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May 5, 2025

Honorable Judge Lawrence J. Vilardo

U.S. District Court

Western District of New York

2 Niagara Square

Buffalo, NY 14202

RE: Sentencing Letter on Behalf of Joseph Bongiovanni

Dear Judge Vilardo,

My name is Ashley Schuh, and I am Joseph Bongiovanni's sister-in-law. I've attended both of Joe's trials. I've followed every moment, every word, every witness. I've watched the way the facts were shaped, how character was flattened, and how a story I know to be untrue unfolded in a courtroom that was supposed to represent truth and fairness.

What I'm writing to you today is not a plea - it's a portrait. Because if you're going to sentence Joe, then I believe you should at least know the whole man. Not just the version of him that was presented in court and the media, but the man we know - the man we've lived beside, trusted, leaned on, and loved.

Joe came into our lives over a decade ago when he married my sister. From day one, there was something different about him. He was steady. Respectful. Soft-spoken. Kind. I'll never forget the first time I saw them together - how my sister smiled in a way I hadn't seen before. She was safe. She was grounded. And I knew it was because of him.

Joe never needed to be the center of attention. He's not loud, flashy, or arrogant. He's one of those rare men who leads by example, not by words. He's the kind of guy who shows up without being asked. If it's snowing, he's already outside shoveling the walkway. If your tire's low, he's got the air compressor running before you even notice. He checks your oil, brings your garbage cans in, walks your dog when you're sick. He just does, and never needs a thank-you.

And he's been that constant presence for all of us - especially me. A few years ago, I went through a painful divorce. Everything in my life felt like it was falling apart. The person I had

counted on wasn't there anymore. But Joe was. He came over with groceries when I didn't have the strength to cook. He checked on me when no one else thought to. He didn't make it about him. He didn't lecture me or try to fix things. He was just... there. Gentle. Respectful. Present.

That's who Joe is.

He's been the most stable male figure in our lives - and I don't say that lightly. He's not just my brother-in-law. He's like a brother to me. To all of us. Raised by women, Joe carries himself with a rare respect. He doesn't speak down to people. He doesn't brag. He's a true gentleman - old-school in the best sense. He's a teddy bear, honestly. Strong, but soft. Protective, but kind.

He and my sister built a simple, beautiful life together. They weren't chasing attention. They didn't care about impressing people. They were happiest at home - watching movies with their dog, painting model cars, taking care of the house, working in the yard. Their love is deep, respectful, and rooted in friendship.

And now I've watched all of that be torn away. Slowly, brutally, piece by piece.

Joe dedicated over 20 years to serving this country and this community. He took his job seriously. Not because he wanted power, but because he believed in what the badge meant. He wasn't out trying to be a tough guy. He did the work because it mattered to him. He wore the badge with integrity. Never once - not once - did I see Joe act like someone who thought the rules didn't apply to him.

Which is why the accusations against him make no sense to the people who actually know him. He's not reckless. He's not dishonest. He wouldn't throw away everything he built for anyone - especially not for someone like Louie Salva.

Your Honor, I sat through Louie Salva's testimony, and what I witnessed troubles me deeply. Louie was a mess - everyone knew it, including Joe. Joe has always had a soft spot for people who struggle. He wanted to help Louie, believed he could be better. That compassion was Joe's only mistake.

But the story Louie told on that stand simply doesn't hold together. You heard the same testimony I did, and I respectfully ask you to consider these contradictions:

Louie testified that Joe was involved in the marijuana grow operation in his basement. Yet in that same testimony, Louie claimed he later had to tell Joe about the operation when Joe "smelled it" during a visit. Your Honor, if Joe was truly involved from the beginning, why would Louie need to tell him about it later? He would have already known.

Ron Serio testified in detail about how he set up the entire operation - grow lights on a moving track specifically to avoid detection by the electric company. Louie himself testified they

vented it so well that his own children living in the house couldn't smell it. So how did Joe supposedly smell it during one brief visit? And if Joe was giving advice on avoiding detection, as claimed, why did Ron Serio testify that he was the one who designed all those sophisticated measures?

I watched Louie on that stand. His story shifted. Dates didn't match. Details contradicted each other from one answer to the next. I'm not a lawyer, Your Honor, but I know the difference between someone telling the truth and someone struggling to keep a story straight.

The truth is simpler: Louie would never have told Joe what he was really doing. He would've been too embarrassed, too scared. Joe stood for everything Louie couldn't live up to. Joe was the authority figure, the one with integrity. Louie was in trouble and looking for any way out.

Over the years since this began, countless people have approached me - at the spa, at the grocery store, walking down the street - and they all say the same thing: "This doesn't make sense. Joe is not that guy." And they're right. Everyone who knows Joe in this community knows the man he truly is.

Your Honor, Joe has already lost everything. His job. His reputation. His peace. His father passed during this ordeal. His mother has been sick. His therapist died. Even his dog is nearing the end. And Joe is no longer the same person. When I look at him now, I see someone barely holding on.

He should be enjoying his retirement - going to breakfast with my sister, taking road trips, relaxing for the first time in decades. Instead, he's stuck in limbo. Shattered. Waiting.

What's happened here isn't justice. Joe is not the man the prosecution tried to paint. If you send him to prison, you won't be putting away a criminal. You'll be locking up an innocent man who's already been stripped of nearly everything - his career, his identity, his dignity.

Please, Your Honor. See the man behind the accusations. See the husband. The brother. The friend. The man who's lived with honor for over two decades in service to this community and who never once asked for applause. Let this be the end of his suffering - not the beginning of even more.

I beg you to consider not just the story that was told in court, but the story of the man's entire life. The contradictions in the testimony. The character of the man you're sentencing. And the devastating cost he's already paid.

Thank you for reading this, and for considering the truth.

With all my heart,

Ashley Schuh