

The Hit Man Next Door

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Written by David Kushner, Rolling Stone

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Joe Passalaqua claims "103 kills," but one judge described his elaborate tales as little more than "criminal fantasy"

The murder-for-hire deal went down inside the Edison Diner, a small red-brick eatery off Route 1 in New Jersey, on September 13th, 2009. Joe Passalaqua, a dark-haired 54-year-old with arms as thick as his Long Island accent, scribbled "\$30,000" on a piece of paper and slipped it across the table to Chris Kontos, a Greek-American who owned strip clubs and restaurants throughout the state. "Thirty for the three," Passalaqua said. "I need cash, half upfront." He also asked Kontos to supply the weapon, "a .357 or a .40-caliber, has to be a revolver. And if you can, get hollow-points." When Kontos asked how soon the hit could be done, Passalaqua told him, "Within two weeks, maybe sooner."

Six months earlier, on St. Patrick's Day, two masked men with guns had stormed into Kontos' high-end steakhouse in Woodbridge, zip-tied two employees and held a gun to the head of Kontos' 25-year-old son and co-owner, Maik, as he handed over about \$150,000 in cash from the restaurant's safe. Passalaqua had approached Kontos, telling him he knew who did it, and offered to murder the burglars. He wore a gold St. Michael pendant around his neck, a symbol of his right-eous vigilantism. In more than 30 years as an enforcer and hit man, he claimed, including a stint collecting debts for legendary mobster John Gotti, he only targeted criminals. "I only do things if I think it's right," he told Kontos. "I've turned away thousands of jobs. I have 103 of these that I've done in my life. One hundred and three. It's got to be something personal like this, where somebody did something bad to somebody that the police can't help them. The police give people like me business because they're incompetent."

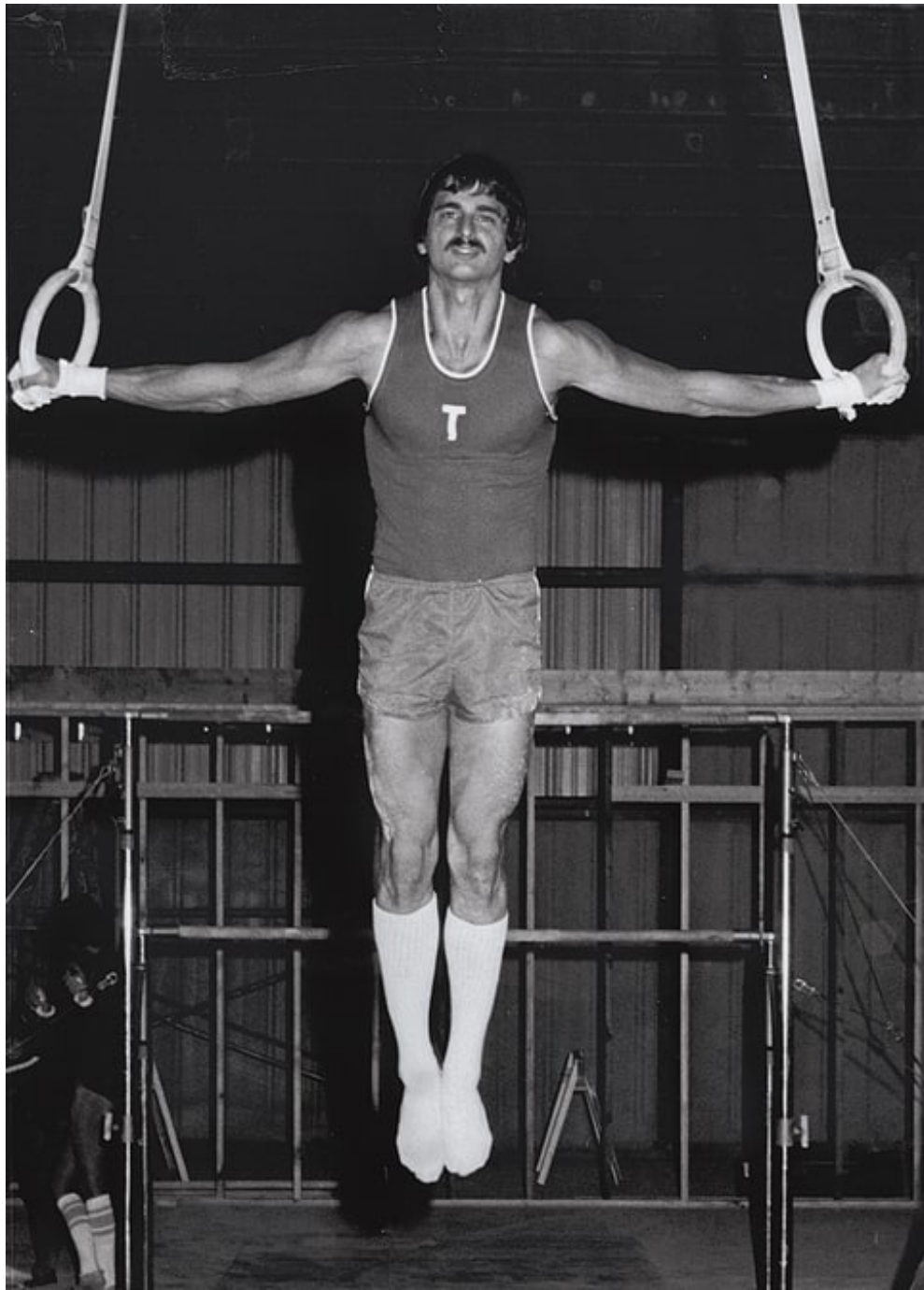
But if Passalaqua was a seasoned hit man, he was leading a surprising double life: as a former Olympic hopeful and 30-year owner of a family-friendly gymnastics center for youth tumbling teams and cheerleaders. At his trial in 2011, Judge Faith S. Hochberg told him, "How one man could take such gifts that you have and were born with and turn them into such human wreckage is almost unfathomable."

