



Joseph Bonanno Sr., 1936

IN 1971 GAY TALESE PUBLISHED "HONOR THY FATHER." THE product of six years spent with mafioso Bill Bonanno as he evaded police and sidestepped rivals fighting for control of the powerful New York Mafia family founded by his father, Joseph (Joe Bananas) Bonanno, Talese's book was the first work of nonfiction to break omertà, the code of silence, and capture the strange combination of the menacing and the mundane that defines the life of the modern mafioso. Bonanno could be violent, charming, selfish or thoughtful—but he was always human. The next year, "The Godfather" arrived in theaters. Grand and operatic, it went on, with its 1974 sequel, to win nine Oscars. But Francis Ford Coppola's story wasn't true. Talese's was.

Now, three and a half decades later, audiences have been infatuated with the story of another fictional Mafia clan, the Sopranos—and Talese has again persuaded their real-life counterparts to talk. Like "Honor Thy Father," "The Sopranos"—which just concluded its six-season run—is a domestic drama that emphasizes characters over crimes, grit over glamour, family over "the family." In its final episodes (especially the shocking—and inconclusive—series finale) the show focused on the question at the heart of Talese's book: born with Mafia blood and a Mafia name, what kind of life can a Bonanno (or Soprano) hope to lead? Following the success of "Honor Thy Father," Talese diverted the profits into an educational trust designed to pay for any higher education the children of Bill and Rosalie Bonanno chose to pursue. For those looking for closure on one Mafia tale, in this NEWSWEEK exclusive, Talese returns to the Bonanno home in Tucson, Ariz., and reports on how Charles, Joseph, Felippa and Salvatore, now in their 40s, have grappled with being children of the Cosa Nostra at the start of the 21st century.

Tony Soprano's Mafia family was fictional. Joe Bonanno's was not. Gay Talese reveals what happened to the next generation of the American mob.

Honor Thy Family



BY GAY TALESE

I FIRST MET CHARLES BONANNO IN NEW YORK IN THE mid-1960s when he was a timid and often terrified adolescent living in a Mafia household where the sofas and floors were regularly occupied at night by snoring bodyguards whose outstretched legs Charles often tripped over in the morning on his way to school, once splitting open his head on a piece of furniture and leaving a trail of blood along the rug.

This was a time of martial law within the Mafia, and the 450-man Bonanno organization was central to the conflict. In 1964, when Charles was 6, his Sicilian-born grandfather, Joseph Bo-



THEN AND NOW: Left, the Bonanno family, from New York, in 1970; left to right: Charles, Salvatore, Rosalie (mother), Felippa, Bill (father) and Joseph; above, members of the Bonanno family together again in Arizona in 2007

nanno—a leading mafioso in America since the 1930s era of Prohibition—was suddenly overtaken one night by armed gunmen on Park Avenue South in Manhattan and driven off toward what the next day's tabloids would speculate was his final destination. More than a year later, with still no public evidence of the existence of Joseph Bonanno—he was still in hiding—Charles's 31-year-old father, Bill Bonanno, while en route to negotiate a settlement with quarreling factions, was nearly killed in a late-night ambush in which 20 bullets ricocheted off the sidewalks and brick buildings in a area of Brooklyn that the Bonanno leadership had long seen as friendly territory.

Bill Bonanno remained in hiding for several days while his wife, Rosalie, dwelled with her four children—and the bodyguards—behind the lowered shades of her suburban home in East Meadow, on Long Island. Police cars cruised regularly along their street, and sometimes members of the press gathered along the sidewalk taking pictures and approaching the Bonanno children as they walked together toward the nearby school: "Where's your grandfather?" they asked, usually directing the question to the eldest one, Charles, who had recently turned 8, and unhesitating-

ly assumed the role of the senior family spokesman. "We don't know," he said. "And what about your father?" "We don't know," he repeated, continuing to lead his siblings at a steady pace toward the school.

I actually knew where their father was during this time, for Bill had rung the doorbell of my apartment in Manhattan shortly after he had been set up to be killed in Brooklyn. I had met him a year earlier, in 1965, during my final year as a staff writer on *The New York Times*, having covered the story of his being subpoenaed by federal authorities in New York demanding to know the whereabouts of his father, Joseph, the patriarch of the clan. Bill told them that he did not know, a response that would earn him five months in jail for civil contempt. While after his release I pursued Bonanno often for interviews, always without success, he did agree from time to time to see me "off the record" and have dinner in certain New York restaurants where he never needed a reservation. And during the winter of 1966 I gained not only his confidence but visitation rights to his home on Long Island, where I gradually came to know his wife and four children: the green-eyed adopted Charles (obtained at 18 months from a cocktail waitress in San Diego who had been abandoned by a U.S. Navy man), and Charles's brown-eyed Bonanno kinsmen: 5-year-old Joseph (who was frail and sickly), 3-year-old Salvatore (who was pugnacious and liked wrestling with the bodyguards) and 2-year-old Felippa (who was spoiled and whose pierced ears held tiny diamond earrings).

