



LONG ISLAND / OBITUARIES

John 'Sonny' Franzese dead, family says; longtime Colombo underboss was 103



John "Sonny" Franzese photographed in Queens on April 24, 2018. Credit: Jeffrey Bastingar

By Sandra Peddie
sandra.peddie@newsday.com X@SandraPeddie
February 24, 2020

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.



"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.



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 crime, but never acknowledged the existence of the Mafia.

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

classic "Deep Throat."

In court papers, authorities once accused him of being responsible for 40-50 murders by the late 1960s, but he was never convicted of homicide.

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



John "Sonny" Franzese (center) is led back to a police car on December 29, 1966 after visiting the funeral parlor in Brooklyn where his mother, Mrs. Maria Carolina Franzese, was laid out. Sonny had been granted three hours leave from prison to pay his respects to his mother, but was denied leave to attend her funeral the following day because of security concerns. Credit: Newsday/Marvin Sussman

As he moved up the ranks of the Mafia hierarchy, Franzese defied mob stereotypes by eschewing the wine-filled lunches favored by other mobsters and adhered to a disciplined daily work schedule. And unlike some of his confederates who held court at their ostentatious Long Island estates, Franzese and his family lived more modestly in a well-kept Colonial on Shrub Hollow Lane in Roslyn.



By all accounts, his crew members both feared and respected him.

Gianni Russo, the actor who played Carlo in "The Godfather" and is familiar with mob life, said, "I've seen guys come and go, but he maintained that respect."

At night, Franzese cut a ruggedly elegant figure — usually in a cashmere overcoat — at New York City nightclubs like 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 was a magnet."

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."



That fierce allegiance to Omerta, the Mafia's code of silence, earned him respect even from those who sought to put him behind bars.

"While I know Sonny detested the FBI, he never disrespected FBI agents," said Robert Lewicki, a retired FBI agent who arrested Franzese for several parole violations.

In 2010, Franzese was sent back to prison at the age of 93 after being convicted of shaking down the Hustler and Penthouse strip clubs in Manhattan and a pizzeria in Albertson. The trial made headlines, not only because of his notoriety but because his youngest son, John Jr., testified against his father after having worn a wire.

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 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."



Moments later, he shoed 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.

By Sandra Peddie
sandra.peddie@newsday.com X@SandraPeddie
Sandra Peddie 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.

