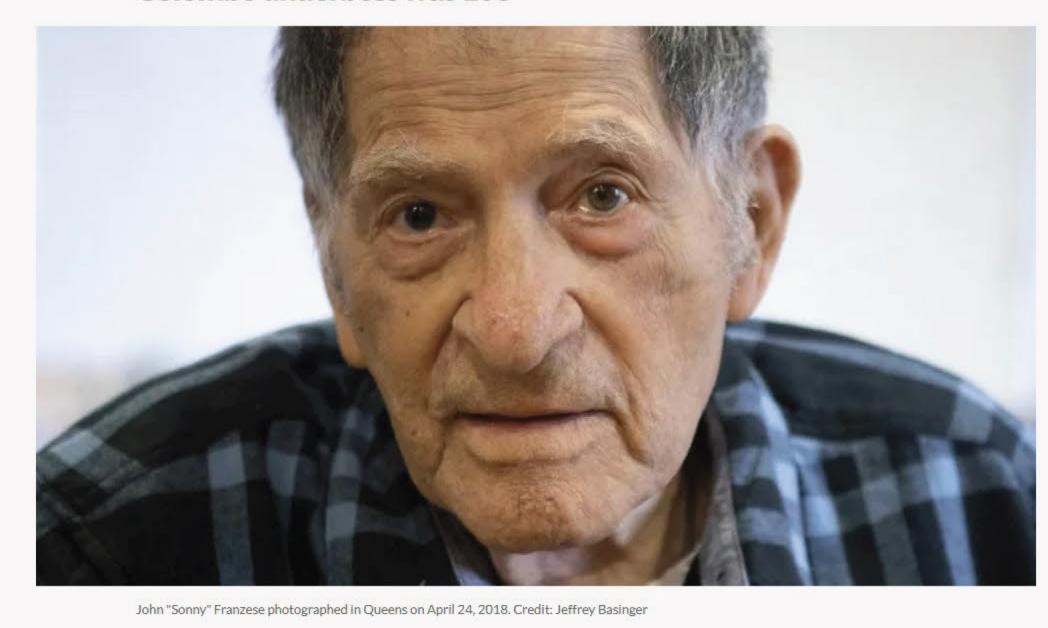
LONG ISLAND / OBITUARIES John 'Sonny' Franzese dead, family says; longtime Colombo underboss was 103



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By Sandra Peddie

The SHARE

John (Sonny) Franzese, the charismatic and fearsome longtime Colombo underboss, died Sunday after a brief illness at the age of 103, according to family members.

He died in a veterans hospital in New York City, 2½ years after being released from a prison medical center as the oldest inmate in the federal prison system. Formerly of Roslyn, he had been living in a Queens nursing home.

Franzese had been considered a rising star in the Mafia until he was sentenced to 50 years in federal prison in 1967 for masterminding a string of bank robberies across the country – a crime he insisted he did not commit. Although he was paroled multiple times, he repeatedly violated his parole by associating with other felons and wound up spending more than 35 years behind bars.

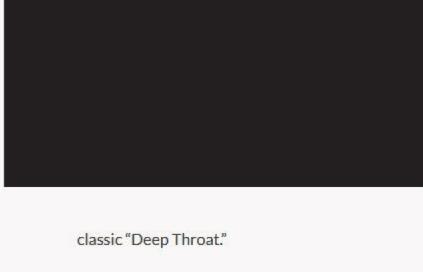
Over the past 18 months, Sonny Franzese granted a series of exclusive interviews to Newsday. He was hobbled by a litany of physical ailments, but exercised daily in a determined effort to regain his health. He spoke freely about his life of

In court papers, authorities once accused him of being responsible for 40-50 murders by the late 1960s, but he was

"The last 50 years of his life, who would've wanted it?" said his son Michael, who left the mob life in the late 1980s

after his criminal conviction for racketeering and extortion and became an evangelical pastor.

"We've had some tough times, but I loved him, and I know he loved me," Michael said.



never convicted of homicide.

