

Mafia criminal finds God

GAVIN BOX

TWENTY years ago Tom Papania worked for the New York mafia.

Today he is an ordained minister with a prisons ministry based in Atlanta, Georgia.

Mr Papania, in Geelong yesterday as part of a speaking tour, has spent almost two decades working in prison welfare since his remarkable exit from organised crime.

An Italian New Yorker, the 59-year-old "inherited" the mobster lifestyle from his grandfather Joe Messeria, one of a number of people credited with bringing the mafia from Sicily to the US in the late 1800s.

Disowned by his father

because of his criminal behaviour, Mr Papania was apprenticed under notorious crime bosses Carlo Gambino and Paul Castellano — heads of the biggest crime families in New York.

From 1961, aged 17, until 1984, aged 40, Mr Papania earned his living collecting money and running businesses for the Gambino/Castellano families.

At one stage, he says, he was earning millions and soon attracting the attention of the FBI. But he says he was taught well to cover his tracks.

"The FBI ultimately regarded me as a low-level street punk whose ties to the Gambino family couldn't be proven.

"I shot people and I beat

them up to the point of death, but by God's grace I never killed anybody," he said.

Yet beneath the tough-guy exterior and the lavish lifestyle, Mr Papania felt empty with his life.

At a friend's urging, he went to a church and was invited to the pastor's home.

He went, taking his gun and a healthy dose of scepticism, but found himself weeping on the floor.

Mr Papania says he got up that day a changed man.

● Tom Papania will speak at Karndina Christian Church, 7.30pm tonight and 10pm and 6pm tomorrow.

On the web: www.tompapania.com



YOU TALKIN' TO ME? Former New York mafia man Tom Papania at Norlane High School. Mr Papania left the mob to join the church and work in the prison ministry in Atlanta, Georgia.

Photo: ALISON WYND

Story amazing but true, lawyer says

THE truth is stranger than fiction, as the saying goes — and could well be said of Tom Papania's amazing life story.

Yet lawyer Steve Yaklin is one among many who is convinced Mr Papania's story is true.

Mr Yaklin — of Georgia law firm Brock, Clay, Calhoun, Wilson and Rogers — says Mr Papania is well regarded in his community, but was formerly the subject of intense US Government scrutiny.

"The Federal Government witnessed first-hand Mr Papania's conversion,

ment, with all of its resources, certainly believed Tom Papania to be a mobster," he said.

"I have lunch with him regularly, we support his prison ministry and we are very good friends," he says.

"He is the real deal."

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