

Ray Brandt's widow will lose control of auto sales empire under judge's order

JOHN SIMERMAN | Staff writer

A Jefferson Parish judge on Thursday threw out a legal challenge to the last will and testament that auto magnate Ray Brandt signed weeks before his death in 2019, following testimony from widow Jessica Brandt and her housecleaner that shed little light on claims it was done improperly.

Barring a successful appeal, District Judge Lee Faulkner's ruling will strip [Jessica Brandt](#) of control over an empire of auto dealerships and collision centers across Louisiana and Mississippi, the centerpiece of an estate valued above \$300 million.

Jessica Brandt has held the reins as CEO of Ray Brandt Auto Group since its namesake died of pancreatic cancer at age 72 in November 2019.

Only after his death did she learn that the will and a trust amendment he signed weeks earlier on the couch at his Old Metairie mansion directed his entire estate to be placed into a trust under the control of Marc Milano, principal at Archbishop Rummel High School.

Ray Brandt's 2019 will also held a "no contest" clause that could cut out legal challengers. The challenge to the probated will was filed by Todd Dempster, who works under Jessica Brandt as chief operating officer of the auto group. Jessica Brandt, however, bankrolled Dempster's legal attack with payments from the estate, she testified on Thursday.

In rejecting a petition to annul the 2019 will, Faulkner dismissed a claim from Jessica Brandt that a witness to the signing, former Orleans Parish criminal court judge Terry Alarcon, was in the bathroom at the time. Alarcon is deceased, and in testimony, Jessica Brandt acknowledged she couldn't be sure which documents were being signed at that time.

The legal fight has pitted Jessica Brandt against her two adult grandchildren, Alexis and Zachary Hartline, over control of the estate. The massive estate also includes Pascal's Manale, the famed Italian-Creole restaurant on Napoleon Avenue that Brandt purchased in his waning days.

The fight has included eviction threats, allegations that Jessica Brandt committed financial misconduct, and a defamation suit that she filed against Milano. The high-stakes succession fight was [headed for a settlement](#) over the summer, but those talks fizzled.

Under any of three wills that Faulkner put in play last year, Jessica Brandt will receive income from the estate until her death, when the trust will be dissolved and

its assets split between the Hartlines. Jessica Brandt acknowledged on the stand that she has fought to maintain control of the dealerships until then.

Dempster's attorney, Philip Franco, argued that Brandt's 2019 will had an "attestation" clause that was fatally flawed, because it didn't indicate Brandt signed it in a notary's presence or together with two witnesses.

Faulkner initially agreed. Last year, he tossed out Brandt's 2019 will and a previous one from 2015 for the same reason. The ruling, later overturned on other grounds, seemed to leave Jessica Brandt in control under an earlier will.

But the Louisiana Supreme Court in a series of rulings has discouraged tossing wills over technical flaws when the intent is clear and there's no sign of fraud. On Thursday, Faulkner seemed to heed those rulings, though he didn't elaborate on his order.

Faulkner rejected an attempt by Dempster to cast doubt on Ray Brandt's intent, by refusing to allow testimony about purported minutes of a corporate meeting at Brandt's mansion on the day he signed the will. The minutes, produced months later, claim that he insisted that Jessica Brandt would still run the car business.

"We were very pleased with Judge Faulkner's ruling today upholding the last wishes of Ray Brandt. This proceeding has gone on far too long as it is, and we're ready to take the next step to close this out," said Randy Smith, the Hartlines' attorney.

Faulkner ordered an accounting of the estate from Jessica Brandt, but Franco said afterward that Dempster would appeal, saying the case was "fraught with several complicated legal issues."

Appeals courts have reversed three of Faulkner's rulings since the legal challenge began.