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Megabucks L.A. art collector Fred Weisman died hoping his elaborate will would immortalize him. But his trophy wife and a small-time judge and his cronies got hold of the estate instead

BYLINE: By **Jill Stewart**

BODY:

When the renowned L.A. art collector Frederick R. Weisman died in the fall of 1994, he probably went more peacefully than most men, having spent years creating a supposedly airtight will that would ensure his art collection's fame, make his name immortal through philanthropies, and build his fortune for his many heirs to enjoy.

The mischievous and quirky Weisman, who was painted by Warhol, dined with senators, and traveled the world in a Lear jet decorated by artist Ed Ruscha, would be horrified were he to walk into a Santa Monica courthouse to watch the curious proceedings these last two years, as his will and his estate are picked apart like a slab of pork thrown to buzzards.

What is unfolding today in the courtroom of probate judge Robert Letteau may rank as one of the greatest scandals to ever hit the L.A. art world, a case of a small-time judge pushing the boundaries of ethics as he appoints friends and business associates to run Weisman's vast estate, and of a manipulative trophy wife, Billie Milam Weisman, who has insinuated herself into the powerful position of controlling his art collection--something her late husband and his lawyers never intended.

Fred Weisman left an estate of nearly \$250 million, and the issue of who controls it has sparked a high-stakes struggle. The winners, so far, appear to be longtime friends of the judge himself--unremarkable men who are being paid the princely wage of \$25,000 a month apiece by Letteau, who now has unlimited access to Weisman's once carefully protected fortune.

The other big winner is Billie Weisman, a fact which has left Fred's relatives and lifelong friends in a state of near disbelief. Made the titular director of the art collection by Fred shortly before he died, Billie--who never earned more than \$45,000 a year before marrying Fred---has begun to dramatically rewrite his very history, elevating herself into a key role as co-discoverer and co-collector of a modern art trove that was, in fact, assembled almost entirely by her late husband.

With so many unintended winners, there are, not surprisingly, an equal number of unintended losers. Chief among them is Fred's lifelong confidante and chief financial officer, Mitchell Reinschreiber, whom Fred entrusted with most major decisions to be made after his death. Today, Reinschreiber has been removed as co-trustee of the estate by Letteau; his five longtime accounting employees have been hired away from his Century City accounting firm by Letteau's court appointees; his house is up for sale; and he is facing financial ruin.

Another unintended loser is Fred's cousin Carol Weisman Garratt, a San Diego realtor who says she is losing thousands of dollars each month because Letteau's appointees have approved a new investment strategy for her inherited trust fund, which differs radically from the one intended by her cousin.

Were Fred to size up the crowd running his affairs today, he would not recognize a single face--save for that of the dark-eyed, hard-edged Billie and her lawyer--among those posturing and arguing over the estate. In fact, it is almost impossible to locate, in court transcripts over the past year, any mention at all of Fred's will or his stated wishes.

"These strangers are controlling my Dad's estate," says Richard Weisman, his multimillionaire son. "They have found the pot of gold, with my father paying the bill."

Richard largely stayed out of the legal fray until recently because almost nobody associated with the estate has escaped unscathed: Judge Letteau has accused the straight-laced Reinschreiber of overbilling Fred by \$3 million and is putting him on trial in September; Reinschreiber's daughter, Woodland Hills investment counselor Debra Reda, has been accused by Letteau's cronies of investing a dozen heirs' money in "junk bonds"; Fred's longtime attorney J. Coleman Bean has been accused of padding his bills by \$3 million and forced to pay a partial settlement; an art staff hand-picked by Fred to oversee his collection has fled or been forced out; and now Richard Weisman himself is under attack for failing to spend his own inheritance as Letteau's hired hands see fit.

"My father isn't just turning over in his grave about Judge Letteau and his cronies and their little scheme to control the estate with Billie Milam Weisman," says Richard. "My father is standing up in his grave and walking straight out of it."

At the heart of this feud is the takeover of the estate by two interim trustees

selected by Letteau--his longtime associates Malcolm Smith and Michael Chmura, a lawyer and accountant respectively, who are not considered players in the rarefied business of major estate management. Chmura works out of a single room in a strip mall, and the aging Smith presides over a dwindling practice. But they were given free rein by Letteau to spend Fred's millions. (Their attorneys, probate experts Lyn Hinojosa, Bruce Ross, and Robert Sacks, refused to comment for this story.)

