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Post's guardianship coverage wins honor from Florida Bar

Palm Beach Post Staff



Pacenti

The Palm Beach Post's 2016 series "Guardianships: A Broken Trust" took second place this month in the print division of the Florida Bar's 62nd Annual Media Awards.

The stories, written and reported by Post staff writer John Pacenti, with research by Melanie Mena and editing by Holly Baltz, exposed the conflicts facing now-retired Palm Beach County Circuit Judge Martin Colin after his wife, Elizabeth Savitt, became a guardian.

The stories showed Colin's wife took tens of thousands of dollars in fees from her senior ward's accounts prior to approval by the court, which Savitt's attorney, and only her attorney, claimed was allowed by statute.

In one case, a judge ordered Savitt and her attorney to return nearly \$30,000.

After publication in January 2016, the circuit's chief judge, Jeffrey Colbath, transferred Colin out of the probate division. He also transferred all of Savitt's cases to a distant courthouse to eliminate the potential for conflict with friendly judges.

In October, Colbath handed down sweeping guardianship reforms, addressing specifically complaints against Savitt. He instituted a random appointment basis for professional guardians and an arduous registration system.

The stories received startling response from readers, leading to a number of families reaching out to the newspaper about abusive guardianships.



The judging panel consisted of two out-of-state journalists, two Florida lawyers with substantial experience in journalism and/or media law and one Florida educator of journalism or law.

First place went to the Sarasota Herald-Tribune's "Bias on the Bench" series, which found judges throughout Florida sentence black defendants to harsher punishments than whites charged with the same crimes under similar circumstances.

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