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Judge Orders Review of Vet's Contested Will

The action comes after The Times' investigation into misconduct by professional conservators.

By Evelyn Larrubia, Jack Leonard and Robin Fields

Times Staff Writers

November 16, 2005

A Los Angeles County judge appointed a lawyer Tuesday to investigate a will in which a senile, nearly blind World War II veteran left his entire estate to his caretaker.

Superior Court Judge Aviva K. Bobb, who approved the will in February, acted on the same day that a Times article raised questions about the authenticity of the will.

Also Tuesday, the county Board of Supervisors created a task force to review misconduct by professional conservators documented by The Times.

"Tragically, there appears to be widespread abuse ... by apparently unscrupulous conservators who may be manipulating our legal system to exploit the elderly and their possessions," said Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, who sponsored the motion.

Burke, a lawyer who has done probate work, said she was "totally appalled" to read reports that some conservators neglected their clients, mismanaged their money and charged high fees that depleted their estates.

Conservators are court-appointed guardians who control the lives, property and finances of adults unable to manage their own affairs. The four-part Times series was based on a review of more than 2,400 cases, including every one handled by a professional conservator in Southern California from 1997 to 2003.

One of the articles described the career of Anne L. Chavis, 72, a nurse who served as conservator for dozens of people, nearly all of them disabled veterans.

Chavis placed some of her clients in the care of Verlene Cameron, who operates a boarding home in South Los Angeles. Among those clients was Louis P. Williams, a former longshoreman with dementia, advanced kidney disease and other ailments.

In 2000, Cameron wrote and had Williams sign a crude one-paragraph will leaving his estate to her. Cameron said Williams, then 80, told her he wanted her to be his heir, and that Chavis suggested she write the will.

"I MR. WILLIAM WOULD LIKE TO MAKE VERLENE CAMERON MY BENIFACARY OF MY MONEY; SHE IS TO MAKE ALL DECISION PLANNING MY BURIAL, THANK YOU," it said. Chavis' bookkeeper notarized the document, using a date different from that on the will.

By law, caregivers are not allowed to inherit from their clients unless the will is approved in advance by a judge or reviewed by an independent attorney to rule out fraud. Neither step was taken in this case.

After Williams died in 2002, Cameron was appointed administrator of his estate. Williams' cousin, Idell Alexander, objected, saying the will appeared improper. A lawyer for the Department of Veterans Affairs also protested.

In February, Bobb dismissed their complaints, ruling that the VA had no standing to intervene and that Alexander had missed a filing deadline. The ruling cleared the way for Cameron to collect more than \$60,000.

After Times reporters submitted questions about the case to Bobb last month, she stayed her ruling and called Tuesday's hearing.

In court, Bobb said she was appointing a lawyer to investigate whether "there was inappropriate behavior" on Cameron's part.

Bobb said Cameron had asked to be appointed conservator in another case, and that she could not act on the request until she got to the bottom of Williams' will.

"The circumstances of this will ... must be resolved," Bobb said.

The attorney Bobb appointed, Andrew M. Wallet, said he would demand that Cameron return Williams' inheritance. "I want everything back," Wallet said. "That's what I think makes sense."

Cameron's lawyer said she would return the money if the court invalidated the will. "She is able and willing to do whatever is right," said John Mickus. "It has never been her intention to pull a fast one on anyone."

If the will is thrown out, Williams' estate would be divided among his surviving relatives.

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