



FORMER
MOBSTER,
CURRENT
AUTHOR AND
MOTIVATIONAL
SPEAKER

Michael Franzese

This retired criminal tells why he didn't become a doctor, went to prison and is now just a good fella.

We've all seen *The Godfather* trilogy. But Michael Franzese lived it. At least Part One. Parts Two and Three he wisely rewrote for himself. Literally, it turns out, in his books *Quitting the Mob*, *Blood Covenant* and *I'll Make You An Offer You Can't Refuse*, a book on business strategies due out in early 2009.

But that's his current life, after Part Two, which wasn't so glamorous. Once known as the "Yuppie Don" due to his good looks and penchant for living more like a Hollywood movie star than a wise

guy, as a captain of New York's infamous Colombo crime family, Franzese at one time made more money for the Mafia than any man since Al Capone. He specialized in white-collar crime – skimming profits off of legitimate businesses, organizing illegal tax schemes and gambling.

And though there is no evidence that Franzese has ever killed a man – the normal mob initiation – like Al Pacino's character, Franzese was pulled against his will into "the life" because of love and loyalty to his father, reputed Colombo underboss John "Sonny" Franzese. Not that Franzese would

ever ask for anyone's sympathy. "I was as bad a guy as anybody out there. I should be dead or in jail. That would be just restitution for me... For some reason, God said, 'That's not going to happen to you,'" he told *Cigar Aficionado* magazine.

At least not permanently. Franzese did spend eight years in a federal penitentiary. And one could argue that God did sentence him, since it was part of a plea Franzese made after meeting the love of his life, Anaheim-born Camille, whom he's been married to for 23 years. With her as inspiration, Franzese pled guilty to federal racketeering, tax conspiracy and 65 other federal counts, took a 10-year sentence, paid \$15 million in restitution, and privately renounced the mob, promising to walk away. When that last part – denouncing the mob – became public "everything went crazy," he says. There were mob contracts out on his life and FBI pressure to join the witness protection program and roll over on his former associates. Neither came to pass; instead Franzese moved to Southern California after prison and went more public, speaking to professional and college athletes about the dangers of gambling, setting up a nonprofit organization for kids called Breaking Out, writing books about his former life and even wedding in time to coach Little League. So whether or not you forgive Franzese for that former life, you need to hear what he has to say. It's an offer you really can't refuse.

Were you always destined to be in the Mafia?

No. My dad wanted me to get an education and become a professional, which I wanted as well. In fact, I was a pre-med student when my dad got a 50-year prison sentence after being convicted in a major federal bank robbery case. So in 1970, he went to Leavenworth [federal penitentiary]. Since he was 50 when he went in, we didn't think he was going to come home. So obviously, our entire family was devastated. We kept trying to appeal but the cost was high.

Is that why you turned to "the life?"

Yes. I was really influenced by the guys who were telling me my dad was the boss of the family and I had to get out on the

street and help him out financially, help him beat this case. Besides, I always thought and still believe that my dad was framed on that particular case and I think there's enough evidence to show that he really had a bad deal. So that motivated me a lot.

How were you brought in?

I visited my dad in Leavenworth and told him I was going a different direction than school. He was disappointed but said if I was going to be out on the street I had to do it the right way. He told me to go home and someone would be in touch with me. I was picked up by a captain in the family and taken to see the boss and it started from that point.

Did your dad hide his world from you when you were a boy?

It was never hidden because my dad was a very public figure. He had a lot of notoriety and was a major target of law enforcement and the media. So we always had agents surveying us. And the tactics were very different back then than they are today. Back then, when they were watching a guy regarding organized crime, they wanted him to know about it, so for a period of seven or eight years, their cars were parked around our house 24 hours a day, seven days a week. When we left, they would follow us. And my dad's friends would come over and he didn't have a normal job, so even though he didn't talk about it, I knew.

At your height, you led a pretty exotic and comfortable life.

I don't think comfortable is ever the word. Yes, I was making an incredible amount of money. I was very motivated when I got into it. I was motivated to help my dad and I was motivated to make money. As my dad told me, money translates to power. And I wanted to be the best possible mob guy I could be. That's who I was. I was an athlete and I always tried to excel. So I attacked [the mob life] full force. But you can never get comfortable. It's a pretty treacherous life. You've always got to be concerned about those around you. And then of course I became a major target for law enforcement and they were on me all the time. And I mean all the time. I was always won-

dering if someone was an undercover agent or if my car or phone or car was bugged. So I could never really relax.

How did your sports gambling ring work?

