

Ex-mob boss going straight

Former 'Yuppie Don' testifies to power of a higher authority

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NEW FAIRFIELD -- It wasn't the kind of testimony that federal organized crime investigators wanted from Michael Franzese 20 years ago.

And it probably wouldn't have done much to assuage Franzese's former associates in the Colombo family, who marked the "Yuppie Don" for death after he walked away from La Cosa Nostra in 1990.

But for the members of the New Life Community Church, Franzese's story about his transformation from a life of crime to one filled with good works was proof that no one is beyond salvation.

"It was an amazing story," said Dan Postupack, an usher at the church and a member of the congregation for nearly 10 years. "

It's just an incredible example of how God works in each and every life."

Franzese, once a capo in one of the country's most powerful organized crime families, is now a nationally known motivational speaker and author. For the past five years, he's traveled around he country, speaking to church groups about the changes he's undergone since accepting God into his life. This weekend, he was a guest at the church, located on Beaver Bog Road, where the pastor, the Rev. Chuck Ferrara, is a former New York City cop and organized crime investigator.

"I was very moved by his story," Ferrara said. He invited Franzese to speak after reading two of his books over the summer.

Franzese, a Brooklyn, N.Y. native, grew up in the mob because his father, Sonny Franzese, also was a "made man." His father wanted him to go to school and become a doctor, but at he age of 22, Franzese dropped out of college and followed in his father's footsteps, in part to earn money to help keep his father out of jail.

"He was the John Gotti of his day," Franzese said. "I grew up hating the police, because they were trying to lock up my dad and they were always harassing my family. It wasn't until later that I realized that they were the good guys, and we were the bad guys. "

At his peak, Michael Franzese had 300 men

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under his control, and made hundreds of millions of dollars for the mob. To the national media, he was "a prince of the mob," the "Yuppie Don," and was the target of local state and federal organized crime investigators, who tried five times to bring him to justice.

Each time, he was acquitted at trial, and "was at the top of his game" when he met the woman who became his wife, and started thinking about leaving his old life behind, he said.

But it wasn't until his conviction on tax fraud and racketeering charges in the late 1980s, and he was faced with losing everything, including his wife and his children, that he finally hit bottom.

"If you put your hand in the fire long enough, you're going to get burned. When the government wants to get you, they get you good," he said. "God put me in a position where I had no one to turn to but Him."

Still, he was faced with the reality that the only way to leave behind his old life was to go into the witness protection program or to be killed. His decision to embrace God was seen as weakness by his fellow mobsters. Nevertheless, he refused all government efforts to get him to testify against them.

It's only in the last few years that he's raised his profile by speaking and writing, and until recently, when he visited a church in New

Jersey, did he return to the East Coast.

"I was still concerned. I didn't want to throw anything in the faces of my former friends and associates," he said.

Franzese acknowledged people have ample reason to be cynical about his motives, and that some of those who come to hear him speak do so "because 'The Sopranos' aren't on TV anymore and they want to hear the mob guy."

But he noted the Apostle Paul was once a murderer "whose job was to kill Christians" before he found God.

"Being good is overrated. It's about being saved," Franzese said.

Jacqueline Scarva, a new member of the church, agreed.

"Being a Christian doesn't mean everything goes smoothly for you. Where he comes from, he shouldn't be here today," she said.

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