

'Stop all of this!' Ray Brandt's widow bemoans the family battle over his massive estate

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Jessica Brandt sat in her spacious living room last week, miffed at the state of her family affairs.

The slain alligator that recently landed in the driveway of the family compound abutting Metairie Country Club, followed by a visit from state wildlife agents, didn't do much to improve her spirits, she said.

“Just stop! Stop, stop all of this!” she pleaded. “If I don't push them at this point to resolve this, it's never going to stop. They don't have a clue what they're doing.”

She added: “Do not misunderstand that they are the most important people in my life.”

The widow of car megadealer Ray Brandt says she's been forced to take drastic actions against her kin, in and out of court, trying to force an end to a legal brawl over her husband's estate that has pitted her against her two adult grandchildren and Marc Milano, the principal at Archbishop Rummel High School in Metairie.

It's come to the point, she said, that she's cut off financial support to her daughter, Julie Hartline, and both grandchildren, Alexis and Zachary Hartline.

Brandt also filed papers this month to evict them from the huge compound where they had all lived together for years until Ray Brandt died of pancreatic cancer in November 2019, after which Jessica Brandt moved out.

But that's now on hold. A justice of the peace declined to consider tossing the Hartlines from the property while a high-stakes succession battle plays out in front of Judge Lee Faulkner Jr. in the 24th Judicial District Court.

The widow of car-dealership magnate Ray Brandt filed court papers to evict her family from their Old Metairie compound on Tuesday, the latest ...

Faulkner last month invalidated Ray Brandt's 2019 will and an earlier will Brandt had drawn up in 2015, on technical grounds over the way they were notarized. The ruling, a tentative win for Jessica Brandt, has left the estate in legal limbo for the moment, tangled up in appeals. Faulkner has scheduled a hearing next month to sort it out.

The legal and family drama stems from a document that Ray Brandt drew up weeks before his death at age 72, tapping Milano to oversee a trust he'd set up to hold his entire estate after his death.

What is undisputed is that Jessica Brandt gets the income from the estate while she's alive, and that the assets will be split between the grandchildren when she dies.

What's in play in the meantime, though, is control over 14 auto dealerships and a half-dozen collision centers that employ roughly 800 people across Louisiana and Mississippi -- the centerpiece of an estate valued at more than \$300 million.

Now the CEO of Ray Brandt Auto Group, Jessica Brandt insists she's not motivated by greed, but by a desire to preserve agreements with auto manufacturers who may walk away if it all lands in the inexperienced hands of a high school principal.

Her husband had made clear shortly before his death, she said, that he wanted her to run the family business -- even though his 2019 will said Milano would hold that power.

"My concern is who's going to take care of these dealerships if I'm not there to take care of them, to run them like I know Ray ran them," Jessica Brandt said. "Marc knows nothing about running a dealership. The only time Marc's been in a store is to buy a car."

When Ray Brandt died inside his Old Metairie mansion last year from pancreatic cancer, the 72-year-old left behind an auto dealership empire a...

Milano, though, said Friday that he spoke at length with Ray Brandt in his dying days about his wishes for the family business upon his death, and his hopes for Jessica Brandt.

“He was very clear that he wanted her to enjoy life and he wanted her to collect her net income and be a grandmother,” Milano said.

He said Ray Brandt, who was known as a whip-smart businessman, was fully aware that he was placing Milano in charge of the dealerships, both in his 2019 will and an amendment to the 2015 trust he’d set up.

“That was his desire, for me to step into that role,” Milano said of leading the auto group.

“He went into great detail three or four weeks before he passed. We had talked for years about different things, about the dealerships, but he never wanted to pull me away from Rummel,” Milano added. “He would often ask me, ‘How much longer do you have, son?’

Milano said he gave Brandt, a duck hunting partner, his word.

“He said, ‘Pal, you’re the only one I can trust that will follow this trust the way it’s written,’” Milano said. “I promised as long as I have air in my lungs that I would follow his trust and protect these kids and all beneficiaries.”

Jessica Brandt, the widow of auto dealership magnate Ray Brandt, scored a big legal victory on Monday in her bid to maintain control of his ma...

Jessica Fussell began working for Ray Brandt as a secretary and paralegal. They were together for 28 years, and married for close to 10 when he died.

She wouldn’t say when she first learned that he’d chosen Milano to helm his trust, but she insists it was a mistake. His idea, she said, was for Milano to act as a buffer, “to keep me from giving Zack and Lexie the company store, to keep me from giving them everything they want.”

In testimony last year, Todd Dempster, the chief operating officer of the auto group, suggested that Ray Brandt had more in mind for Milano than just reining in the grandkids. Dempster, who is not an heir or beneficiary, recounted an intimate conversation with his old boss on the day a priest was called to administer last rites.