Today, as he sits behind bars in a federal prison in Maryland, his hair is long, his beard graying, his voice raspy and weary. He knows some friends, family and former students still wonder how a pillar of their community could also have been, as Passalaqua claims, a contract killer in an underworld of drugs, strippers and Mob bosses. With little evidence to substantiate his most elaborate tales, including the "103 kills," one judge described it all as

little more than “criminal fantasy,” but Passalaqua maintains he committed far worse crimes than the handful that got him locked away. Over many interviews, he was calm and reflective, and never once demurred, characterizing his past with a mix of bravado and shame. “I just became an animal,” he tells me. “There’s nothing more addictive than power.”

Passalaqua grew up in a middle-class suburb on Long Island in the 1960s. His father owned a successful exterminator business, and his mother was a Sunday-school teacher. According to his aunt, Patricia Ametrano, he was “very skinny” and often terrorized by a gang of older kids at school. “I was definitely not a bully,” Passalaqua says. “I looked like Olive Oyl.”

Around the sixth grade, he watched a gymnastics competition on TV and decided to transform himself into one of the -muscle-bound athletes. He eventually became a specialist on the rings – he could hold the iron cross, steady and still with outstretched arms, longer than anyone in his district. He earned a scholarship to Temple University, home to one of the country’s fiercest squads, and became co-captain and league finalist. For Passalaqua, the solitary nature of the sport, which pitted him as much against himself as others, suited his temperament. “I always liked to stand alone,” he says. “I never liked to have to lean on anybody else for success.”



Passalaqua was a co-captain at Temple University. Courtesy of Joseph Passalaqua

Passalaqua says that his Olympic dreams were dashed during his senior year, when he broke his wrist doing a double backflip. He turned to coaching after graduation, opening his own school, Flip Over Gymnastics, in an East Brunswick, New Jersey, industrial park. Holly Baumgartner, who began taking classes there at age five, recalls Passalaqua as a compassionate disciplinarian who comforted her when she fell with his adage “Progress, not perfection.” “He wasn’t just a coach to me,” she says. “Joe was like family.”

The Jersey moms admired Passalaqua (who’d divorced after a short marriage to a Temple University classics professor) not only as a devoted coach, but as charming eye candy. “Joe was an exceedingly good-looking man,” recalls Karen Baumgartner, Holly’s mother, who

regarded Passalaqua like a brother. “He had a commanding presence.” He also had a big heart. When Baumgartner could no longer afford classes for her daughter, Passalaqua gave her a secretarial job at the gym to cover her costs.

Passalaqua settled into a successful suburban life. He married a Flip Over gymnastics instructor, Cherie, with whom he had three kids. His oldest son, Joseph “Joey” Passalaqua IV, recounts fond memories growing up around the gymnastics club. But even as a young boy, he knew there was a darker side to his father too.