I sometimes wondered what would happen to these children in later years. Would they inhabit homes without bodyguards?

Who would then protect them from their inherited notoriety? Would the younger Bonannos change their surnames? Would they deny their parents' backgrounds? To what degree could offspring of the Mafia later find social acceptance if they conformed to the laws of the larger community? As a source of continuing financial support, the Bonnano crime family was clearly in decline—this seemed obvious to me in 1971 when my book about the Bonannos ("Honor Thy Father") was published. The organization founded by Joseph Bonanno had already lost what crime journalists referred to as "the Banana War," and Bill Bonanno—exiled from New York with other loyalists—moved his wife and children to San Jose in northern California and spent the next several years of his life being either on the run or, as he phrased it, "being a guest of the government."

While he was serving a four-year term between 1971 and 1974 at Terminal Island near Los Angeles, having earlier been convicted in a federal trial in New York on charges of running up bills with a stolen credit card, Rosalie and children visited him regularly, although it was a long eight-hour car trip downstate. Invariably his wife returned home depressed by seeing him in clumpy shoes and a prison-issue khaki outfit with a drawstring waist, rather than his custom-made suits and expensive shoes of Italian design. But for her children the prison visits were joyous reunions, and Charles in particular liked the journey after he had received his driver's permit at 15 and could replace his mother behind the steering wheel.

TODAY, CHARLES BONANNO IS a 6-foot-2, 240-pound, 49-year-old bachelor who is currently contented with delivering all types of cargo coast to coast in an 18-wheel vehicle in which he also stores his golf clubs, his fishing tackle and clothing appropriate for wearing on those rare occasions when he takes women to dinner in places more refined than the roadside diners and fast-food drive-ins that he frequents when alone.

When I first met Charles he was hardly a good student. But he was excellent with his hands, repairing whatever his younger brothers and sister had broken, and he was equally adept at repairing and maintaining Rosalie's unreliable secondhand coupe. After graduation from high school, Charles worked in auto-repair shops and also became a welder. Unfortunately, in the 1980s, when he was in his mid-20s and eager to increase his income, he was identified by law-enforcement officials as an accomplice in a ring that traded in the sale of stolen auto parts, and so Charles spent a couple of years in the Jamestown correctional institution in northern California. There his father had an opportunity to visit him—indeed, it had been his father who had talked Charles out of his expressed desire to flee the country rather than surrender. "You can run away," Bill Bonanno told his son, "but you're still young, and you'll be spending the rest of your life looking over your shoulder."

After his release and his remaining out of trouble for the next 10 years while employed in a Costco auto-repair shop in Phoenix, Charles left to become an interstate truck driver. But his surname shadowed him. One day, after being assigned to

deliver merchandise from Fresno to British Columbia, he informed the dispatcher that he was not carrying a passport. "Oh, don't worry," came the reply, "you won't need it." At the Canadian border, after submitting his driver's license to a customs official who checked his credentials through a computer, the official turned to him and asked: "Are you in any way related to either Joseph Bonanno or Bill Bonanno?" "They're my grandfather and father," Charles answered, and the response was: "Well, then you're on the nonentry list."

Charles Bonanno returned across the border and, after notifying the dispatcher, he lived in his truck for three days until a second driver arrived with a packed van for him to deliver within the United States while the newly arrived driver took over Charles's van and proceeded with it into Canada.

The second Bonanno son, Joseph, grew up suffering from acute asthma, and during his grammar-school years in San Jose he frequently was unable to attend classes. But as a bedridden boy



FAMILY TIME: Talese (center) dining with Charles (left) and Joseph

he developed a fondness for reading and doing crossword puzzles, and, despite his many absences from school he easily managed to keep up with his fellow students. Rosalie cleaned and vacuumed his bedroom every day, and even removed the rug hoping it would reduce the presence of dust, but he nevertheless coughed constantly, spitting up phlegm.

After his condition had been brought to the attention of a physician specializing in treating young people with respiratory ailments, Joseph's health gradually improved. His doctor, an American of Japanese ancestry, was a delicately boned, willowy individual not much taller than Joseph, but his capacity for caring was enormous. He promptly and cheerfully appeared at the Bonanno residence whenever Rosalie telephoned, and it seemingly made no difference if the calls came late at night or during rainstorms—he was always at Joseph's bedside, a comforting and reassuring presence, and it was because of him that Joseph decided to become a doctor.

