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DOLLY PARTON'S ESTATE DISPUTE: A LESSON IN PLANNING BEYOND THE WILL

When Dolly Parton died on August 25, 2026, she left behind an extraordinary musical legacy as well as significant business and professional interests. According to reporting by *The Tennessean,* based on court filings, Parton established a network of trusts and related entities before her death to oversee her assets, business interests, and legacy.

Despite that planning, a dispute involving her professional interests has already made its way to court.

According to *The Tennessean* and other published reports, She's Alive LLC, the company established to oversee Parton's professional property and run by Parton's longtime manager Danny Nozell, filed a lawsuit in September against Parton's nephew and former head of security, Bryan Seaver. As part of the lawsuit, She's Alive LLC alleges Seaver engaged in threatening and intimidating acts. Seaver disputes those allegations and has maintained that certain communications cited in the lawsuit were taken out of context.

A Tennessee judge issued a temporary restraining order against Seaver and his security company on September 23. Published reports indicate that the order restricts contact with individuals associated with She's Alive LLC and is intended, in part, to protect the company's business relationships while the dispute proceeds. The underlying allegations, however, have not been adjudicated.

The dispute remains unresolved.

The situation provides an interesting lesson about estate planning. Even careful planning cannot guarantee that disagreements will not arise after someone dies. An estate plan can establish who receives property and who has authority to manage assets, but succession can become more complicated when an estate involves business interests, intellectual property, employees, family members, and other professional relationships.

There is another layer to the story. Parton was also administering the estate of her husband, Carl Dean, who died in March 2025. According to *USA Today* and *The Tennessean*, Parton died before completing that process, and Dean's niece, Dea Chaffin Cunningham Williams, has since been appointed to continue administering Dean's estate. Dean's will named Parton

as his heir and included provisions for nieces and nephews if she did not survive him or otherwise did not receive the property.

For families, the takeaway goes beyond simply having a will or trust. A thoughtful estate plan should consider not only who ultimately receives the assets, but also who will manage them, who can step in if the person originally selected cannot serve or is unwilling to serve, and how business and family roles will transition following a death. Those questions can become particularly important when family members are also employees or otherwise involved in a family business.

As the publicly reported developments involving Parton's affairs illustrate, even detailed planning cannot eliminate every potential conflict. A well-considered estate plan will provide greater clarity about who has authority, what should happen when circumstances change, and how a person's assets and interests should be managed.

For most families, the estate will not include a music catalog, a famous name, or an entertainment empire. But the underlying questions are much the same. Thinking through succession, decision-making authority, family expectations, and contingencies before they become an issue can help provide clarity and protect the legacy someone worked a lifetime to build. Comprehensive planning offers an opportunity to consider, and stay ahead of, the types of disputes and friction that the Parton family and organization are now forced to navigate.

Trevor C. Lippman is a shareholder at the law firm of O'Neil Cannon. Trevor assists clients with all matters related to inheritance disputes, including questions surrounding the creation and administration of trusts and wills. To schedule an initial consultation with Trevor, call 414.276.5000 or email Trevor directly at trevor.lippman@wilaw.com.