When he was around 12, Joey remembers, he was riding in his dad’s black Hummer when another driver cut them off. Passalaqua sped up and peeled sideways around the offending car, forcing it to pull over to the side of the road. Joey watched as his father ripped the guy from the driver’s seat and began pummeling him into a pulp on the pavement. It wouldn’t be the last fit of road rage. “I can remember countless times of him beating someone up on the side of the road,” Joey says. “He was in tremendous shape and he was very respected, but at the same time, he fit the part of being more than what he appeared to be.”

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“The steroids,” his aunt recalls with a sigh, “that’s when he became a different person.” In the mid-Eighties, Passalaqua noticed some guys at his gym who worked out less than he did but “looked like fucking King Kong,” and he eventually developed a crippling habit: Deca, testosterone, Primobolin, human-growth hormone, Anadrol 50s, D-Bols, and even some intended for animals, like Equipoise (horses) and Finajet (cows). He would sit alone in a backroom at the gym and use a 13cc horse needle to shoot up in a hip, shoulder or thigh, or around his bellybutton. He recalls occasionally hitting an artery and blood shooting clear across the room. His muscles made his shirts look like children’s clothes. “One of the things about steroids is you never realize you’re as big as you are,” Passalaqua says. “It’s a psychological thing. I never really contemplated the way it was changing my personality and my life.”

With his testosterone surging, Passalaqua seduced women from strip clubs, bars and his own gym, not seeming to care if his employees walked in on him having sex in his office. “One time, I went into my club,” he says. “My wife is on one StairMaster, my mistress is on another and my girlfriend is on the one next to her.” His son recalls passing his father’s Hummer on the highway – inside, a young woman was straddled over Passalaqua, having sex with him. “He saw me and gave me a thumbs-up,” Joey says with an embarrassed laugh. Passalaqua also became obsessed with martial arts, spending long nights in training, and grew so eager to brawl that he took a side job as a bouncer at a New Jersey disco called Hunka Bunka. “It was a place to fight without legal problems,” he tells me. “Plus, it was a chickfest.”

People around Flip Over noticed a new level of aggression in their once laid-back coach. When a fight broke out between two trainers, he pinned one up against the wall like a rag doll. “He was very big, very strong and very intimidating,” says a former Flip Over trainer, Blair

Gaertnier. Though Passalaqua kept his smile on for teams and parents, gym members could sense something simmering. A local priest who worked out at the club says, "I knew just from talking to him that if his anger came out, he would be a very dangerous man." Baumgartner heard others around the gym referring to her boss as Steroid Joe. But if anyone commented on Passalaqua's gargantuan size, he would simply joke, "Yeah, I rent myself out as a car jack on weekends."

In fact, Passalaqua claims, he was spending his time away from the gym as an enforcer for the Mob. His connection came through working on charitable causes for disadvantaged kids with the owner of a number of Italian restaurants around the state. "He wanted to come in and help," says the restaurateur, who asked not to be named. "That's the side of Joe I know." According to Passalaqua, the restaurateur also took an interest in his martial-arts skills. In 1987, during a Republican fund-raising lunch, Passalaqua says, the restaurateur – who was later indicted as part of an alleged drug-dealing operation run by the Nicodemo Scarfo organized-crime family (the charges were later dropped) – told him there was someone he should meet. Passalaqua says it ended up being the head of the Gambino crime family, John Gotti.

The meeting took place one bright afternoon at a social club in New York's Little Italy, Passalaqua says, where he found the Dapper Don in a stylish suit, seated behind a large wooden desk, flanked by two large goons. "What makes you so special?" he says Gotti asked.

"I can put those two guys in intensive care in less than 10 seconds," Passalaqua replied, nodding at Gotti's bodyguards.

Gotti laughed and said, "You're pretty sure of yourself."

"No," Passalaqua responded, "I just know what I'm capable of."

Gotti then explained that he needed someone "to collect money," Passalaqua recalls. "I'd have to use brutal force, which I had no problem with at that time in my life." If Passalaqua failed, Gotti told him, he'd pay with his life. "I didn't take it as a threat," he says. "It was something I accepted before I agreed to meet him." Gotti then asked what he wanted his nickname to be. "Angel," Passalaqua said. It was part of his rationalization, an avenging angel going after criminals and mobsters. "I had a warped sense of morality," he says.



