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The Minister And the Feds



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Newsday / Thomas S. Kordis

Pierson Freed

After 3½ months in jail, Cheryl Pierson celebrates with Robert Cuccio Jr., brother James Pierson Jr. (behind Cuccio), and Craig Santiago, a friend. / Page 3

Minister and Informant

Activist Rev. Al Sharpton details secret relationship with feds

By Bob Drury, Robert E. Kessler
and Mike McAlary

For the last five years, the Rev. Al Sharpton Jr., one of the city's most vocal and visible black activists, has been secretly supplying federal law-enforcement agencies with information on boxing promoter Don King, reputed organized crime figures and black leaders and elected officials, according to sources.

And in a two-hour, wide-ranging interview with New York Newsday, Sharpton, 33, said he carried concealed microphones in briefcases and accompanied undercover federal agents wearing body recorders to meetings with various subjects of federal investigations. He also allowed the U.S. attorney's office for the Eastern District of New York to install a tapped telephone in his Brooklyn home.

Sharpton was willing to supply information to federal law-enforcement agencies on King and his stepson, Carl; reputed Colombo crime-family figures Michael and Sonny Franzese; reputed Genovese crime-family members Joey and Danny Pagano; City Councilman Wendell Foster (D-Bronx); Brooklyn-based black activist Sonny Carson; and sports agent Norby Walters, sources said.

Sharpton denied supplying incriminating evidence on fellow activists or King. "Not only don't I allow them [federal investigators] to ask race questions; I don't talk about anything except what I brought to them," he said. But Sharpton told New York Newsday that he has cooperated in investigations of election-related irregularities involving Rep. Major Owens (D-Brooklyn) and Assemb. Al Vann (D-Brooklyn), as well as investigations involving organized crime. The telephone, Sharpton said, is only used to record conversations with drug dealers.

Most law-enforcement officials, noting the problem of keeping informants' identities secret, refused to comment on Sharpton's dealings with government investigators. U.S. Attorney Andrew Maloney explained, "It is a longstanding policy of the government, certainly the policy of the Eastern District, that we neither confirm nor deny whether or not any person or persons are cooperating with the government."

Asked whether he would consider a community leader as an informant, Maloney said, "I would use the cardinal if he were in a position to assist us . . . I would think the people would applaud anyone assisting the government to bring the lawless to justice."

A Pentecostal minister and president of the Brooklyn-based National Youth Movement, Sharpton first came to the attention of the FBI at the start of an investigation into King's boxing empire in the early 1980s. In 1983, law-enforcement sources said, agents, believing Sharpton was close to King, tried to implicate Sharpton in a drug sting and then force him to cooperate in their probe. Sharpton decided to cooperate, the sources said, after being videotaped inquiring about buying cocaine from undercover FBI agent Victor Quintana, who was posing as a rich South American trying to break into the boxing promotion business.

"The reason he was not indicted for criminal activity was that he did cooperate with the bureau to a limited extent . . . in the [Don] King investigation," said one source. "He was in a Catch-22 situation . . . But you can talk jail time and put the fear of God in some guys, and that's what happened with Al," said the source, who added that the videotaped conversation alone would not have been sufficient for an in-

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Newsday / Linda Fleury

dictment. "The tape was played and he saw himself in living color. And then, without a lot of prompting, he realized his position and from that point on, he cooperated."

During the Monday night interview, Sharpton disputed that version, but admitted that FBI agents threatened to prosecute him based on the contents of the videotape. He said he had turned down Quintana's offer to set up a cocaine ring, and that he began cooperating with the FBI after it threatened to indict him.

In describing the taped meeting in Quintana's bugged Manhattan office, Sharpton said, "He took out a piece of paper and said, 'Let me explain to you how much money you can make.' He said, 'I know you're against drugs, but you need money, Reverend, like

anybody else.' He told me all I had to do was introduce him to someone and we can move boxes. He was using boxes as a symbol; I don't know what they stood for."

"He kept drawing boxes and going through these shenanigans, and finally he says, 'You could make this over here.' And he wasn't talking \$2,000 or \$3,000. I told him I wasn't interested in getting involved with drugs. I never called after that, for months. And he never called me."

