

Penn State Forum Speaker Series
September 12, 2008
Michael Franzese
“Life Choices, Life Stories”

Mobster turned motivational speaker, Michael Franzese, kicked off the Penn State Forum Speaker Series on Friday, September 12, with “Life Choices, Life Stories.” The former Capo of New York’s Colombo crime family spoke about his life in the Mafia and the road to redemption.

“If you told me 13 years ago that I would be standing here talking to you today, I would have said you were crazy,” Franzese said to the crowd of 370 gathered in the Nittany Lion Inn ballroom. “I thought I’d either be in prison for the rest of my life or dead.”

The audience, made up of Penn State faculty, staff and students, listened as Franzese explained how a pre-med student attending Hofstra University could become one of the most successful criminals in the country.

“My dad, Sonny, was an underboss in the Colombo crime family back in the 1960s” said Franzese. “He originally didn’t want this life for me and told me, ‘Son you need an education.’”

Franzese, dressed in a black suit with a maroon-and-black-striped shirt, recalled dropping out of school after his father was arrested and sentenced to 50 years in prison.

“I wanted to help my dad and make some money,” he said. “So my dad told me, ‘If you need to be on the street, you need to be on the street the right way.’”

The former student-athlete remembered entering the world of crime and learning quickly that “it’s not a business. It’s a way of life.” This became a reality when he was formally inducted into the Mafia.

“It was Halloween night, 1975, and I was sworn in as a member with six other guys,” said Franzese. “We took a blood oath and pledged our loyalty to the family above all other things.”

A skilled businessman, Franzese explained how he earned hundreds of millions of dollars for the Colombo family. His many ventures included the wholesale gasoline business, sports gambling and producing movies. It was on the set of a movie that he met and fell in love with his future wife, Camille.

“It was never on my radar screen to give up this life,” said Franzese. “You just don’t do it, but if I was going to spend my life with her I would have to make changes.”

After pleading guilty to a racketeering charge and spending almost a decade in prison, Franzese successfully quit the mob. He did so without testifying or government protection.

The former capo gushed about the inspiration Camille has been and the lessons learned during their 23 years of marriage.

“Sometimes you’ve got to stop and look at your life,” he said. “But most importantly you must surround yourself with the right people.”

When he is not delivering motivational speeches or speaking to athletes about the dangers of gambling, Franzese told the crowd he enjoys spending time with Camille and his five children. The ex-convict even coached his son in little league baseball.

“It was the most rewarding experience of my life,” Franzese said of his time with the team. “The best thing I’ve ever done.”

Following his speech, Franzese answered questions from the audience. He was asked what he missed most about his former lifestyle. “We had a lot of good times,” said Franzese. “There was the intrigue of this brotherhood, and I really miss that camaraderie.”

As for the men Franzese was sworn in with on that fateful night. “Those six guys I was with that night are all dead,” he said. “Not one of them died of natural causes.”

Nicholas Pizzino
Journalism, Political Science
Fall 2008