His stories of the next five years of his life seem ripped from the pages of a Mario Puzo novel:

stalking mansions in night-vision goggles and pummeling the coke-snorting debtor inside; protecting Gotti during a secret visit with cartels; watching a friend take a bullet to the head. From nine at night until five in the morning, he says, he'd be out in the city, cavorting with strippers and thugs as Angel, then racing against the dawn in his red Lotus back to New Jersey. When he arrived at the gym, he would trade his black Versace suit for baggy sweats and a red Flip Over muscle shirt. By the time he hit the mats, he was once again beloved Coach Joe.

Others close to Passalaqua attest to suspicious activities that support his claims. Gaertnier, the Flip Over trainer, says he was having lunch with Passalaqua in the late 1980s at the Seville Diner in Sayreville, New Jersey, when he saw Gotti approach his boss outside. "It was him," Gaertnier says. "There's no doubt in my mind." Another time, he says, cops showed up at Flip Over searching for weapons, though he "knew better" than to press Passalaqua for details. Baumgartner says she began fielding calls from gruff men who would demand to speak with Passalaqua but not leave a number. Despite their close relationship, she too was uncomfortable confronting him about it. "He always had that aura where you didn't want to overstep your bounds," she says.

Passalaqua's son says their lavish lifestyle seemed far beyond the wages of a gymnastics-club owner. Passalaqua moved his family into a sprawling two-story house on a manicured cul-de-sac and collected a fleet of exotic sports cars – Lotuses, high-end Mercedes and Hummers. He installed an elaborate security system with motion detectors around the house and glaring spotlights over the yard. He also competed in underground cage-fighting matches, which he videotaped and proudly showed to his son.

One night, according to Joey, Passalaqua came home with a bullet wound in his leg and treated the gash with foaming hydrogen peroxide. There was also a safe the size of a refrigerator in the basement that "was just full of guns," Joey says, though his mother denies this. He never felt that his dad was trying to recruit him into a life of crime – it was more about sharing parts of his world. "I think Dad wanted to be everything," Joey says. "He wanted to be good, and bad."

In 1989, Passalaqua claims, he became a made man in the presence of Gotti and Sammy "The Bull" Gravano. "It let me understand that this really was for real," Passalaqua says. He is calm and consistent in his recollections, claiming he continued his side work for Gotti up until the Mob boss's incarceration in 1992. But federal agents and former mobsters alike say there is no evidence to support his alleged Gambino ties.

The Italian restaurateur completely denies Passalaqua's account. "Whatever is said has to be proven," he says. "That's how I live in my universe." J. Bruce Mouw, the retired FBI agent who led the agency's investigation of the Gambino family, tells me, "There wasn't much we didn't know about Gotti by the time we put him away, and I never heard of this guy before." Neither has John Alite, a former Gotti hit-man-turned-government-informant. "What this guy is saying is

just not feasible,” Alite says. But after seeing an old photo of a massive Passalaqua in his Flip Over muscle shirt and St. Michael necklace, Alite adds with a laugh, “He certainly looks the part.”

Passalaqua says it is easy to explain why others didn’t know about him, albeit conveniently so: They weren’t supposed to. He was brought on specifically to help Gotti explore a burgeoning interest in the drug trade, he says, which was still somewhat verboten in the Gambino family. Gotti wanted someone outside the fold to provide necessary muscle. “I was like a phantom,” Passalaqua says. “John had people like me up until the day he went to prison because he couldn’t trust the people he was around.”



Competing as a body builder on the Jersey Shore. Courtesy of Joseph Passalaqua

Regardless of whether his Mob ties were real or imagined, Passalaqua fashioned himself as the ultimate Jersey hero. Flip Over, with more than a thousand students, had become a renowned farm of talent. There was the U.S. Girls Gymnastics Team; a wrestling squad and karate classes; a Paralympic weight lifter who pressed triple his body weight despite having spina bifida; and a champion cheerleading squad called the Jersey Knights. "He produced a lot of good kids," says Karen Drew, a former tumbling coach at Flip Over. "He was one of the best bosses of my life."

With his smiling face and sharply cut mullet, he put his steroid-sculpted body to use as a professional bodybuilder, winning the Muscle Beach Championship on the Jersey Shore, and – by benching twice his weight, more than 425 pounds – making the Bench Press Weight Lifting nationals. He divorced his second wife and married Miss New Jersey herself, Michelle Graci, a stunning brunette who soon coached the cheerleaders at Flip Over (Graci declined to comment for the story). Passalaqua ran on the Republican ticket for Middlesex Township Council, donated to Republican campaigns and framed a photo of himself with former New Jersey Gov. Christine Todd Whitman.