So far, an estimated \$2 million has been drained from the estate to support a phalanx of 11 lawyers who work for people Fred Weisman never knew. The millions have attracted top-flight lawyers like Ross and Sacks, who have won so many rulings from Letteau that they often appear to be directing the judge rather than the other way around.

The seemingly bottomless pit of money from which these lawyers are being paid--Fred's estate---has proved too daunting for Fred's lifelong business advisor, Mitchell Reinschreiber, to fight, and he is now ruined, both financially and physically. Lynne Reinschreiber, his wife, says, "My husband was a vibrant, successful man before Judge Letteau and his henchmen went after him. Now we are selling our house to pay our attorneys, and my husband can barely walk."

The extremely ill Reinschreiber today cannot be recognized as the confident, suavely dressed man seen in the hundreds of photos of him and Fred at family and company functions. "Every day there's some new kind of hell," Reinschreiber says.

But the single worst day came shortly after Reinschreiber appealed to the California Supreme Court to remove Letteau from the Weisman case. The appeal was denied, and not long after, on August 16, 1996, Letteau suspended Reinschreiber as a co-trustee of the estate. That day, Letteau's longtime friend, attorney Thomas McCullough, walked into Reinschreiber's Century City accounting firm and, under orders from Letteau, hired away all of Reinschreiber's employees to work for the opposition.

"My Dad never spent any time befriending his employees," says Reinschreiber's daughter, Debra Reda. "His worst failing is that he's gruff, tough, and some would say he's mean. So when Judge Letteau's pal hired them all away, not one stood up for Dad."

Until last January, the Reinschreiber family was virtually alone in challenging the takeover of Fred's estate by the court and outside attorneys. But this year, Fred's son Richard decided he'd had enough when Letteau's appointed trustees, Smith and Chmura, with the backing of Billie Weisman, tried to expand their power by demanding control over a trust for Fred's two retarded adult children. (The retarded siblings, Richard's brother and sister, live in separate institutions and their modest trust of \$260,000 is overseen by Reinschreiber.)

For Richard, that was the final straw. "I will do everything in my power to see that Billie and this judge's cronies have no say over the lives of my brother and sister," he says.

For the first time since Letteau got involved in 1996, another local judge had a chance to make a ruling in the estate battle because of the fight over the retarded Weisman siblings. Santa Monica Probate Court Judge Irving A. Shimer, stunned to see so many high-powered attorneys fighting for a say in the lives of two retarded people, lashed out at the motives of Letteau's appointed trustees, Smith and Chmura.

"The conservatorship for these siblings is peanuts for this estate--\$260,000!" Shimer boomed from the bench. "I don't begin to understand what is going on when we have the top attorneys in town here! There's an agenda, and it stinks!"

Outside Letteau's courtroom, in L.A.'s gossipy art community, much of the talk concerning Fred Weisman's estate centers on Billie, a 48-year-old who today favors a severe chignon and dark Neiman Marcus suits, but who, as a striking younger woman, snared the elderly multimillionaire after his years of open philandering.

Fred was so well-known for juggling mistresses and girlfriends that one longtime friend still recalls a classic moment at an art opening in Palm Springs to which Fred had invited not only his latest mistress, Billie, but also his East Coast mistress and a third girlfriend.

"One of the guests at the opening leaned over to me and said, 'Who are all these beautiful women?,' " recalls the friend. "And the answer someone offered was, 'Those are Fred's girlfriends representing different parts of the country.' "

Billie came on the scene in the mid-1980s in a more curious way than most of the others. An obscure statue restorer for the L.A. County Museum of Art, she arrived at Fred's Holmby Hills mansion one day to clean the stunning marble, granite, and brass statues by Bottero and Henry Moore that virtually littered the grounds of the estate on Carolwood Drive. As longtime Weisman family employees and friends tell it, Billie wore a tight T-shirt and began sloshing sudsy water onto the statues as Fred gaped from a window.

"He was basically done-for," says Lynne Reinschreiber. "The day lives in infamy when he saw her in her wet T-shirt."

Carol Weisman Garratt, Fred's younger cousin, whom he raised during her teenage years, was sitting at the Carolwood mansion one day with one of Weisman's girlfriends, Wendy Michel, when the family chauffeur drove up the driveway. The front door opened and into the foyer walked a complete stranger--a raven-haired woman in her late 30s with Cherokee cheekbones and a hard-looking face.

