

Guns, drugs, justice . . . and an apology

WHEN LUIGI and Antonio Lanzara were arrested in 2006 and released the next day on low bail, Police Commissioner Sylvester Johnson was irate.



JILL PORTER

Police had confiscated 60 firearms, cash and drugs from the Frankford brothers, provoking Johnson to rail against the justice system's revolving door.

"When we talk about gun violence, and we lock up someone with 60 guns on bail and then they're out again walking the street the next day, what kind of message does that send?" Johnson fumed at a news conference.

The clear impression was that two dangerous, gun-wielding drug dealers were frivolously freed to continue preying upon society in the aftermath of one of the city's biggest gun busts.

I, too, cited the case in a column as a failure of the justice system to protect society from rampant gun and drug violence.

As it turns out, the case was an overblown farce — and a tainted one, at that.

The arrest of the Lanzara brothers was a high-profile collaboration between a Philadelphia narcotics officer and a confidential informant who claims that they fabricated evidence in other drug cases.

Nothing was falsified in this case.

But the facts hardly fit the hype. And greed may have been the primary motivation for the bust.

According to an investigation by *Daily News* reporters Wendy Ruderman and Barbara Laker, the July 16, 2006, police raid on two homes occupied by the Lanzara brothers was prompted by a tip from confidential informant Ventura Martinez about dozens of guns and drugs in the homes.

Martinez told narcotics officer Jeffrey Cujdik about the guns and Antonio Lanzara's boasts that the brothers were drug dealers.

Martinez said that he anticipated being paid \$6,000 for the bust, based on a Police Department program that pays \$100 per gun for the recovery of illegal weapons.

But Cujdik, who allegedly arranged for the informant's compensation, paid him only \$500 and kept \$2,000 for "rent money" on a house Martinez was renting from him, Martinez said.

And the Lanzara case fell apart under closer scrutiny.

All but one of the guns were legally owned by the Lanzaras' elderly father, a longtime collector who belongs to a gun club. The other was legally owned by Luigi Lanzara's wife.

None of the weapons was known to have been used in a



Daily News file photo

This was the scene on July 17, 2006, as police held a news conference to show the guns found at the Lanzara houses.

crime. Most of them have been returned to the father.

All charges were dropped against Antonio, who has no criminal record.

Luigi got three years' probation after pleading guilty to a marijuana charge; police found about a third of a pound in his house.

The informant's scandalous allegations of police wrongdo-

ing in other cases are under investigation by federal and local law-enforcement authorities.

And the Lanzara brothers still carry the taint of notoriety.

"They said I'm a big-time pot dealer and gun dealer,"

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Antonio and Luigi Lanzara

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Luigi told the *Daily News*' Ruderman.

"They had no buyers. They only had this confidential informant's word . . . what he said was all lies.

"I never bought a gun in my life. I never sold a gun to anybody."

As for the marijuana, Luigi, 40, said that he and a handful of friends would buy a quarter-pound to half-a-pound at a time to share.

"I'm thinking, 'Oh, my God, they think I'm friggin' 'Scarface' or something, and all I'm doing is smoking some weed with my friends!'"

"It really baffled me. I couldn't believe all this was happening."

Luigi, a welder who makes iron fences, declined to talk with me.

He told Ruderman that he pleaded guilty to a charge of possession with intent to deliver because "my wife was ill. Three

years probation. I had to take it."

Luigi's wife died of cancer in October. He said that he stopped smoking marijuana when she died, because he now has sole responsibility for their three children, ages 15, 6 and 4.

Luigi has two drug convictions — in 1996 and 1998, according to court records — and may be understating his involvement in drugs at the time of the raid.

But I suppose he's entitled, after the way police — and the media, based on official information — portrayed him and his brother as public enemies and social parasites.

I, for one, apologize. ★

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