One day in 2005, his longtime friend and secretary, Karen Baumgartner, walked into Flip Over, past the girls on the tumbling mats, the moms on the elliptical machines, the teenagers in the tanning booths, and burst into tears at her desk. “Holly was raped,” she told Passalaqua of her 15-year-old daughter, long one of his best gymnasts. Baumgartner watched an icy-cold glare enter her boss’s eyes. “If you want me to,” he told her, “I’ll make sure something is taken care of.”

Baumgartner, who’d caught glimpses of Passalaqua’s other life for decades, knew he was offering to kill or otherwise severely maim the rapist. For the first time in her presence, he was breaking down the wall between his two worlds. “I had heard rumors he was working with the Mafia,” she now admits.

She asked her daughter if she wanted to let Passalaqua get involved. “My mom told me Joe would handle it if I wanted him to,” recalls Holly, who at one point, on a phone call with her mom, heard her old coach demanding the rapist’s details in the background. “I knew how scary he could be. He would not let it up, he wanted to know who this person was and he was going to take care of the rest.” In the end, it’s unclear what happened to the rapist. Passalaqua will only say, “I couldn’t do anything at the time.” But it wouldn’t be the last occasion he made such an offer.

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One verifiable period of Passalaqua’s lawlessness begins in 2007, when he met a crew of criminal weight lifters at a Jersey gym called the Muscle Mill. The recession was on, work was slim and, for Passalaqua, who had moved into a larger and more costly 15,000-square-foot facility, business at Flip Over was struggling. The popularity of gymnastics was on the decline, and Flip Over’s bread-and-butter of birthdays and private tumbling classes had taken a hit. “He couldn’t pay rent and had a hard time making payroll,” Gaertner recalls. When one of the guys from Muscle Mill, Raffaele Danise, a hulking 21-year-old used-car salesman, said the owners of his dealership often cheated customers and deserved to get robbed, Passalaqua agreed.

The crew of four went to the owners’ home late one night, and balanced a ladder on the roof of Passalaqua’s Hummer to break into a second-floor window. They sped away with a safe that was stuffed with envelopes full of cash. Their total take was \$140,000. “After that,” Danise recalls, “we were off to the races.”



With New Jersey Gov. Christine Todd Whitman. Courtesy of Joseph Passalaqua

Over the next two years, they committed at least a dozen burglaries. The jobs often began at strip joints. They'd stake out a known drug dealer raining cash on dancers, and then run his license plate with the help of a dirty cop. Then they'd show up at the guy's house and steal his money. Passalaqua was double the age of the rest of the crew, so he mainly served as the getaway driver. "Cops aren't going to pull over a 55-year-old white guy," Danise explains. In Passalaqua's mind, targeting bad guys meant he was less a hood than a vigilante. "These people were legends in their own mind and detriments to society," he says.

But, as Passalaqua tells it, Danise and the others were soon spinning out of control. At one home invasion, they assaulted the woman inside, and doused her with bleach in an attempt to destroy any trace of DNA evidence. Afterward, Passalaqua chastised them for using violence

against an innocent bystander, but they had little interest in his moralizing. Tensions again rose when the men engineered a robbery of a high-end steakhouse where two of them had previously worked – the one owned by Kontos. “I told them I wanted nothing to do with it,” Passalaqua says. “That it was too close to home, and Kontos was a regular businessman who hadn’t done anything wrong.”

To the crew, Passalaqua was becoming a nuisance. He soon learned from one of them that Danise was leading a charge to take him out – a fact Danise doesn’t deny. Danise says he was worried that Passalaqua might flip as an informant or simply turn them in.

Passalaqua decided to strike first. When he met with Kontos to make the murder-for-hire deal, he says, he had every intention of going through with it. “I had to get these guys before they got me,” he says. “I was going to kill them anyway, so I might as well let Kontos pay me to do it.”

By then, Passalaqua had fallen in love with a young brunette from Texas, who had first dropped by the gym for a sales call. (She asked not to be identified for this story, but agreed to a pseudonym, Julia.) He showered her with money and nights on the town, and sometimes brought along Danise and the others, telling her they were his bodyguards. “At the time, nothing made me suspicious,” she says. “I was young, I was wild and I wanted to party.”