"It was so strange, even for our very strange family," says Garratt. "Billie came in, tossed us a look, and walked up the stairs. Wendy and I looked at each other and said, 'Who's this woman?' We called all over the country trying to find Fred in his Lear jet to figure out who the heck the chauffeur had brought home."

While family members found Billie strange and manipulative, Fred was smitten. Henry Hopkins, director of the Armand Hammer Museum in Westwood and former curator of the Weisman collection, says, "Fred seemed very happy in the relationship. But there was a common impression that Billie was very interested in money."

And indeed she was. As Fred began to pare down his stable of beauties, including Sachiko Bower, to whom he gave more than \$10 million in art as a settlement for their years together, Billie began seeking and receiving Fred's largess. In part because Billie was not a respected figure within the L.A. art scene, where Fred was a legend, he bought a fabulous home in New Orleans and set Billie up as an art maven there.

According to one art expert, "Billie Weisman got her wish as Fred filled that house with art and generously bought works for New Orleans museums. Nobody in New Orleans cared that Billie had an atrocious eye for art, because befriending and complimenting Billie was a way to Fred's wallet."

For a big spender like Fred, the New Orleans venture was not excessive. Before meeting Billie, he had amassed one of the most famous private modern art collections in the United States with his first wife, the late Marcia Weisman, sister of the renowned art collector Norton Simon. The colorful collection included the creme de la creme of modern art, with bold works by Lichtenstein, Hockney, and Pollack, lifelike statues by Hanson, and smaller but important pieces by Picasso and Kandinsky.

Both Marcia and Fred came from money, she as the daughter of the Hunt Foods king, and he as the son of a Minnesota furrier. But the Weismans became vastly richer from Fred's ownership of the Toyota distributorship for the mid-Atlantic states, the first to bring the economical little cars to America.

The couple had met presidents and hobnobbed with Warhol, who painted Fred four times. Fred and Marcia were memorialized by David Hockney in a famous painting of them standing in formalwear like a Holmby Hills version of "American Gothic." (The piece was recently reproduced by the Chicago Art Institute to promote its new galleries.)

Fred and Marcia divorced in the early '80s, setting off juicy gossip in the art world over the way they split up their incredible collection: by tossing a coin for each painting. But Fred was nothing if not quirky. He had a habit of traveling the world and opening personal bank accounts in his favorite towns so that when he

returned the local banker would always recognize him. He also was known for cracking local phone books while traveling, checking to see if anyone was named Fred Weisman, and then telephoning them to chat.

"Fred Weisman did exactly as he pleased and knew exactly what he wanted," says the Armand Hammer Museum's Hopkins. "And he often did these things in the most unique ways imaginable."

So those who knew him weren't much surprised when they learned Weisman had been secretly married to Billie Milam in New Orleans on Feb. 29, 1992, by that city's mayor. But the bliss Fred sought didn't last long.

Within weeks of the wedding, according to Reinschreiber and family members, Fred's new wife began complaining that the \$3 million he had given her in a prenuptial contract wasn't enough. "She kept hounding him, and this woman can whine, and cry, and scream, like, oh Jesus," says Reinschreiber. "One day, Fred finally called me and said, 'Mitch, I can't take it anymore. Can we just give her what she wants?' " (Billie's attorneys, Sid Machtinger and John Ruskey, did not return phone calls from New Times.)

Billie's demands for more money soon became the central fact of their new marriage. Noted Santa Monica psychologist Milton Wexler, Fred's longtime counselor, was brought in to negotiate a new post-nuptial deal. According to family members, Reinschreiber and Wexler cautioned Fred that if he acceded to all of Billie's demands, she'd never stop making them.

According to Garratt, Billie began threatening to leave Fred unless he agreed to give her more cash. "How can a man stay married to a woman who keeps giving him a higher price to stay married?" asks Garratt. "The answer is that Fred was brilliantly tough in business but terribly weak with women."

Billie was furious over Reinschreiber's challenge to her demands for more money. Says Reinschreiber: "One day Billie told us Fred wanted to give her a small statue worth perhaps three-quarters of a million dollars, and she produced papers that were to be signed. Milton Wexler and I both said to Billie, 'This wasn't in the agreement,' and Billie became enraged and literally threw the papers at us."

As the battle stretched into its second year, says Reinschreiber, "Things got so bad that Fred had me looking into any technicality I could find that would annul the marriage, but it was all legal."

Stricken with pancreatic cancer less than a year after their marriage, Fred finally agreed to give Billie \$5 million along with art works, properties, a Bentley, and a Lexus. But, says Reinschreiber, "Fred said, 'I want it stipulated that she never fucking mentions the money to me again, or she will lose it all.' So the stipulation that Billie never again bring up the post-nuptial agreement was put in writing."

