

Shameful Abuse Of Probate

Rick Green
March 4, 2008

Rose Quattro is an 88-year-old widow in a wheelchair who just wants to live quietly at her East Hartford home, watch some TV, read and perhaps do a little baking now and then.

Is that too much to ask?

It is, apparently, for our probate court system.

A phalanx of court-appointed lawyers — acting on her behalf and on her dime — is fighting Quattro's desire to live her remaining days with her son.

"I just want to know why I am here and why I can't live my life the way I'm supposed to at my age? Everybody is making things difficult for me. Why?" she asked Probate Judge Steven M. Zelman one day during a hearing last month. "That's all I want to know is why."

Quattro and her son James have lived together in a house her parents built for all of his 58 years. You can imagine the relationship between these two.

"I am an independent person. I can do things on my own and make sure that they get done," she said at a February hearing. "You all know that I was — I went into a convalescent home that I got discharged [from] and now I am facing all these problems. Why? I didn't do anything. I'm treated like a criminal."

Some criminals receive better treatment than Quattro, who suffers a variety of chronic conditions. She is sometimes forgetful, but Quattro and her son say that she can live on her own with some help. In court, the lawyers quiz her about the most private details of her life. They imply that her son, her only heir, could be out to bilk her — and worse. **At one hearing last fall, five attorneys showed up, all billing Quattro's estate.**

Some of the court-appointed lawyers — **including Steven M. Allen, her conservator**; Thomas S. O'Grady, lawyer for Allen; and Joseph Prokop, **court-appointed guardian ad litem** — are **openly feuding with Quattro's volunteer lawyers** from Greater Hartford Legal Aid.

When I read court transcripts and the piles of briefs and motions and met with Quattro, her son and her Legal Aid lawyers, I was left with a single, bewildering thought: Why?

Quattro's life landed under court control last summer after she was hospitalized for an infection and ended up in a nursing home. A dispute arose between her son and the nursing home that she was set to be released from. The nursing home — part of the infamous, bankrupt Haven Healthcare chain recently exposed by my colleagues Lisa Chedekel and Lynne Tuohy — went to the probate court, which named a conservator for her and appointed a lawyer to look out for her.

While the lawyers and the nursing home bickered, **Quattro remained against her will** at the Haven Health Center of East Hartford, running up a \$51,646.63 tab when she could have been home. She was **finally released in November, but still remains under a conservatorship**, stripped of her rights and without access to Social Security and a small pension. Her son pays for a full-time aide to assist him with Rose Quattro's care.

The law is clear, by the way, when it comes to probate court taking away a person's rights: "If the court of probate having jurisdiction finds a ward to be capable of caring for himself or herself, the court shall, upon hearing and after notice, order that the conservatorship of the person be

terminated."

Marilyn Denny, Rose Quattro's Legal Aid lawyer, said "the question is, is [James] taking care of his mother? **There is not a shred of evidence that he has ever not taken good care of her.**"

"Her estate is being dissipated. The nursing home still hasn't been paid," Denny said. "They have made her life and her son's life a living hell."

Probate courts have "a paternalistic attitude toward protecting people," she said. "Sometimes what people need the most is protection from the system."

Rose Quattro lived a simple working life. She raised a boy, held down a full-time job and baked her Italian cookies in a home that she remains proud to live in. She deserves better.

Make no mistake. This could be your mother. Or you.

Rick Green's column appears on Tuesdays and Fridays. He can be reached at rgreen@courant.com.

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