"Then the FBI contacted me, an agent named Joe Spinelli, and he said that they had me on videotape," Sharpton said. "They didn't tell me Quintana was an agent. I said, 'Go ahead, indict me.' I was insulted. They were talking to me like I was some little kid."

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They said, 'Okay.' But then they called me again, Spinelli called, and we sat down and he said, 'We think you can help us and we won't have to hurt you.' I said, 'Indict me.' Then he mentioned Don King."

Sharpton denied helping agents in the King investigation. Law-enforcement sources said he supplied some limited information about King and King's stepson, Carl. Sharpton, however, admits that he agreed to work as an informer in organized-crime cases. In an unrelated investigation, King was indicted and acquitted in 1985 on tax-evasion charges.

New York Newsday reported on Jan. 23, 1985, about a meeting that Sharpton set up with King for Dec. 12, 1983, that was attended by Sharpton, King, Michael Franzese and Quintana, who was posing as a man trying to get into the fight promotion business.

Numerous calls to Spinelli, currently the inspector general for New York State, were not returned. U.S. Attorney Rudolph Giuliani of the Southern District, King and Walters could not be reached for comment.

"After a week or two they rested on that, about King," Sharpton said. "They said, 'Let's deal with the mob stuff.' I said, 'What do we want to deal on the mob stuff?' And we went through a litany of guys that have been using contracts, that have been doing things like intimidating blacks and they got lucky. In the middle of this — it's 1984 and I'm threatening to boycott [the Michael Jackson concerts] — one of these nice mobsters threatened to kill me. Sal Posillo. So right away I said, 'You guys want something. Here's a guy that wants to kill me, and I would love to give this guy up. They got a guy to sit on a meeting with me and let him threaten me on behalf on one of the biggest record company presidents in the business.'"

Posillo was indicted on extortion charges by the U.S. attorney in Los Angeles in July and is awaiting trial.

In 1984, Sharpton said he worked with federal agents investigating possible dealings between Norby Walters, who has been criticized for signing college athletes to professional contracts before they graduate, and the Franzese crew. Sharpton said the mob was involved with a ticket-fixing scheme with black entertainers in which organized-crime figures would be given tickets that they later scalped.

"Nothing came of the Walters investigation as far as I know," Sharpton said. In 1985, Sharpton said, he set up a ticket-fixing scheme involving members of a reputed organized-crime crew allegedly run by Danny Pagano in Westchester County.

"They go into a scheme with Danny Pagano, a guy that had a record company, a guy that I knew," Sharpton said. "One of my guys works for him. And [my] guy, I tried to get the guy to tell me something and he didn't know anything. I said, 'Is [Pagano] doing anything that will hurt any of us?' I met with the FBI and they said, 'He may be scalping black artists' tickets.' They set up a thing with some guys in Jersey who were working with [Pagano] and [Pagano's people] bought some tickets from me. Where they went with that we don't know."

The ticket exchange between Sharpton and Pagano's crew came to the attention of the New York State Organized Crime Task Force, which was investigating Pagano at the time. The task force called Sharpton in for questioning, and he told members that he needed to call the FBI to straighten out the situation.

"The state people wanted to ques-



tion me about ticket fixing. I never told them that I had been told to sell the tickets by the FBI. I guess the FBI called the state people and told them, 'This is our investigation — back off.' I never told the state people what I was doing. I don't know them."

Between the time Sharpton sold the tickets and when he was called in by the task force, he said he had decided to begin working in a multi-tiered investigation by the U.S. attorney's office in the Eastern District involving election irregularities, organized crime and drugs.

Sharpton said he offered to work as an informant for the Eastern District in developing cases, but insisted he only would work to convict people who were hurting the black community. Sources said that among those Sharpton mentioned as fitting into this category were Don King and his stepson, Carl, and organized-crime figures connected to the boxing industry.

"I went down to meet with the Eastern [District], I called for a meeting and said I had information on some election fraud — I had information on Al Vann and Major Owens being involved in a vote ring [scheme] — information on drugs in the community, information on the 77th Precinct — I didn't get that one, obviously someone else got there first — and I want to talk to somebody. They said, 'Okay, we can work together.' They started an investigation that is still going on on the election stuff and some of the drug stuff."