Despite her newfound millions, Billie, raised by middle-class parents from Minnesota who relocated to the Valley, was known as a stingy tipper, and refused to spend her own money on even the tiniest items. Lynne Reinschreiber was with Billie at a drug store one day. "I will never forget watching Billie, a woman now worth something like \$10 million, going up to the clerk and charging a box of tampons to Fred Weisman. In the two years she was married to Fred, I never saw her spend a penny of her own."

One former Weisman employee says Billie became "an embarrassment" after she persuaded Fred to put her in charge of all family gift-giving. "The worst Christmas was the one where Billie gave some longtime loyal employees little packets of jams she had pocketed from restaurants as their Christmas gifts," says the ex-employee.

Fred's son Richard says Billie was "an obvious gold digger" but that she wanted more than money. "Billie was the only one of all the women in my Dad's life who wanted control: control over the family, control over the art, control over Dad. If you offered her \$50 million to go away right now, she wouldn't, because money is just her way of keeping the power she has attained. And what she wants is more and more power."

After the post-nuptial battle had ended, Billie began pressuring Fred to name her director of his art collection. "It wasn't just that Billie started angling for a position she couldn't possibly handle, because she was just an art cleaner who knew nothing about art directing," says one respected curator. "It was that she was so mean and vicious, stepping on others to get her way." In the end, the longtime members of Fred's art staff all quit or were fired under Billie's reign.

Billie's critics marvel at how convenient it was for her that Fred was stricken with terminal cancer so soon after the marriage. Garratt says, "It's such a sad story, but the sicker Fred got, the shrewder and more manipulative Billie became. At the end, when Fred was in a coma, she had lawyers at her side every day. Fred was heavily medicated and Billie allowed almost nobody in to see him."

As Fred lay dying, his wife seemed to relish the power she was gaining. According to Reinschreiber, shortly before he became bedridden, Fred moved out of the nearby mansion on Brooklawn he had purchased for himself and Billie and returned alone to his beloved Carolwood estate. "He couldn't bear her anymore, and even though he was filled with pain, he tried to leave her," says Reinschreiber. "But she came and literally got him because the marital agreement said she forfeited every dime if they weren't living together. He tried to escape, but he was just too sick to fight her."

She moved her gaunt husband back into her mansion, which directly overlooked the late Marcia Weisman's villa. Some say Billie chose her manor looking down on Marcia's to announce to the world that she, not Marcia, was now the top dog.

Richard Weisman bitterly recalls how Billie began to control Fred's every waking moment. "I was barred by Billie from seeing my father when he was dying," says Richard. "The only way onto Billie's property was with a key that opened the driveway gate. Billie had the locks changed, and denied me and many others the new key. I would call my Dad and say, 'Dad, I can't get in to see you. Billie's changed the locks.' And Dad would say, 'I'm sorry, that's just the way it is.' I will never forgive Billie for taking away my ability to miss my own father."

Most horrible to some was Billie's decision to move Fred into a makeshift intensive-care room she created in a large basement-like room adjacent to her garage--"a creepy, dungeon-like room," recalls Garratt. As he weakened, Fred had insisted for months that he not be kept alive by artificial means. "Billie kept my father alive against his wishes in order to continue using his bank account, and to amass more power," says Richard.

The week before Fred died, according to a sworn declaration by his longtime secretary Lee Larssen, Billie persuaded her morphine-sedated husband to name two of her allies--Ellen Morehead and Fred Nicholas--as powerful new directors of his two major foundations. "The document had already been prepared, and it was as if Billie was holding it, waiting for the right moment" for Fred to sign it, Larssen stated.

After lawyers for Fred and Reinschreiber protested her apparent attempt to exert undue influence on a dying man, Billie withdrew the signed document.

Says a still-furious Richard: "Any one of us could kill Billie and nobody would get caught, because there are 50 family members and friends who want her dead. The killer would never be turned in."

There was only one matter in which Billie had no input and Fred had the ultimate control. He had constructed a detailed will, and in his final years spent so much time fine-tuning it that it became almost a hobby. It was not uncommon for the phone to ring in the Reinschreiber home at 8 or 9 p.m., with Fred on the other end, saying: "Mitchell? Shall we work on the will?"

