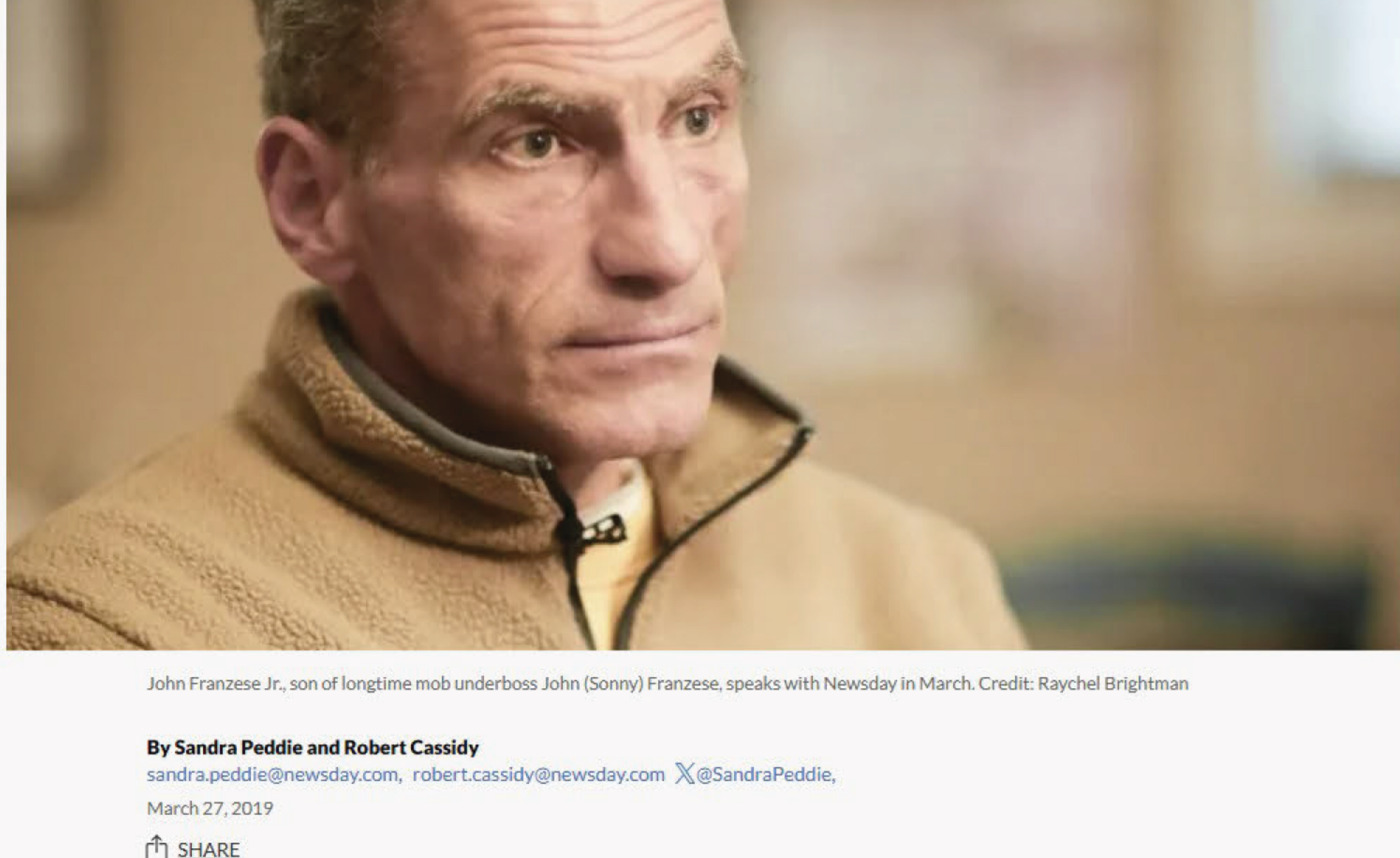


LONG ISLAND / INVESTIGATIONS

## John Franzese Jr. testified against his dad, Sonny — and then quit Witness Protection



John Franzese Jr., son of longtime mob underboss John (Sonny) Franzese, speaks with Newsday in March. Credit: Rachel Brightman

By **Sandra Peadar and Robert Cassidy**  
sandra.pedar@newsday.com robert.cassidy@newsday.com @SandraPedar, @RobertCassidy  
March 27, 2019

SHABE

John Franzese Jr. was placed in the federal Witness Protection program after breaking the Mafia's code of silence and testifying against his father, the Colombo mob chieftain John (Sonny) Franzese. His testimony helped send his father back to prison for eight years at the age of 93.

