

Preaching on savior he couldn't refuse

A convicted mobster gives South Barrington congregation window into his redemption

By Robert Channick | Special to the Tribune
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With jury deliberations continuing in Chicago's Family Secrets mob trial, a convicted New York mobster was offering testimony of his own this weekend before thousands of people at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington.

Owning up to a colorful and lucrative 17-year criminal career, Michael Franzese, a former captain with the Colombo family of New York, credited a higher power with his reformation.

"Before God changed my heart, I was a pretty bad person," said Franzese, 55, who found religion in a jail cell in 1991. "If I was left to my own to handle my resources in my life, I wouldn't be here today. I would have made the wrong decisions -- I would either be dead or in prison for the rest of my life."

Franzese, who often speaks at churches, is the author of two books on his experiences, runs a youth outreach program and lectures athletes on the dangers of gambling.

Born into "the life" as the son of Colombo underboss John "Sonny" Franzese, now serving a 50-year federal prison sentence, the younger Franzese abandoned premed studies at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., in 1970 to follow in his father's footsteps.

Elevated to captain in 1980, Franzese was a rising star who raked in untold millions through diverse ventures involving sports agents, car dealerships, union kickbacks and a gasoline-tax scheme.

"I was succeeding pretty well in that life," Franzese said Saturday. "I was very motivated to make money. It was never on my radar screen, ever, ever, to walk away from that life."

The first catalyst for change occurred in 1985 on the Florida set of "Knights of the City," a break-dancing movie that Franzese produced. Smitten with Camille Garcia, a 19-year-old dancer from California, he doggedly pursued and soon married the devout Christian, opening his mind, if not his heart, to her beliefs.

Indicted later that year, Franzese pleaded guilty to racketeering and was sentenced to 10 years in federal prison, of which he served five. Renouncing his former life, he was disowned by both his father and the Colombo family.

In 1991, a parole violation landed him back in jail, and threatened with a 50-year sentence from federal authorities and a death sentence from his former mob associates, Franzese was despondent.

"I remember that night so vividly because my heart hurt so much that night," he said. "I was looking at that little cot, and I just wanted to lay myself down on that bed and just never wake up again."

Given a Bible that night by a guard making rounds, Franzese emerged from his 3-year prison term as born-again Christian, a conversion that raised more than a few eyebrows.

Still preaching the gospel more than a decade later, Franzese elicited a standing ovation from nearly 4,000 congregants Saturday night in the first of three services there as guest speaker.

"To be quite honest with you, I was skeptical," said Rev. Gene Appel, lead pastor of Willow Creek. "I've watched him for several years, and here's what I've become convinced of: He's the real deal."

Franzese's appearance wasn't scheduled to coincide with the high-profile Chicago mob case, but Appel said he was grateful for the timing of his unusual guest speaker, who brought out many curiosity-seekers this weekend.

"Chicago is kind of infamous for organized crime, and I thought it would be an important thing that we could try to bring something redeeming out of an organized crime story," Appel said.

Still not welcome in Brooklyn, N.Y., Franzese said, he looks over his shoulder less and less, thanks to the passage of time and the lessons of his faith.

"When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, even his enemies are at peace with him," he said, roughly quoting his favorite proverb.

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