"The will was like his baby," says Lynne Reinschreiber. "Mitchell and Fred would put their heads together for hours working out Fred's dream." And his dream, "which was so like Fred," she says, was to be immortal. The art collection and a richly-endowed philanthropic foundation were to be monuments solely to Fred Weisman's name. "More than anything in the world, he wanted his name to be remembered," says Lynne.

As everyone expected, the real power was going to be placed in the hands of two trusted associates: Mitchell Reinschreiber and J. Coleman Bean, Fred's Washington, D.C. attorney. They would be named as co-trustees of the estate.

It is difficult to overstate the respect Fred had for Reinschreiber, a surly and

exacting chief financial officer who made up for what he lacked in social graces with his stringent work ethic and dog-like loyalty. A story is told within the Weisman family circle--and has been recounted in two books--of a night at the Polo Lounge when Frank Sinatra, sitting at a table near Fred and Richard Weisman, became enraged when a tipsy Fred demanded that Sinatra's table pipe down.

"Some of the people in Sinatra's group literally charged at my Dad, and Dad went down, and when they pulled him out of the tangle, he was unconscious," remembers Richard.

Fred ended up at Cedars-Sinai with severe head injuries, and initially was not expected to live. He fought his way back to health after Marcia made him a gift of a Jackson Pollack painting --an act which Armand Hammer director Hopkins says "became the turning point in Fred's recovery."

Weeks later, with the scare over Fred's near death fresh in his mind, Reinschreiber urged his boss not to let any further time pass without telling Marcia the family's deepest secret, known only to Fred, Mitchell, and a family attorney: Marcia's second child, Daniel, whom she believed to have died at birth, was alive and retarded and living in an institution.

"You can grasp pretty easily that Mitch was Fred's closest confidante, but also how completely trustworthy he was by protecting such a shocking secret for so many years, and by guiding Fred in what had to be truly lonely decisions over Daniel's care," says one longtime former employee.

Indeed, some people believe Billie was always at war with Fred's financial chief because she was so jealous of that trust. Thus when Fred finally died, all of the pieces were in place for a battle royale the likes of which the Los Angeles art crowd has never seen.

There are dozens of disputes unfolding in the surreal courtroom drama presided over by Judge Letteau, but on one point everyone agrees: If Reinschreiber and his fellow trustee, Bean, had not started feuding, Letteau today would be making rulings in small-time legal battles typical for his Santa Monica courtroom, and Reinschreiber would have an influential and lucrative lifelong gig as overseer of a fabulous art-laden estate.

Instead, the estate was thrown into probate court because of a complex dispute that erupted between Reinschreiber and Bean within weeks of Fred's death. Bean had altered a single page in the inch-thick bylaws and minutes of the Frederick R. Weisman Co. The tiny change upended Reinschreiber's position as chief financial officer for life, as granted by Fred, and reduced Reinschreiber to a co-equal power with Bean and Billie Weisman. When Reinschreiber discovered the alteration, he sued Bean.

Then, Reinschreiber caught Bean--who was being paid a \$50,000 retainer each month--padding his billable hours on a real estate deal in which Bean bungled the sale of horse racetracks Fred owned in Maryland. Bean, contacted at his Washington law office, refused comment on the case. However, court documents show that Bean retaliated, accusing Reinschreiber of similar overbillings during Fred's life.

During a civil trial before L.A. Superior Court Judge David Yaffe on the various claims and counterclaims, Bean agreed to a settlement after court testimony showed that he had overbilled substantially. But Yaffe let stand the altered bylaws which gave Bean equal powers over the Weisman Co., a ruling Reinschreiber has appealed. At the same time however, the jury unanimously ruled that Reinschreiber had not overbilled Fred.

Across the hall from Yaffe's courtroom, Reinschreiber was seeking help from the probate court to stop Bean from standing in the way of the day-to-day running of the estate. The probate case was assigned to Letteau.

According to Reinschreiber and others, the judge seemed to take an instant dislike to him, but an instant liking to Bean.

Letteau ignored the fact that Bean had agreed in another court to pay a settlement for overbilling, and generously awarded him a \$12,500-a-month stipend to act as a court adviser and chief fingerpointer against Reinschreiber. By contrast, Reinschreiber was not allowed to even speak in Letteau's court, and has not done so to this day. "I will be eternally baffled by how or what I did to make that judge hate me so much," says Reinschreiber. "All I know is somehow I became the bad guy, and Coleman Bean became the good guy."