But Passalaqua didn’t keep her in the dark for long. Once they were living together, he confided to her over dinner. “I trust you,” he said, “and I want to tell you about what I’ve done in my past.” And so he revealed the alleged secret life that others only suspected or still refuse to believe: the Mob, the crews, the beatings and killings. “I was a little intimidated and a little scared,” Julia says, “but he was like, ‘That’s my past life – I don’t do that anymore,’ and I believed him.”

She had been wanting to return to her hometown in Texas, and Passalaqua agreed to sell Flip Over and move with her. When he proposed marriage in August 2009, she said yes. She moved down that month, and in mid-September, he texted her a picture of her engagement ring: a four-carat princess-cut diamond set in a platinum band with stones around it. “He was going to give it to me the next time he came to Texas,” she says. But there was something that Passalaqua didn’t disclose: He had to finish one last job.

“We thought about assassinating this guy. We were gonna make it look like autoerotic asphyxiation or give him a hot dose of heroin and make it look like suicide.”

September 23rd, 2009, began like any other day at Flip Over: kids tumbling, weight lifters benching, moms stretching. After finishing some paperwork around 2 p.m., Passalaqua says, he scribbled a note for Gaertnier, telling him he’d be away for a few days, and drove his red Dodge Charger to a Perkins restaurant in Woodbridge. Kontos was waiting in the far end of the parking lot in his black BMW. He seemed nervous, but at first that didn’t alarm Passalaqua. “That was normal,” Passalaqua says. “He was giving a man \$15,000 to kill three people.” Kontos handed him a thick envelope full of cash, and Passalaqua put it straight into his pocket. “Are you going to count it?” Kontos asked.

“No,” Passalaqua said calmly. “I would have no problem collecting the balance.”

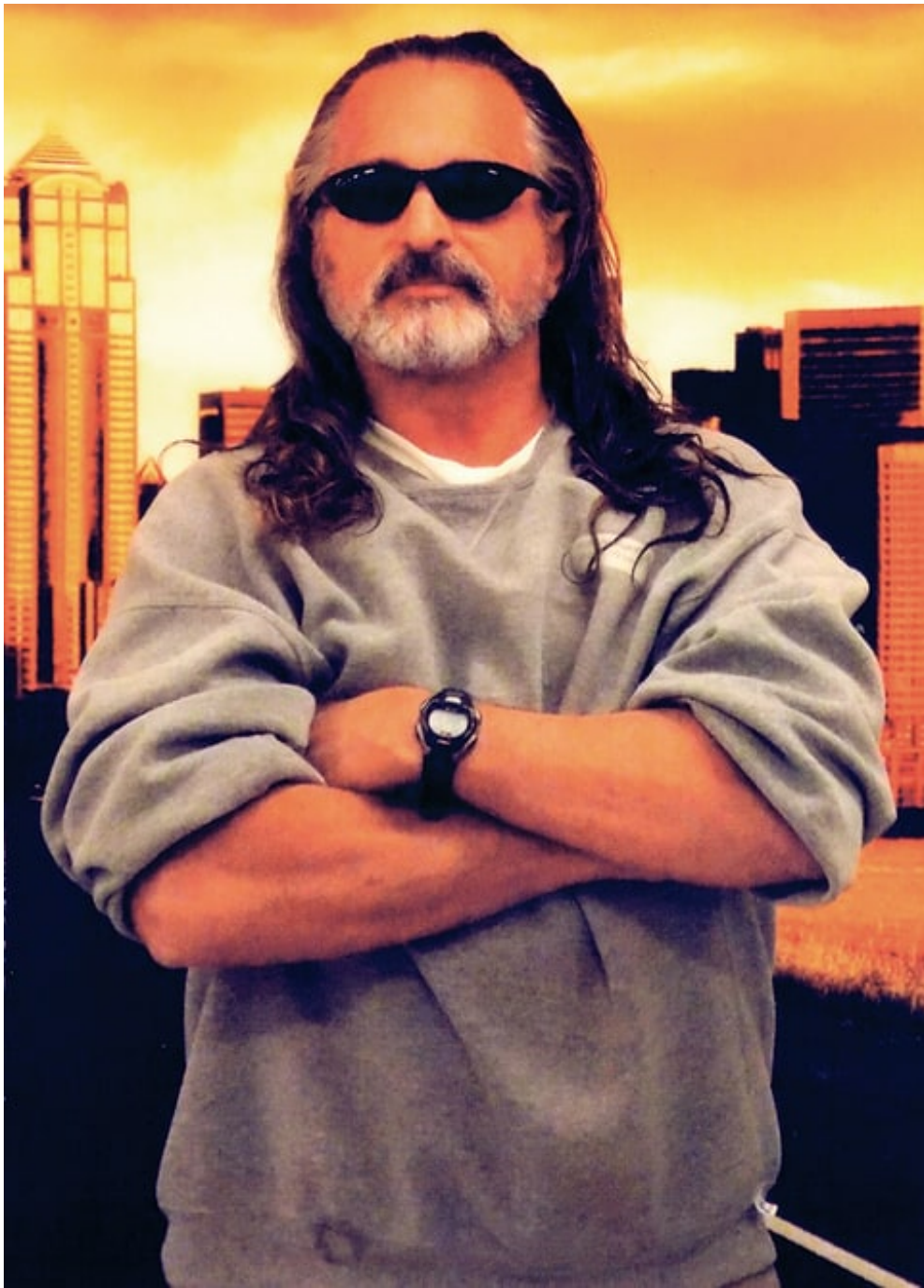
“When will it be done?”