Joseph entered the University of Arizona as a premed student in the fall of 1978, and in 1987 he returned to Arizona as an intern in pediatrics at St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix. There he treated many young patients who reminded him of how he had felt as an ailing youngster two decades before, and he often comes to their bedsides attired in clothing that he hopes will cheer them up—his shirts and even his neckties depict a cast of well-

known characters from children's literature and Disney cartoons.

After he had been associated with the hospital for a year or more, he was approached by one of his senior medical colleagues, who, after complimenting him on his work, said: "You know, we almost didn't accept you here because of your name."

Dr. Joseph Bonanno married a woman he met as an undergraduate on the Arizona campus, and they now have three children. Attending their wedding and banquet in May 1986 was the entire Bonanno family, including the doctor's father—who, though then on trial in Sacramento on conspiracy charges, obtained permission from the judge to attend. During the banquet Dr. Bonanno was also in communication with his 81-year-old grandfather and namesake, Joseph Bonanno, then imprisoned for civil contempt at a federal facility in Lexington, Ky. He somehow managed to gain access to the warden's phone, and in a prideful tone of voice to the groom and bride he said through a speaker on the dais: "I regret that I cannot spend this

of the 2006 piece in *The Arizona Republic* he was working as a senior projects manager with a company under contract to install security systems within one of the casinos in Arizona located on an Indian reservation. On the day after the article appeared, Salvatore said, his boss informed him that he was being shifted from the casino job to another assignment because someone who had read the article believed it was bad public relations for a casino to be serviced by a member of the Bonanno family.

Infuriated, Salvatore resigned immediately from his \$90,000-a-year position, and would not reconsider his decision even after his employer had offered him a raise.

MOBS ON SCREEN:
Brando in 'The Godfather,' Gandolfini in 'The Sopranos'



Tony Soprano is a vulgar lowlife, he insists, lacking the shrewdness and dignified demeanor of his grandfather.

glorious day with you ... but as you know I am still on vacation in the Mediterranean Sea."

The elder Bonanno would die at 97 at his Tucson home in 2002.

The third child of Bill and Rosalie Bonanno, Salvatore, born in 1963, grew up to become an ill-tempered and combative youth who might have been a candidate for the Mafia (in the opinion of his father) if the Mafia had not evolved into what his father believes it has become—a moribund way of life, a feudal tradition adhered to mainly by senile senior citizens who are kept alive only by mythmaking Hollywood directors and television series such as "The Sopranos."

ALTHOUGH BOTH SALVATORE AND DR. JOSEPH Bonanno have been regular watchers, if not admirers, of "The Sopranos," Salvatore was quick to take offense when *The Arizona Republic* in March 2006 published an article comparing the Tony Soprano character to his late grandfather. Tony Soprano is a vulgar lowlife, Salvatore insists, lacking any of the courtly shrewdness and dignified demeanor of his late grandfather. Salvatore, who graduated from the University of Arizona and roomed for a while with his premed brother, Joseph, is currently a computer-systems executive with his own firm in Phoenix, but at the time

and humanitarian activities. Although she is no longer known as Bonanno since taking her husband's name in marriage, she has always been guided by her mother's often repeated warning to her and to her three brothers when they were growing up in San Jose: "You are not ordinary children. You have to try twice as hard to be good. You have to be better than everybody else. The world won't give you a second chance because of your name."

Recently, I met Felippa and her brothers in Tucson during a reunion at their parents' home. Their father is now 75, their mother 71, and earlier in the year they marked their 50th wedding anniversary. Rosalie continues her bridal-veil business in Tucson, and she also sells what's left of the late Joseph Bonanno's personal property on eBay, such as canceled checks bearing his signature.

Rosalie and Bill's four children, with the exception of the bachelor Charles, not only have children of their own (17 in total) but a few grandchildren as well. And again, except for Charles, none of the Bonanno offspring has ever been a "guest of the government."

On that occasion we all went to a local restaurant for dinner. In what must have seemed to other diners like an ordinary family gathering—parents, children and four grandchildren seated among the adults—I had the chance to comment to Dr. Joseph Bonanno, "Well, I guess you've overcome your surname."

"I've overcome it," he said, "but I didn't escape it." ■

FROM LEFT: PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENDA ANN KENNEALLY FOR NEWSWEEK. COURTESY OF EVERETT COLLECTION, HBO—COURTESY OF EVERETT COLLECTION