



Joey Pantoliano

It was not until about three years ago, when he faced his own dark time of the soul that world-famous acting talent, Joey Pantoliano, came to terms with his own issues with mental illness.

Joey Pantoliano grew up a cocky, skinny kid in New Jersey, from a family that had a long-standing feud with, of all folks, anyone who was kin to Frank Sinatra.

The roots of the legendary beef go back to one of Pantoliano's and Sinatra's great cousins or great grandfathers, he thinks. Pantoliano tells the story of how his father left one hospital on his death bed cursing, simply because a doctor commented on how both men—his dad and the famous crooner—came from Hoboken, New Jersey, but then made the mistake of calling the neighbourhood “Sinatra country.”

His father died less than hour later—but in a different hospital where “old blue eyes” was not-so-obviously revered.

“To say we were eccentric would be an understatement,

at least,” says Pantoliano, with a quick smile and laughing eyes, his voice echoing that “Ralphie Cifaretto, Jersey Boy” inflection so notoriously part of the murderous wise guy he played in the award-winning HBO series, *The Sopranos*.

But it is easy to see the man before you is no Ralphie, but more of an ever-youthful trickster, with an intense empathy for others and a passion and drive for life, far from dangerous, dark killers and turncoats he's played on the big and small screen.

Pantoliano's family roots were not just eccentric—he acknowledges nowadays, though they were loving, they were also marred by mental illness and addiction on both sides.

The actor, renowned for playing wise guys and troubled men going over the edge, was surrounded by what he

now sees as a troubled but dynamic family and cultural matrix, if you pardon the pun, he adds, mischievously, referring to his blockbuster role as Cypher in the film, *The Matrix*.

“I always grew up feeling alone and different but I always wanted to shine and be special so no one would forget me,” Pantoliano, now in his late 50s, says. “When I saw the shows on TV and



Joe Pantoliano, as Ralph Cifaretto, acts in a scene in HBO's hit television series, 'The Sopranos' (Year 3).

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actors in movies then it clicked. If I could do that I'd be like those people and I'd be something and everybody would remember me forever. I would not just disappear. Weird thinking from the time I was a real young kid, even at six or seven years old."

But it was not until about three years ago, when he faced his own dark time of the soul that Pantoliano came to terms with his own issues with mental illness.

And that has spawned a new fighting passion to change the stigma associated with mental illness and to overhaul the perceptions of how the world around sees people like himself.

"Yeah, it's, no kidding, me, too, you know, I am like this and so are so many others who are afraid to say so and that is just wrong," Pantoliano says. "We should really just be seeing it as a different brain style, and everyone is entitled to exist with their own brain disease and not be judged. We should all be afforded the same dignity and understanding if we have a certain type of brain disease, just as if we have a disease that affects our heart or a condition such as diabetes. It is time we came out of the dark ages."

In fact, Pantoliano now knows his mother had a mood disorder and an addiction (she was a compulsive gambler) and though she was fiercely loving and devoted to him was also at times abusive and very promiscuous.

"It was all she knew how, she did her best, you have to understand and let go," he says.

At the age of 12, his world was rocked when the man he thought was his father, a darkly depressed man with a drinking problem, was not in fact his real father.

Although if you read the full scope of their tumultuous relationship in his autobiography "Who's Sorry Now, The True Story of a Stand-Up Guy" (available online through Amazon) you may wonder if Pantoliano's late mother was ever capable of telling him the truth in full about any subject, largely because she herself had such a twisted sense of reality.

But little "Joey Pants" who was made part of his parents'



Winner for Best Supporting Actor in a Drama, Joe Pantoliano poses backstage during the 55th Annual Primetime Emmy Awards at the Shrine Auditorium September 21, 2003 in Los Angeles, California.

schemes in petty crime—running money to bookies at the age of six and seven for his mother in the gambling rackets she helped run—didn't know any different.

He thought everyone showered their kids with fouled-mouthed curses, threats and blows keeping them locked in the topsy-turvy world of intense physical fighting and anger, which, in a heartbeat, could switch to smothering kisses and love. Pantoliano's epiphany came after he lost a friend to suicide. He himself was struggling in his marriage



Joe Pantoliano and his family attend a luncheon at the Selby Botanical Gardens on April 19, 2007 in Sarasota, Florida.

and with misuse of street drugs and alcohol—all in an attempt to numb and wipe away the way he was feeling and perceiving the world.

“Then I woke up,” he says. “I realized I could not do those things to the people I loved. To my own dear wife and children. I had more to offer.”

He was diagnosed with clinical depression.

“I was numb, my body ached, I felt trapped, overwhelmingly sad,” he says. “I was physically so sad and angry at myself for feeling that way, as if I was somehow weak.”

With support of medication and therapy and by doing creative, positive work, Pantoliano began to change his

harmful coping style of medicating himself with “anything I could get my hands on.”

“I did all of these reckless things, took chances with people and relationships, I over-shopped, I drank way too much, I did drugs, I over-ate, you name it if I could find a way to use it I would just do it to blot out the pain,” he says. “When I was a kid I really felt I was insignificant, that I was nothing. I came from a family where no one spoke of anything and it was all compartmentalized and people did the same types of things, those same behaviours, which I did to cope.”

Pantoliano has found talk therapy, medication and 12-Step work has helped him along his journey to wellness, but he does not specifically endorse any one approach, say-

ing everyone needs to find their own best solution.

He also lives with dyslexia, another different “brain disease,” he says, and thinks everyone with any condition that is invisible but affects their mind or mood should band together for support.

But no one will find any answers unless they feel free to come out of the closet and start asking for help, he says.

That is why he has escalated his campaign to change the world view of mental conditions.

He has created a group called “No Kidding, Me, Too,” a non-profit organization comprised of entertainment industry members united in an effort to educate Americans about the epidemic related to brain disease in all forms.

Its goal is “to educate the public about the wonderful possibilities that exist when we break down the societal barriers which hold us all back because we treat those afflicted with mental illness differently—we label them and isolate them. What we passionately want to accomplish is to relieve the weight of millions of people who suffer this isolation,” the group says on its website, www.nkm2.org.

The group cites brain diseases including anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, specific phobias, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating, pyromania, kleptomania, compulsive gambling, addictions, paranoia, multiple personality disorder, gender identity disorder, Down’s syndrome, psychosomatic disorder, tic disorders, and others as all deserving of understanding and the removal of social stigma.

It has a who’s who of supporters from the entertainment industry—many of whom have reported having various brain diseases themselves—including Jeff Bridges, Delta Burke, James Cameron, Robert Downey, Jr., Edie Falco, Christine Lahti, Matthew Modine, Ron Perlman, Gloria Reuben, Montel Williams and Robin Williams, among others.

“I decided I could, with my profile and the people I knew, the connections I had developed, make a difference,”

Pantoliano says.

This past fall he was keynote speaker at the Imagine Film Festival at the Whitby Mental Health Centre. There, he spoke after a screening of *Canvas*, a poignant film in which he stars that aptly shows how mental illnesses affect families.

He also told those gathered there that his group was seeking to make connections and partnerships with health institutions, consumer and survivor groups and youth groups all over the world to join to fight the stigma.

“We can and we will make a difference,” he said. “But nobody will do it but us. We will do it for ourselves because we will have to speak up for ourselves and have the power. We do have that power.”

Robin Harvey is a Toronto freelance journalist, fiction writer and mental health advocate.

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