Though still in hiding and living under a new name because of threats against his life, Franzese has taken the highly unusual step of leaving the protection program. He told Newsday he is tired of having to move at a moment's notice because of death threats, misses being able to talk to his family and trusts that his story will have meaning to others.

"I believe in my life now," he said.

Once a Mafia scion from Roslyn with special cachet because of his last name, he said he hung out with top mobsters, music industry executives and Hollywood producers. Today, he lives quietly and anonymously in a space that reflects what he said matters to him now: Crosses, spiritual sayings and books on philosophy and religion are scattered throughout.

He is 58 and is living with AIDS-related HIV, contracted after years of drug abuse that reduced him to stealing from family members and riding the subways to keep warm when he had no place to go. Franzese said he once pointed a pistol at the head of a close friend and another time sold the rims of an \$82,000 Jaguar his mother had given him for \$15 to get money for drugs.

"I lived like an animal," he said.

Sober since Oct. 9, 2001, Franzese said he has dedicated his life to following a 12-step program for people recovering from drug or alcohol addiction.

"He's probably one of the most spiritual people I know," said a close friend, whose name Newsday is withholding in order not to reveal where Franzese is.

Although he said he is happy with the decision he made to become a cooperating witness, Franzese is both defiant and pained at being called a rat. Under his new name and identity, he frequently speaks at high schools about drug abuse and points out that a teen who dies of a drug overdose almost always had friends who could have sounded a warning beforehand. A rat, he said, stops bad things from happening.

"I'm proud to be a rat," Franzese said, his eyes tearing. "You wanna call me a rat, fine."

### Family business

In 1970, when Franzese was 10 years old, his father began serving a 50-year sentence for conspiring to rob banks. Franzese said he remembers crying when he saw him in prison the first time, but his father never scolded him for that. In fact, he gently encouraged his son in letters from prison and reminded him of his love for him. He even sent him books. The first one was "The Prince," by Niccolò Machiavelli.

His brother, Michael, tried to step in as head of the family, he said, and got "straitened out," or inducted into the Mafia, on Halloween 1975. The next day, John Jr. recalled, Michael took him to a Chinese restaurant and explained the rules of Mafia life to him for the first time.

For John Jr., it was a welcome revelation. He finally understood why his family lacked the normality and warmth of other families. "I thought, 'Ahh, I'm not crazy!'"

When Sonny got out on parole the first time in 1978, he resumed his life of crime with his sons. John Jr., then a teenager, eagerly embraced his role in the family business but never felt like a full partner with his brother and father. "They always lied to me about money," he said.

John Jr. carried messages for his father, did stickups and hung out at a Colombo Family social club in Red Hook, Brooklyn, according to court records. "All the circles I traveled in treated these guys with great respect," he said.

He also developed a love affair with cocaine. He didn't like other drugs, but cocaine made him feel a little better, a little straighter. "For a minute or two, I recaptured myself," he said.

He'd binge, sober up, go to rehab and then relapse. Each time, his family took him in. He said he felt lucky that his father continued to take him along to business meetings.

He recalled an encounter during which they shook down a businessman for thousands of dollars a week in protection money. When the man protested, Sonny said to him, "How much is your life worth?" John Jr. said.

The younger Franzese said he walked out of there feeling proud of his father, thinking, "Hey, that's what it means to be a Franzese."



Mobster John (Sonny) Franzese leaves federal court in Brooklyn during his racketeering trial in 2010. Credit: Charles Edart

At the same time, however, he said he felt a nagging guilt at doing that and ultimately destroying the business by taking so much money. But the son rationalized it: "You stick with what you're stuck with," he said.

Other times, he said, his father made offhand comments that stunned him. He remembered the two of them walking into a body shop, where there were pools of acid on the floor. His father casually mentioned that acid was good for dissolving bones.

Though he has no illusions about his father's life of crime, Franzese, like other family members, is convinced that Sonny was not guilty of the bank robberies that sent him to prison for so many years. He said he thinks he might have been set up by a mob boss, Carlo Gambino or Joe Colombo. Gambino, said John Jr., never liked Sonny, and more people knew Sonny than Colombo.

"There was a lot of jealousy in the family," Franzese said.

### Turning point

Throughout the 1990s, Franzese said, he had periods of sobriety. In the mid-1990s, he became a confidential informant, working with FBI agent Robert Lewicki, according to records. He passed on information about his confederates. But when the FBI discovered he was using drugs again, the bureau stopped using him, he said.