“This weekend.”

Before Passalaqua left the car, he noticed some sweat misting on Kontos’ face. What had seemed like simple nerves now gave him a more ominous feeling. The moment Passalaqua stepped out of the car, a SWAT team rushed him, throwing him to the ground. A helicopter circled the sky, he says, as cuffs were snapped over his wrists.

When he looked up, he saw FBI agent Carrie Brzezinski, a steely woman with gray hair who’d been working violent crimes in New Jersey for more than two decades. A Middlesex County police detective had contacted her with suspicions that the Kontos case might be tied to a string of unsolved robberies and home invasions in the area, potentially with links to the Mob. At Brzezinski’s first meeting with Kontos, he had told her about Passalaqua’s offer and agreed to cooperate with the feds, later recording every detail of the murder-for-hire deal.

Now, with Brzezinski staring down at him, Passalaqua says, he tried to play it cool. “Where’s Ashton Kutcher?” he joked. “Am I getting Punk’d?”



Passalaqua was sentenced to 15 years in a Maryland penitentiary, where he's now a pastor. Asked to verify his claims of once being a ruthless killer, he says, "Why would I lie to God?"
Courtesy of Joseph Passalaqua

Passalaqua pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to interfere with commerce by threat or violence for his role in nine burglaries and one armed robbery, and is now seven years into a 35-year sentence. Danise and other crew members are serving similar time. During our many conversations, Passalaqua was quick to disparage his violent past – blaming, in part, his abuse of steroids for fueling his brutality. "I did what I did because I could," he says. "Arrogance combined with ignorance leads you to get worse and worse. All you care about is self-gratification and pleasure. I wanted to be the big shot."

Passalaqua has been largely cut off by those closest to him. His second wife, Cherie, thinks he's a man deeply lost in his own self-aggrandizing mythology. "His ego continues to create a history of himself that did not occur," she tells me. "He has destroyed lives to reach his own level of greatness." For all his childhood suspicions, their son, Joey, who now runs a pair of fitness centers in New Jersey, never imagined his father would become a common thief. "Maybe those people were hardworking people," he tells me. "It is not justified to be able to do that to someone." At the same time, he hasn't lost much affection for the man who raised him, explaining, "Dad was a really good dad."

Despite the elaborate details of his recollections, and being caught on tape boasting about more than 100 killings, the FBI found nothing to tie Passalaqua to past murders or the Mafia. This raises an obvious question: Why would he continue to insist he was once a ruthless killer? Is he still trying to be the big shot, spinning tales about the one chapter of his life that no one can, or will, corroborate? With a sigh of resignation, Passalaqua answers his doubters with a question of his own: "Why would I lie to God?"

Although he spurned his mother's Sunday-school teachings as a child, he has finally found religion. Of course, he's not content to just sit in the back row of the prison church. He has come to lead the services himself, counseling younger prisoners on the dangers of drugs – especially steroids – and steering clear of the violence that he claims once defined much of his life. When he gets out of prison, likely around age 70, he hopes to have his own congregation, a Flip Over for lost souls. "I sold my soul to the devil when I became Angel," he says. "Now, I'm just Pastor Joe."