

In Ray Brandt estate battle, widow tries to evict family from Old Metairie compound

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February 3, 2021



The widow of car-dealership magnate Ray Brandt filed court papers to evict her family from their Old Metairie compound on Tuesday, the latest escalation of a bitter family battle over control of the massive estate that Brandt left behind when he died in late 2019.

Jessica Fussell Brandt filed an eviction petition in the 5th Justice of the Peace Court in Jefferson Parish against her daughter, Julie Hartline; her son-in-law, Darryl Hartline, and Alexis and Zachary Hartline, the two grandchildren against whom she is pitted in a legal fight over an estate valued at more than \$300 million.

Before Brandt's death from pancreatic cancer at age 72, they all shared a compound on Falcon Road that includes two mansions backing up to Metairie Country Club.

Jessica Brandt has been trying on and off for months to sell the property, which belongs to Ray Brandt's estate, as its executrix.

The family members living there have balked, at one point pulling "For Sale" signs from the lawn.

Her move to evict them comes just a week after Jessica Brandt scored a big legal win in her bid to maintain control of her deceased husband's estate -- most notably a lucrative array of auto dealerships and collision centers across Louisiana and Mississippi.

Auto magnate Ray Brandt's widow wins big round in court fight over massive estate

A Jefferson Parish judge on Jan. 25 invalidated the last will and testament that Ray Brandt signed weeks before his death in November 2019, and another one he drafted in 2015. District Judge Lee Faulkner Jr. ruled that both wills contained a fatal flaw in the way they were notarized; neither recorded the presence of Ray Brandt, the witnesses and notary together when they signed it.

The decision, which is being appealed, appears to leave the fate of Brandt's estate to a will he made out in 2010. Unlike the others, that will places Jessica Brandt in firm control of Brandt's estate and trust, including the auto dealerships, until her death.

Ultimately, Ray Brandt laid out that her grandchildren, whom he legally adopted as adults shortly before he died, would split the estate's assets.

Jessica Brandt issued a statement through her lawyers after Faulkner's ruling, saying she was "most pleased with the prospect of her family beginning the healing process."

But her eviction filing revealed that, that same day, her lawyers fired off an email re-urging the family to abandon the property by Jan. 31.

"Regretfully, Ray Brandt's widow has chosen to fight, not heal, her own family in the wake of his untimely death," said attorney Randy Smith, who represents Alexis and Zachary Hartline. "Instead of respecting Ray Brandt's clear wishes, she has rejected efforts to mediate and left her own family no choice but to respond in the courts."

Fate of Ray Brandt's auto empire in doubt amid roiling family squabble over estate

The eviction case will be heard Feb. 9.

In a statement explaining her decision, Jessica Brandt described "multiple citations" issued by Jefferson Parish officials for violations at the compound.

The most recent citation came Jan. 21, for a trailer and mud buggy parked in a driveway on a vacant lot.

"When Ray passed away, I allowed my family to continue living at this property and paid the expenses for my family members living there for 14 months," her statement read.

"As far back as November of last year and then again Jan. 5, I informed my family of the necessity to sell this property. These family members already own two other lovely homes, one in Metairie and one in Fort Beauregard," she added.

“Following the most recent property citation Jan. 21, we sent a reminder to my family members living there... Unfortunately, I had to take the legal step today so I could move forward with the sale of this house.”

Most evictions across the country are on pause under a U.S. Centers for Disease Control moratorium aimed at keeping tenants in place during the pandemic, but the freeze applies only to those who earn \$99,000 or less and have suffered a financial loss.

The compound where the family settled seven years ago is valued at more than \$8 million.

The heart of the legal dispute pits Jessica Brandt against Archbishop Rummel High School Principal Marc Milano, whom Ray Brandt named in his 2019 will as the trustee to oversee the auto group and the rest of his estate until she dies. Milano has accused Jessica Brandt of siphoning money from the estate and attempting to claim an ownership interest in the dealerships against Ray Brandt’s wishes. In response, Jessica Brandt sued Milano for defamation.

Ray Brandt's widow sues Rummel principal Marc Milano for defamation

On Monday, the grandchildren filed their own legal action, challenging a petition to put Ray Brandt’s 2010 will into effect. They argued that the trust that Ray Brandt set up in 2015 makes clear that he meant for Milano to oversee the assets.