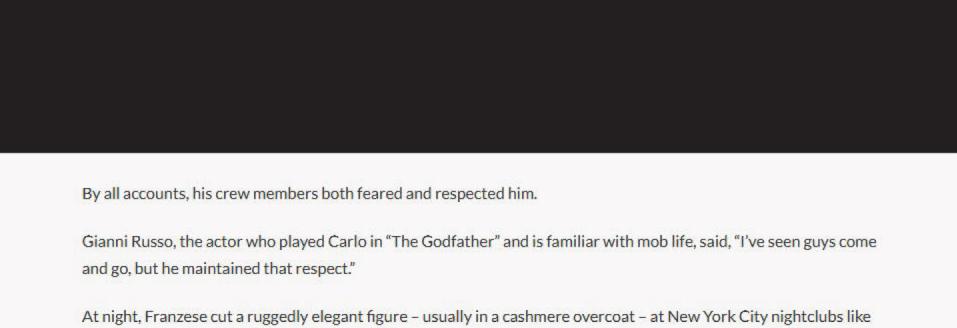
Law enforcement authorities said that at the height of his influence, he controlled half the bookmakers on Long Island, as well as an array of loan sharking and extortion enterprises on the Island and in New York City. He also had silent interests in hit record labels and helped finance the porn

crime, but never acknowledged the existence of the Mafia.

"I never hurt nobody that was innocent," he maintained in one Newsday interview.



confederates who held court at their ostentatious Long Island estates, Franzese and his family lived more modestly



was a magnet."

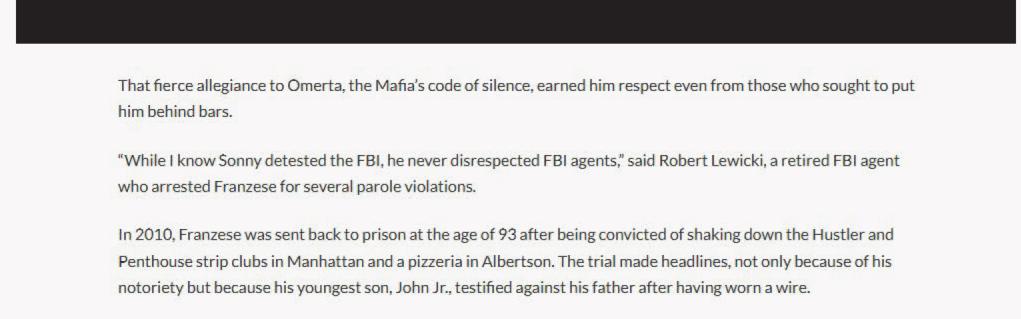
in a well-kept Colonial on Shrub Hollow Lane in Roslyn.

When Franzese was sentenced to the 50-year prison term, he vowed to do the "whole 50," Michael said. The sentence was indeterminate; if Franzese went along with federal authorities and cooperated, he would get out of prison earlier. He never did.

"They wanted me to roll all the time," Franzese told Newsday. "I couldn't do that. Because it's my principle."

the Copacabana and Latin Quarter. Although he was married with children, Franzese claimed to have had affairs

with countless starlets and other glamorous women. One friend, boxing gym operator Tommy Gallagher, said, "He



Queens. He said he told his father he had never meant to hurt him, and his father replied: "Well, you're my son, and I love you. But you've always been crazy."

As a result of his cooperation, John Jr., a recovering drug addict who contracted HIV from a dirty needle, entered the Witness Protection Program. Last year, he emerged from hiding and visited his father at his nursing home in

Moments later, he shooed his son out of the nursing home before anyone he knew could take note of John's presence. Franzese is survived by two daughters, Maryanne Shinn of Wethersfield, Conn., and Lorraine Scorsone, of Brooklyn, and three sons: Carmine Franzese of the Bronx, Michael of Los Angeles and John Jr. Two daughters, Gia and Christine, predeceased him. Visitation will be from 2 to 5 p.m. and 7 to 9 p.m. on Wednesday and Thursday at B. Anastasio & Son Inc. in Brooklyn. A funeral Mass will be said at 9:30 a.m. Friday at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, followed by burial at St. John's Cemetery in Middle Village, Queens.

Sandra Peddie has been a special writer on Newsday's investigations team since 1993. She has won more than 50 journalism awards

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