Deciding that Reinschreiber and Bean could not run the estate amid their feud, Letteau, who today makes a habit of gushing over Billie in open court, even named Billie a temporary trustee along with his friends Smith and Chmura. The outcry from Fred's family and Reinschreiber over this direct violation of Fred's will was deafening. "I think 26 of the 30 heirs all signed a letter demanding her instant removal, and Billie lasted in that trustee job about 25 days," says Richard Weisman.

Meanwhile, the court turned its guns on Reinschreiber. Letteau had appointed an old friend, attorney Thomas McCullough, to investigate every aspect of Reinschreiber's work during Fred's life. McCullough soon came up with accusations: that Reinschreiber had illegally sold Fred's life insurance policy and received excessive salary payments while Fred was alive.

Under California law, once a probate judge is asked to make a ruling on an estate, he or she also has almost limitless powers to investigate and control virtually every aspect of the will. Normally, judges do not do this because the wishes of the deceased are supposed to be honored. But in the case of Letteau, the Pandora's

Box had been opened.

Says Richard Weisman: "If Reinschreiber had just worked out this problem with Bean outside the courts--or hell, just let it go since it was a matter of perhaps a few million taken by Bean from my Dad's estate of \$200 million--none of this would have happened. Reinschreiber really screwed himself. But who knew he'd get a puppet like Letteau?"

Until recently, Letteau had a reputation as an intelligent and generally fair jurist with an exaggerated ego, which associates say he acquired during his glory days as an Inglewood City Councilman from 1971 to 1977. In recent years, however, some attorneys who appear before him say Letteau has acted "bizarre" in legal battles where large sums of money are at stake. (Letteau declined to comment for this story.)

Recently, for example, Letteau involved himself to an unusual degree in the massive estate of the late Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos. The judge tried to assume jurisdiction over the Philippines in a scandal-ridden case involving several people who claim to be heirs to the fortune, including some California residents. Letteau claimed California law permitted him to "step up to the plate and swing away at...this complicated estate."

Letteau's ruling was appealed, and last August a state appellate court rejected Letteau's attempt to insert himself into the case, declaring his effort to be "wholly without authority."

Next came Letteau's attempt last October to appoint his good friend and former law partner, controversial L.A. Superior Court Judge Edward M. Ross, as a \$300,000-a-year co-trustee of the Weisman estate--in addition to Smith and Chmura.

Since Letteau's friendship with Ross is well known, the legal community was shocked when Ross was recommended as co-trustee of the Weisman holdings by a committee of judges hand-picked by Letteau himself.

Ross was expected to retire from the bench to take the cushy job--which would have tripled his current salary--but his plans were upended when the scrappy local legal newspaper Metropolitan News-Enterprise blew the whistle on the scheme. "It was a clear case of cronyism, with Letteau trying to hand his friend Ross that job," says Roger Grace, the paper's editor.

A few days after the newspaper story ran, Letteau abruptly announced he would not award Ross the position after all.

But in other efforts to award his friends stunning salaries from Fred Weisman's estate, Letteau has succeeded. For example:

* Attorney Thomas McCullough, whom Letteau hired as his personal investigator into the Weisman estate and Reinschreiber's activities, is a former employee of Letteau's former law firm, as well as a longtime friend. Court records show McCullough earned \$200,000 in just one year, paid from Weisman's estate.

* Attorney Malcolm Smith, to whom Letteau handed the powerful and lucrative position of interim co-trustee of the Weisman estate, is from Letteau's Inglewood crowd, and sits with Letteau on the board of directors of the Inglewood Park Cemetery. He is being paid \$25,000 a month by Letteau from Weisman's fortune.

* Michael Chmura, named by Letteau as the second co-trustee, is a longtime associate to whom Letteau frequently steers lucrative court appointments as an accountant. He, too, is being paid \$25,000 a month from Weisman's estate.

* Smith and Chmura fired Fred's longtime investment counselor, Debra Reda, accusing her of nepotism and high fees and commissions, and hired Chmura's personal broker and longtime friend, Rick De Weese. De Weese's fees and commissions, records show, are higher than Reda's.

Probate attorneys who know Letteau say his awarding of enriching jobs to his friends in the Weisman case is highly unusual and unethical. "What kind of crazy world allows a bunch of nobodies from the Inglewood Park Cemetery board to gain control of an important art collection and the \$250 million Fred Weisman estate?" asked one attorney familiar with the case.

Another lawyer close to the situation says Letteau "has set himself up as an investigator, a prosecutor, and a judge, and there are so many conflicts of interest--you've got people in charge who need to recuse themselves from themselves."