In 2005, after several years of being sober, Franzese said, he got a call that would change his life. Lewicki said in an interview that he asked him to come "on board" as a cooperating witness. Previously, he had just been passing on information. This time, he was being asked to take on a more dangerous task — wearing a wire.

Lewicki and Franzese, just a year apart in age, both had attended Herricks High School in New Hyde Park and shared an affinity for the New York Jets, Lewicki said. They clicked.

Lewicki said he recalled telling him, "Listen, you know what, these guys ... They've never done anything for you. When you were down and out in the street, did anybody come to help you? Nobody did."

"And I said, 'You owe them nothing.'"

John Jr., meanwhile, had been working with Hollywood producers on a television show, he said. As word got out, Colombo associates suddenly showed up, he said, seeking a cut of the deal by entangling the producers.

"They never left me alone," he said.

There is, however, a truism in mob life: Once they're involved with you, they never let go.

Disgusted, he said, he called Lewicki, who recalled his saying two words: "I'm in."

They met at Christopher Morley Park in Roslyn. Unlike other cooperating witnesses, Franzese wasn't trying to work off a crime, Lewicki said. He was working at maintaining his sobriety and was so committed to his new life that he felt he needed to heal his past by making amends, Franzese said.

Although Lewicki made no promises, he convinced him that he had targets in mind other than his father and pointed out that John Jr. would not be of much use to him if he was in jail, according to both men. Franzese decided that if the FBI focused on other mob guys, he could keep his father out of prison by keeping them busy with other cases, which would also help his mother pay the bills.

"I thought my mom needed my dad here," he said.

Secretly taping mobsters was initially daunting.

The recording device was a square box, slightly smaller than a cellphone. It felt like a neon sign when he wore it, Franzese recalled. But when Lewicki finally came up with the idea of putting it in the pocket of cargo pants, he said he felt better.



John Franzese Jr. during an interview in March 2019. Credit: Rachel Brightman

Franzese focused on other Colombo guys, but his father would always walk in on the conversations, "issuing commands, like a general," Lewicki said. Franzese couldn't turn off the recorder. He caught his father making incriminating statements, including explaining to underlings the right way to extort a strip club, court papers show. Still, he felt safer with the government. When John Jr. arrived to testify at trial against his father and others, he said, the FBI zipped him up in a Kevlar body armor suit and transported him in a fortified SUV. Then he was transferred to a vault-like room until it was time to go to court.

When it came time to testify, Franzese felt a certain resolve. "I knew what I had committed to do," he said.

He looked over at the defense table and saw his father, who didn't look at him.

"He looked beaten, not because of the case, but because of me," he said.

### Father and son

Although prosecutors contended that Sonny had put a hit out on his son after he learned he was cooperating, John Jr. never believed it. His father, he said, always told him that, unlike other mob bosses, he would never hurt his own family.

After years in hiding, John Jr. decided he needed to confront that possibility himself. Traveling to New York was risky. He needed to do it quickly and quietly and avoid being seen by unfriendly people. But he felt nearly as much trepidation about his father's reaction to seeing him.

In February, the younger Franzese said he made a surprise visit to his father early one morning, when no family or friends were around. At first, he said, Sonny didn't recognize him. John Jr. had lost a lot of weight and wears the ravages of years of hard living on his face.

Finally, he said, "Dad, it's John."

"John!" Sonny cried out, immediately embracing him, he remembers.

His father gently admonished him for testifying against him, John Jr. said, wagging his finger and saying that it "wasn't nice."

"I never meant to hurt you," Franzese replied, explaining that he had been testifying against "the life."

He said Sonny replied: "Well, you're my son, and I love you. But you've always been crazy."

It was the moment John Jr. needed, he said. "I knew he was going to tell me he loved me."

He added, "My dad showed up, not Sonny Franzese."

But over the years, the dad had honed a keen sense of caution. He refused to take a photo with his son and, as the time passed, he got nervous because other people were expected to visit, John Jr. said.

He hustled his son out before he could be seen.

By **Sandra Peadar and Robert Cassidy**  
sandra.pedar@newsday.com robert.cassidy@newsday.com @SandraPedar, @RobertCassidy  
Sandra Peadar has been a special writer on Newsday's investigations team since 1993. She has won more than 50 journalism awards and was a finalist for the Public Service Pulitzer Prize in 2014.