Vann, who could not be reached for comment, was knocked off the 1986 Democratic primary ballot for petition irregularities. He won election as an independent.

Reached in Washington, D.C., Owens declined to comment.

Sharpton also agreed, sources said, to help gather information against several black leaders, including the Rev. Wendell Foster and Sonny Carson. Although Sharpton denied that he was working on a case involving black leaders, several of the sources said he was providing information on what they said appeared to be an extortion-like attempt by Foster. Foster, sources said, told Sharpton that he could help King escape federal scrutiny. Foster said he could provide help because he had good contacts with several federal agents, sources said.

After being told last night of Sharpton's activities, Foster said he did not believe that Sharpton was a federal informant and denied allegations that he had attempted to extract money from King through Sharpton in exchange for help with the FBI.

"It's not just a little lie, it's the biggest lie of his life," Foster said. "I challenge him to meet me in Madison Square Garden and take a lie-detector test and have injections of truth serum so the whole world can see who is telling the truth."

Foster said he met with the FBI on a different matter last year, the Wedtech defense contract probe, and with Sharpton on the same day. Foster added that Sharpton and King recently gave his church, Christ Church in the Bronx, 400 turkeys for distribution to the poor.

"If I was going to shake someone down, wouldn't it be someone who had money?" Foster asked. "I don't know if Sharpton can pay his rent every month. I don't want to discredit Sharpton, but have you ever seen him in anything more than the same blue-green jump suit?"

On Monday, Sharpton was at first reluctant to discuss his role with the government, calling reports of his cooperation "untrue." With his hands shaking, Sharpton asked for assurances that "if I tell you what happened, you'll tell my side of the story."

Sharpton then ordered his secretary to hold all his calls and ordered his aides from an adjoining room. He then detailed his cooperation, insisting that he "never gave information about my friends. They can't ask about my civil rights activities. They only asked me about [Alton] Maddox once. They wanted to know why he was my lawyer and if I had told him what I was doing. I told them it was none of their business."

In explaining how he was able to obtain information for the government, Sharpton said, "On some of the mob stuff, sometimes we used a briefcase. Most of the time they would have someone go with me. They would be wired. On the drug case, they installed a phone in my house. Civil rights people would never call me on that phone. I didn't give the number out. I called them. Guys would come to my house and use the phone. The phone is out of

service. I didn't pay the bill."

Although Sharpton said he had been planning to make his cooperation public, he also seemed worried about the safety of his family and himself. He met with investigators in Maloney's office yesterday to discuss the ramifications of having his cooperation with the government revealed.

"You know what is going to be my biggest problem when this comes out?" Sharpton asked. "You got guys in Bensonhurst and Howard Beach that want to kill me. They'll say, 'We can kill him now and make it look like organized crime killed him.'"

Sources said Sharpton had not asked for federal protection as of last night, but added that if he wanted protection he would get it.

Sharpton himself joked about the danger.

"I expect a backlash from organized crime when this gets out," he said. "I'm 33 and I want to be 34."

The minister said he was concerned about how the news of his cooperation would play in the media and what kind of response he would get in the black community. "Everybody knows I love headlines," Sharpton said. "But I don't want to die for a headline. If this is painted that somebody got me in trouble and that I turned around, that's one thing. If it's painted where there are some guys in the civil rights movement who are willing to work with the government to get rid of drugs and election fraud, anybody that doesn't like that, I don't care about."

Sharpton seemed most concerned, however, with how his cooperation would be viewed by his political nemesis, Mayor Edward I. Koch, a man who sometimes refers to Sharpton as "Al Charlatan."

"There's an upside and downside to this coming out," Sharpton said. "The downside is that there are organized-crime guys that I have been active with that will want to hurt me. You go with the risk to your family because we gave information and tried to get information. The upside is that Koch and everybody is trying to paint us as these hoodlums and radicals and it appears that I've been doing as much if not more to fight crime than any private citizen in this country."

Richard Eposito and Howard Manly contributed to this story.

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