

LOCAL NEWS

## Ex-mafioso in Anaheim Hills now serves God, not the mob



Michael Franzese, a former mobster, has made a movie about his life, daughter Julia plays the role of her mother.

By ART MARROQUIN | Orange County Register  
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ANAHEIM – After countless menial tasks to prove loyalty, Michael Franzese pledged his life to the Colombo crime family on Halloween in 1975.

Six men took the oath that night inside a Brooklyn catering hall.

Of those, Franzese is the only one alive today – a feat that the born-again Christian attributes to a loving wife, turning away from the mob and dedicating his life to God.

“When we take the oath and violate the policy, then we pay with our life,” said Franzese, a former New York mobster now living in Anaheim Hills.

Franzese’s life as a captain in La Cosa Nostra and his subsequent redemption are chronicled in “God the Father,” set for release Friday in 20 cities across the country, including Cinema City Theatres in Anaheim and the Krikorian Buena Park Metroplex.

The biographical film is premiering on the 39th anniversary of his induction into organized crime – a coincidence, Franzese said. But it reminds that the past haunts his present life.

Franzese, 63, got another death threat just last week.

“I don’t think too many people are going to be happy about this movie coming out,” Franzese said while sipping bottled sparkling water at his favorite Italian restaurant, Baci di Firenze Trattoria in Anaheim.

“I’m not worried about it, but neither do I sell my associates short,” he said. “I don’t take anything for granted.”

Forget “Goodfellas,” “Donnie Brasco” and “The Sopranos.” Rather than glorifying life as a mobster, Franzese said he wanted to tell his story through the prism of atonement.

Documentary-style interviews, stock news footage, dance sequences and recreations tell Franzese’s tale in the 103-minute movie, shot over two years in Bulgaria, Israel and Baton Rouge, La.

Animated scenes display graphic violence and “some of the things that might have occurred,” Franzese said.

His 16-year-old daughter, Julia Franzese, plays her mother in the movie’s dance sequences.

“I was never really aware of my father’s past, because I never really took the time to think about it,” she said. “Watching the movie has been a real eye-opener into his life. But I think my father had to go through all that to be the man and the father that he is now.”

During the early 1970s, Franzese gave up pre-med studies at Hofstra University on Long Island to follow in the footsteps of his father, John “Sonny” Franzese, an underboss for the Colombo crime family.

Michael Franzese said he quickly rose through the ranks to become a capo, or captain, bringing in close to \$10 million per week by pocketing state and federal taxes through a bootleg gasoline operation.

Because he brought in so much cash, Franzese said that he wasn’t asked to kill anyone.

“I was one of the guys who earned money, and there were other guys who did this kind of work,” Franzese said carefully. “But, I can’t say that I’m not responsible in a way, because I was a part of it, if you understand what I’m saying.”

When he met Camille Garcia on the set of a movie he produced, “Knights of the City,” in 1984, Franzese was instantly smitten with the dancer from Anaheim and came back to Orange County to meet her family.

“I had an idea that he was in the Mafia, but I didn’t know how much he was involved,” Anaheim community activist Seferino Garcia said about first meeting his future son-in-law.

“I knew my daughter loved him, and he loved her, and they were very sincere about how serious they were,” Garcia said. “But my wife and I made an ultimatum: He had to quit the mob if they were going to get married.”

Franzese said he tried to distance himself from a life in organized crime by the time the couple married in July 1985. Five months later, he was imprisoned after pleading guilty to racketeering and extortion charges connected to the gasoline-tax scheme.

After serving 43 months of a 10-year federal prison sentence, Franzese returned to Anaheim to be with his wife – and so that the authorities could not accuse him of violating parole by associating with the Colombo family.

Franzese was arrested again in 1991 for violating his probation.

“They came up with a minor charge, mainly because I wouldn’t testify” against the Colombo family, Franzese said.

He was thrown in “the hole” and kept isolated for his safety during most of that three-year sentence. The solitude gave Franzese time to reflect on his life while reading the Bible and about 300 books about religion sent by his wife.

“My faith penetrated my heart and my mind while I was in the hole,” Franzese said. “I honestly believe that if I didn’t go back to jail for a second time, then I would probably be dead or behind bars forever.”

Franzese has led a relatively quiet life in Anaheim Hills since his last release from prison in 1994, writing several books about his life and working as a motivational speaker for athletes, law enforcement officers and students.

He regularly attends Eastside Christian Church in Anaheim. Pastor Gene Appel said that Franzese’s life story “is so compelling.”

“There’s a fascination we have about the Mafia, but he’s one of the few guys who actually lived it, managed to walk away, and lived to tell about it,” Appel said.

“His story gives hope to anyone who really wants to change and not be doomed by the actions of their past.”