Until Richard Weisman's recent entry into the battle, only one person was fighting Letteau and his associates: the persistent Mitchell Reinschreiber. But he has paid dearly for refusing to walk away.

Letteau assigned a novice accountant to produce a report alleging that Reinschreiber was overpaid by Fred from 1990 until Fred's 1994 death, and owes the estate \$3 million. The allegation turns on whether Reinschreiber can prove--now that Fred is gone--that he and Fred had a longstanding gentlemen's agreement which allowed Reinschreiber to be paid surcharges in addition to the \$90,000 monthly retainer for his and his company's services.

Says Reinschreiber: "It's not a mystery that an executive like myself makes this sort of money, nor that an accounting firm for a huge company generates that kind of fee."

But in September, Reinschreiber faces trial before Letteau on charges by Smith and Chmura that Reinschreiber was paid "excessive surcharges" while Fred was

alive.

It wasn't the first time Letteau's appointed investigators have issued disparaging allegations against Reinschreiber. They also charged that he forged documents in order to sell Fred's \$20 million life insurance policy, so that Reinschreiber's insurance-broker son could make money buying Fred a new policy or so that Reinschreiber's daughter, Debra Reda, could reinvest the money in stocks and charge fat commissions in the process.

Like a number of other accusations against Reinschreiber, the life insurance allegations were dropped when nobody could produce a shred of evidence that they were true.

And his daughter, Reda, a first vice-president at Smith Barney, Inc., only snorts derisively at the stock-reinvestment allegations: "Yes, my father committed a felony so I could make \$10,000 in fees. How patently absurd."

Although no friend of the crusty, hard-to-like Reinschreiber, Richard Weisman finds Letteau's current charges against his father's trusted associate "really asinine."

"Mitchell Reinschreiber was not overpaid, and in fact it's impossible, because my Dad never paid anyone more than they were worth--except Billie," Richard says. "The truth is, Reinschreiber worked his ass off, gave up his life, and put in two hours for every hour he was ever paid. My dad controlled him completely, believe me. These blood-suckers siphoning off my Dad's estate are the ones who should be on trial."

Reinschreiber's attorney, Andy Gifford, a respected probate lawyer from the firm of Riordan & McKinzie, is fighting Letteau's findings against Reinschreiber and says that Letteau's prosecution of Reinschreiber has left him mystified.

"This is uncharacteristic of my prior experiences before Judge Letteau," says Gifford. "I honestly do not understand what the judge is thinking."

From the start, Letteau has engaged in a withering reputation-bashing of Reinschreiber in open court, saying Reinschreiber was "incredibly well-paid beyond the wildest, imagination of anyone we're going to find within a radius of 100 miles."

Among the most pointed attacks is a claim that Reinschreiber improperly appointed his daughter, Debra Reda, Fred's longtime investment counselor, as lead investment counselor for his estate. In fact, Letteau approved the employment of Reda and Smith Barney, but she soon became an easy target for claims of nepotism by Smith and Chmura.

After Reda was removed as investment chief, Smith and Chmura handed the job

of managing investments for the heirs' trust funds and the \$100 million estate funds to Rick De Weese, who has far less experience in the field of institutional investing and happens to be Chmura's personal investment counselor.

Carol Weisman Garratt says that since November 1996, De Weese has improperly "churned" the investments in her trust fund--buying and selling securities frequently to earn bigger commissions--and has sold off high-yield investments recommended by Reda, dismissing them as "junk bonds." De Weese refused to comment on the controversy.

As a result, says Garratt, trust income that was supposed to flow to heirs like her and Fred's 91-year-old brother, Ted, has plummeted. "Can you imagine putting someone who is 91 in growth stocks when they need income stocks?" asks Garratt. "Malcolm Smith and Michael Chmura are both nobodies who know nothing of large estates. They're so dumb that Smith admitted to me over coffee one day that he'd have probably put the money in four-percent CDs certificates of deposit if I hadn't complained. He told me, 'I don't like to gamble.' I thought, 'Oh, for heavens' sake.' "

Letteau's efforts to oust Fred's most trusted employee and other key figures from the collector's life have played directly into the hands of Billie who, in addition to her wealth, is today being paid \$200,000 a year as director of the Weisman art collection--a salary enjoyed only by the top museum directors in the world.

