

BOOK REVIEW

# Inside the Mob, from a JA who lived to tell

By **NAO GUNJI**

## **RAFU ENGLISH ASSISTANT EDITOR**

In person, Kenny “Kenji” Gallo—whose real name is concealed—is not what you would expect from an ex-Mafia guy, well if you ever meet one. His

hapa frame is muscular, but not tall, not too intimidating. His demeanor is polite, calm and casual.

Gallo said he co-wrote his memoir, “Breakshot: A Life in the 21st Century American Mafia” to turn himself into a cautionary tale for kids. He looks back on his outlaw days with senses of exhaustion and disgust.

“My life was a waste,” Gallo told The Rafu Shimpō.

However, once he starts talking about his decades’ involvement in the criminal world, Gallo’s face lightens up. His speech and body language get animated. Now as a legitimate businessman, he enjoys his peace and lives a healthy life, but one soon realizes, by talking to him, he still seems to have the muscle memory of the adrenaline and brain rush he felt as a gangster and then an FBI informant.

“Breakshot” is the story of a Japanese American man who grew up in an abundant household in Orange County, made his name in the 1980s as a millionaire teenage cocaine smuggler, and later ran a porn and prostitution empire for Los Angeles’ Milano Mafia Family and New York’s Colombo Mafia Family. He became an undercover FBI informant in the late 1990s and has since assisted law enforcement in the fight against organized crime.

This is certainly not an afterschool, feel-good type of a book. It’s filled with descriptions of extreme violence, drug-dealing and sex industry involved with the modern underworld of America. It’s rather vulgar and in-your-face, and Gallo is not too shy to reveal the ugliness of the mob world and his own young, reckless days.

Nonetheless, the authors aspire to inspire. They do so by telling how being an outlaw is “not like the movies,” how chaotic it is, how miserable it is, and oftentimes how idiotic it is.

Throughout the book, Gallo’s “wise-ass,” “tough guy” personality remains the biggest attraction. He is sort of like this character you can always count on to get involved in trouble and bring along some outrageous anecdotes. As a matter of fact, his gangster life of 20 years seemed like a series of bad dreams, sometimes even nightmares. He may not be a hero, but he is a survivor, and that certainly makes this autobiography a fun read.

Kenny “Kenji” Gallo was born in Boyle Heights in 1968 and grew up in Orange County. His father was interned at Minidoka during World War II and had great success in the magazine publishing business after the war.

Although Gallo was a straight-A student, his parents were receiving behavioral reports that “would have made a Hells Angel proud.” He was a bored smartass. His parents got divorced, and his stepfather, who was a bomber pilot during the war, sent him to a military school in Carlsbad when Gallo was 13. There, he faced bullying by older students and the “normal boot camp brutality.” In the book, Gallo attributes the school for teaching him “to enjoy hurting people” and that “man should use any means at his disposal without hesitation to obtain dominance over everyone he meets. The only cure for weakness was strength.”

After his mother and stepfather moved to the East Coast, his father got him out of the military school and enrolled him at the University High School in Irvine. His father also found a job for young Gallo as a busboy at a Newport Beach Japanese restaurant called Setoya, which happened to be the local hot spot for cocaine dealing. Unfortunately, this fatherly attempt of finding the delinquent son an honest job became one of the biggest turning points in Gallo’s life as a criminal. He soon started dealing coke for the Avila family, who ran Setoya and the very successful El Ranchito Mexican restaurant chain.

At age 15, he was smuggling \$150, 000 worth of uncut cocaine from Columbian drug lord, Pablo Escobar’s cartel, while making \$196 a month working for minimum wage at the restaurant. He idolized and emulated Joey Avila and his drug dealing life—Cadillac, “Miami Vice” outfit, jewelry and women. By the time he graduated from University

High in 1986, Gallo was already transporting cocaine to Hawaii and making more than an average man would make in a lifetime.

"I was grossing millions without any repercussions, a government-protected coke dealer with elite Columbian connections and a hardened crew of teenage smugglers, car-bombers, drive-by shooters, and all-round sociopaths at my disposal. In addition to my criminal life, I also had a gorgeous and kind girlfriend who had no idea how I really made money. I felt like the toughest, smartest, and luckiest guy in the world, a sly f\*\*\*er who could get away with anything without suffering any consequences. I had 'won' at life."

Gallo continued his extreme life in the underworld until the late 1990s, changing his address from one state to another, working with different groups of criminals, and making a lot of money and enemies along the way. The former straight-Akid from Orange County got married to the infamous adult movie star, Tabitha Stevens in Las Vegas when he was 28.

"People always ask me how an average-looking Japanese guy could gain entry to the toughest corners of the underworld and be taken seriously by the scariest Mafiosi, bikers, and Columbian drug traffickers in America. The answer was simple: I always acted like I belonged. I never acted scared."

He told the Rafu that he had been on probation, on bail, on trial, or in jail constantly since he was a teenager, and that kind of lifestyle certainly had its toll on him. He had lost the love of his life, friends and mentors. Gallo grew tired of running from police and being "frantic all the time," as much as he loved meeting new people and experiencing new "adventures."

"I thought I was free, but I was never free," he remembers. "Even though people thought I was having a fun life, it wasn't fun for me. It's just a grind for me everyday doing this."

"Everybody looks at you like, I am Porno Kenny. I mean, this is not cool. It's fine at first when you're 20, but it really gets to be a grind. You're not normal."

In 1997, Gallo got exactly what he needed—a way out. He was contacted by the FBI to become an informant. Although that meant for him to remain active in the criminal world in order to provide the information, he welcomed the "born again" moment.

"They told me, 'If you come to our side, we can give you a fresh start,'" Gallo continued. "To me, that was the key word."

After working for the Colombo family in New York doing anything from bookmaking, to arm robbery, to escorting port starts and prostitutes, he was finally done with it. With two suitcases, Gallo started moving from city to city, staying at hundreds of hotels for almost a year. He's been on the FBI's witness protection since 2004.

He is no longer an FBI undercover informant. He goes to work, practices martial arts, reads books and takes care of two dogs. Currently living in Southern California, Kenny Gallo truly cherishes his new identity as a "normal guy."

But, what does being "normal" mean to him?

"Coming home, doing my things, I am not looking over my shoulder all the time, not getting hustled by somebody," he said. "I want to have a family. I don't know if I want to have kids, but I want to have the normal life."

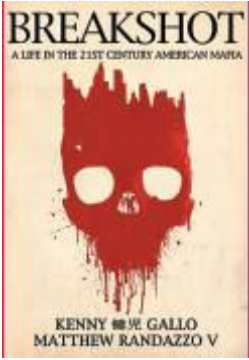
Gallo also wishes to do speaking engagements and consulting on gang, witness protection and legal matters. And, writing the book is part of that aspiration.

"A lot of people, kids might take [being an outlaw] in the wrong way, like, 'oh, this is really cool.' But it is not," he said. "I'm way much happier now than I ever was before. Just calm. I earn my paycheck, nobody is gonna take it. I'm not gonna get my door kicked in, I don't have to keep moving because I get bugged. I just like a healthy life."

"I enjoy being responsible for somebody, something other than myself."

"Breakshot" will be available at bookstores nationwide on Aug. 1. There is also a deal being crafted in Japan for a feature film .

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Breakshot by Kenny Kenji Gallo, Matthew Randazzo V Phoenix Books 416 pages, \$24.95

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MIKEY HIRANO CULROSS/Rafu Shimpō

Kenny "Kenji" Gallo discusses his autobiographical book, during an interview at the Rafu offices.

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