“He’ll be here,” Brandt said of Milano, in Dempster’s recollection. “He’ll help you.”

But Dempster has since sided with Jessica Brandt, lodging an outside challenge to the 2019 will that named Milano as trustee.

The legal dustup began last year when Milano began pushing in court to transfer the estate’s assets into the trust -- and out of Jessica Brandt’s control. Milano accused her of financial misconduct, including diverting estate assets, and stalling.

Jessica Brandt has since sued Milano for defamation.

The legal battle over the estate of auto dealership magnate Ray Brandt has reached a fevered pitch, with Brandt's widow accusing Archbishop Ru...

But she acknowledged errors were made when she amended operating agreements with auto manufacturers after her husband's death, listing herself on some of them as owner, not as executor of his estate. Her attorney, David Sherman, described them as mistakes that will be corrected.

At this point, Milano's role is uncertain. If Faulkner's ruling stands, Brandt's massive estate would seemingly revert to a 2010 will that places Jessica Brandt in control over the trust.

Jessica Brandt said the dispute has only ripped apart what once was a close bond.

She and Milano were "best friends" for years, she said, describing herself as his "biggest cheerleader" and a tireless fundraiser for the Rummel principal, who arrived in 2015.

"I'm not talking about sitting in a chair sipping a cocktail. I was stirring pots and walking around selling 50/50 tickets, anything I could to help Marc, raise him in the community, the principal that was going to take Rummel back to its days of glory," she said.

"He and I had a thing. Every time we'd hang up, he'd say, 'I love you,' and I'd say, 'Most.' And we never hung up without saying that. So I don't know where it went wrong. I truly do not."

Milano said his relationship with Jessica Brandt "went south" when he began last spring asking for operating agreements and applications to vehicle manufacturers.

"When I started making formal requests for information, she cancelled board meetings," he said.

In the meantime, Jessica Brandt says the family's Old Metairie compound is in disrepair and bleeding red ink. She's been trying to sell it as executor of her husband's estate, but her family has refused to leave.

Brandt listed bills to maintain the property since the start of 2020 at \$354,000 – well over the median home price in Metairie. That includes nearly \$200,000 in taxes and insurance and \$13,000 in landscaping.

The dead alligator appeared on the driveway a few months ago. Zachary Hartline, who runs a hunting and fishing business, brought it home to skin. The scene, his grandmother said, left a negative impression on the neighbors.

"I want to sell the house while there's still something there to sell. If it's destroyed, do you think somebody's going to come in and say, 'I'll pay \$5 million for a house ... Oh, look right there, the dog has peed all over the marble floor?'" she asked.



State fish and wildlife agents were called out recently after Zachary Hartline, the grandson of auto megadealer Ray Brandt, brought this alligator home to skin at the family's compound in Old Metairie. Brandt's widow, Jessica Brandt, cited the incident as she described her desire to sell the property.

BY JOHN SIMERMAN | Staff writer

In any case, she said, the proceeds will go into the trust, which is destined for her grandchildren. Ray Brandt, who was childless, adopted them as adults weeks before he died.

Attorney Randy Smith, who represents Zachary and Alexis Hartline, blamed any maintenance problems at the Brandt compound on Jessica Brandt's refusal to pay for repairs.

She has fired her son-in-law, Darryl Hartline, and furloughed her daughter, Julie, from their jobs at the family business. Last week, she said she was halting her grandkids' monthly stipends, which she said had reached \$20,000 a month apiece.

Smith described it as a squeeze.

"The tradition in this family was that they all lived together in that house and that everybody, including Jessica ... everybody was taken care of by Ray. They had allowances. Darryl and Julie had jobs. The house was taken care of," Smith said.

“She’s got the money and is not doing it. Then there was the eviction.”

Smith also called the alligator incident a smokescreen, saying the state agency left after confirming that Zachary Hartline had complied with all state laws.

“There’s nothing illegal about what he was doing,” Smith said. “People do that. It seems kind of a snobby type of thing to say.”

Ray Brandt “would be turning in his grave with the idea she’d be selling this compound,” Smith argued.

“It’s all nonsense that she has to do it for their own good. What she should be doing is stepping up to maintain the house. The assets belong to them.”

The family members continue to speak, Jessica Brandt said. Madden, Milano’s attorney, said the sides are arranging a mediation session for next week, to find any common ground before next month’s court hearing.

Jessica Brandt said she’s offered numerous concessions, including keeping the compound, in exchange for oversight of the auto group.

Milano said he’s offered to install Jessica Brandt as CEO over several years in a compromise that would still follow Ray Brandt’s 2019 will. In that scenario, she would be an employee.

Milano balked at Jessica Brandt’s plan to sell the compound, saying it wasn’t what Ray Brandt had in mind.

“He said he didn’t want the kids’ lives to change at all because he was dying of cancer.”