I had a number of bookmakers that I controlled and a couple of them had athletes gambling with them. An athlete in trouble with a bookmaker can provide an edge, whether it be shaving points or providing information. If an athlete is gambling with you and he's losing money, that's the natural trap he's going to fall into. It happened quite a bit. Many of them love to gamble; it's an extension of their competitiveness.

How would you gain control?

We would lure them in. I'd give them as much credit as needed to get them buried and once they were buried, I'd make the approach. I'll give you a perfect example. You get a [college] athlete in trouble. He owes a couple thousand dollars and has no way out. So you sit him down and ask, "How you going to pay me?" "I don't know." "Then let me tell you how you're going to do it." Basketball is the easiest. One guy can affect the outcome of a game fairly easily. So you tell him the deal: "Tomorrow night, you're favored to win by 10 points. Don't win by 10. Win by six, seven, but don't cover the spread. Then we'll get you out of the hole. As a matter of fact, you do this a few more times and we'll even put money in your pocket." Then you give them a little advance. Because, if you put \$10,000 in front of these kids, forget about it. You've got 'em. They see that kind of money laying on the table. You've got 'em.

Were athletes without a gambling debt ever targeted?

Sure. We had a really good network, so you approach maybe a senior guard and tell him he's a pretty good player but we both know he's not going pro. So you say, "You've only got a few games left. You've got no money in your pocket, your girlfriend's pregnant and you're driving around in an old bomb of a car..." Whatever. "Why don't you make some money? I'll tell you how to do it." Then you pull out that \$10,000.

Do you ever encounter athletes with gambling problems today?

Whenever I give a presentation, I tell college athletes who have a gambling issue that they can e-mail me. I don't report to the NCAA or the school. They can do it anonymously if they want, but I let them know I want to help them. By the time I get back to my hotel room I have a number of e-mails and more follow in the next few days. Every single time. I've appeared at over 300 schools and it has never failed.

A woman, not the FBI or prison, turned you away from the mob. How?

I was filming a breakdance movie in Florida and [Camille] was one of about 50 dancers we brought in from a professional dance company. I wanted to meet her, but she didn't want anything to do with me. But I finally got a date and I fell in love with her immediately. But she was a good Christian and I realized that she was never going to be able to handle my life. No way. [The mob life] is pretty treacherous. It's not the honor and respect and all that it's supposed to be. However, I still would never have thought of walking away. Until I met her. Everything changed and I decided I was going to try to walk away, marry her, move to California and live happily ever after.

But it wasn't that easy.

No. Even though I had been indicted and tried four times and I beat all of them, they were preparing another racketeering case against me and I knew I couldn't beat them forever. So my plan became to take a plea on that case, do some time, then move out to California and hope that everyone back in New York would forget about me. I was trying to do it low-key, but that didn't happen.

What went wrong?

I had to publicly renounce the mob, and when that happened, my boss went pretty crazy. Same with all the guys because they thought I was going to start cooperating. And the FBI put a lot of pressure on me to cooperate, saying that they had gotten word on the street that I was going to get killed, that there was a contract out. I was in a lot of trouble.

Did you regret your decision

while in prison?

No, because I knew it was part of making the change in my life.

Do you still worry about the FBI or the mob coming after you?

I don't worry about the government coming after me because in the last 12 years the people who had it in for me have all retired. And in the last 10 years, I've done seminars for the FBI and the sheriff's department and gained their respect and friendship. So they don't have it in for me anymore.

And the mob?

If I moved back to Brooklyn, I wouldn't last 24 hours. But I've outlasted almost everybody who'll come after me. They're all either dead or in prison for the rest of their lives. The boss who had it in for me is doing life in Lompoc and we had a war back in 1989 to 1990 and a bunch of guys got killed.

How did your life as a speaker and writer come about?

It wasn't a plan. I'm not one of those guys who says they found religion and now want to go out and help everybody. In fact, in prison I was trying to figure out what I was going to do for a living once I got out. I had the government and the guys in New York mad at me. I'd be in Southern California, like a fish out of water, and I couldn't get a normal job because of my record. But then, when I had about six months left to go, the FBI asked me to participate in an anti-gambling video that all four major leagues were producing – the NBA, NFL, NHL, and MLB. I was reluctant at first, especially about going public, but I finally did it.

And when you got out?

Major League Baseball approached me directly about speaking to their players, because the major leagues are paranoid about gambling. If people think that games are not legit, they've really got an issue. So I traveled to every team in spring training in 1996 and the feedback was so great the NBA asked me to do the same thing. Suddenly, I was making a living doing this.

To learn more about Michael Franzese's story, visit www.michaelfranzese.com.