Billie is omnipresent in the courtroom battle, even though by terms of the will she cannot challenge Fred's desires or she will lose everything. But before each court hearing, she can be seen huddled in the hallway with Letteau's appointed team of trustees and lawyers, discussing legal strategy and laughing like an old friend. (On one occasion, when Billie arrived, the attorneys fighting Reinschreiber laughed uproariously as Billie announced: "I have those tickets I promised you. Now you really owe me.")

Lynne Reinschreiber has maintained a vigil in the courtroom, quietly sitting throughout dozens of hearings, and watching Billie and the ever-expanding team of lawyers treat the proceedings like a family reunion. "They have drained us of every penny using Fred's money against his wishes, and they sit there and laugh and joke while they ruin lives," she says. "I leave the courtroom each time feeling physically nauseous."

Malcolm Smith, the man now holding the job Fred had intended for Mitchell Reinschreiber, defends what has happened to Fred's dream, saying, "Reinschreiber is just trying to insert himself as the financial czar. The administration of this estate is going orderly and we have all our major litigation resolved except Reinschreiber, who is standing in the way."

But a look at the philanthropic foundation's activities and the handling of Fred's storied art collection suggest otherwise.

Family members and former employees say the thing that would most enrage Fred is the way in which his trophy wife has carefully begun to rewrite the history of his life and the legacy of his art collection.

The collection is ensconced as Fred wished at the Carolwood estate. But he would hardly recognize the description of his years of passionate collecting as portrayed by docents, overseen by Billie, who give tours of the home to the public three times a day.

Fred's will expressly states that the tour of his home in no way be associated with Billie. But today she is mentioned no less than eight times as an influential co-collector of the Weisman art. At one point during a recent tour, the docent related an anecdote in which she credited Billie with discovering, on the back of the famous "Dark Pond" by artist William de Kooning, his practice drawing for his equally famous painting "Pink Angels."

As the docent explained, "Billie Weisman is an art conservator, and she discovered the secret sketch by de Kooning on the back of "Dark Pond." "

Actually, Billie, who is not a conservator of paintings but of sculptures, had nothing to do with discovering the practice drawing. According to Eddie Fumasi, who for 10 years was the art register for the estate, Fred and Marcia Weisman knew about the drawing when they bought the "Dark Pond" and "Pink Angels" paintings in the 1970s. "The practice sketch is a well-known historical fact of the Weisman collection that predates Fred Weisman ever meeting Billie Milam," Fumasi says.

In truth, Billie had almost nothing to do with collecting Fred's vast art cache, and those who knew Fred say her efforts to inflate her role would devastate Fred were he alive today. Hopkins, the former Weisman curator, says that in Fred's later years with Billie, "He did let her buy art, but it was not of great consequence. She ought not to be portrayed as a serious co-collector."

Moreover, expressly against the orders in Fred's will, the Carolwood home has not been preserved exactly as he left it. Instead, silverware, furnishings and even art have been removed or altered, according to several former high-level employees. Says one of them, "This horrible woman is murdering a man's legacy."

Billie's name is also creeping toward prominence over Fred's in his cherished philanthropic endeavors, which were designed in his will to insure that he would be remembered forever. Today, Billie's name is listed along with Fred's in gifts and donations made by the Frederick R. Weisman Foundation, although none of the money is hers.

On a commemorative program handed to participants at the recent ritzy fund-raising bash at the Beverly Hills Hotel for the Venice Family Clinic, one of Fred's

longtime charities, credit for supporting the free clinic was given to "Billie Milam Weisman-Fred Weisman Foundation." Seeing his wife of just two years credited by his side "would kill Fred Weisman all over again, because more than anything Fred wanted his name, and his alone, to get the credit," says Mitchell Reinschreiber.

As Richard Weisman notes, "There isn't a penny of Billie's money going to any of those charities, and there isn't a penny of her money in my father's foundation. She is merely shoving my father off the stage, and Judge Letteau is doing nothing to stop her."

In the end, Fred could not even control where his remains were interred, according to bitter family members. Though he told his family and closest friends that he wanted his ashes placed in a family crypt he had specially constructed on the vast Carolwood property, Billie instead inserted his remains into the wooden base of a Henry Moore statue, "The Queen," which is now a highlight of the public tour.

As a docent explained to a group touring the Weisman collection recently, "Fred was interred by Billie Weisman in the base of this favorite statue by Moore--at Fred's request."

It's possible that in the final days of his life, Fred did indeed change his mind. But in the sad and strange story unfolding in the four years since his death, many observers believe that Fred Weisman's desires have long since given way to the desires of others.

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