion that seems to have survived the reformation process. "I could go back into the [illegal] gasoline business," he suddenly suggests, apropos of nothing. "I know it inside out and I know how to destroy the government tax-wise. I could go back and take down half-a-mill a month and they would never even miss it."

Intrigued, I wait to see who'll speak next: the evangelist or the mobster, God or the devil. "Morally, I won't do it [the gasoline scam], because I don't feel that I should any more," Franzese says. "But if I wasn't a person of faith, absolutely I'd do it."

Moments later, as though this was some sort of ongoing inner dialogue, the mobster shoots back: "Anyway, I don't think taking tax money from the government is a sin. They're just throwing our money in the sewer! They're the worst thieves in the world!"

Or maybe that was the Republican. Hard to tell.

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