

## Albert Vassallo Sr.: From friend to enemy, Savitt cites 'bad blood'

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**J**ames Vassallo can't stop beating himself up. He blames himself for allowing Savitt to take control of his father's finances. As result, he has a list of questions about Savitt's actions that he says remains unanswered to his satisfaction.

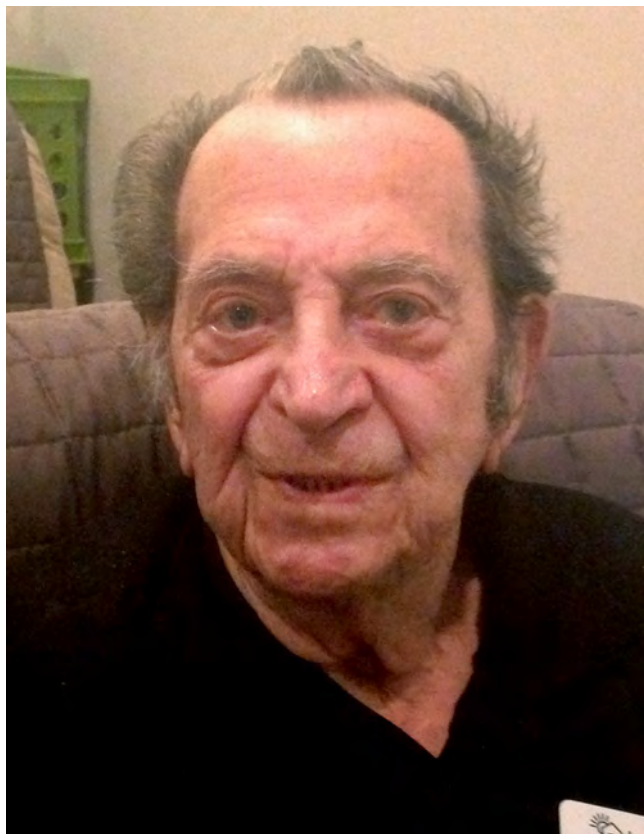
Like in the O'Grady case, Vassallo sought the advice of Hark when he learned last year that his brother and sister had transferred \$180,000 from the accounts of his father. And like in O'Grady, Hark steered him to Savitt, saying she would protect the assets of Albert Vassallo Sr., who was suffering from early stages of dementia.

Vassallo, who moved from Brooklyn to live next door and care for his father at Century Village in Deerfield Beach, says Savitt instead aligned with his sister who had taken \$140,000 and other assets, according to demand letters.



James Vassallo holds a photo of his parents, Albert Vassallo Sr. and Geraldine Mickey Vassallo. (John Pacenti/The Palm Beach Post)

Savitt successfully petitioned Judge



Albert Vassallo Sr. in November 2015. (John Pacenti/The Palm Beach Post)

French to remove Vassallo as a trustee to his father's estate, which would have allowed him to retain some administrative control. Savitt claimed Vassallo **wasn't getting along** with the very siblings, whose actions prompted him to seek the guardianship in the first place.

"If I knew her husband was a judge, I never would have went with her because whatever I said to her meant nothing. She can do whatever she wants because she has the court's backing and that is exactly what is happening now," said Vassallo.

In a **voicemail** that Vassallo still has, Savitt had assured him attorneys were working to remove his brother and sister but there was no reason to remove him because "you didn't do anything wrong." She did, however, suggest paying Hark more money to defend him just in case.

Vassallo said Savitt **made her move to remove him** from his father's trust after he repeatedly questioned her billing practices. He estimates that Savitt and her attorneys collected \$40,000 to get him off the trust. His father's savings have been depleted by more than \$200,000 in about year, he said.

Savitt said, "To accomplish getting the relief favorable to the Ward, and because of bad blood and conflicts between all three children of the Ward, it was agreed by the lawyers that I should be the sole trustee, not because of anything wrong James did."

Vassallo produced email and bank statements showing how Savitt **doubled-billed** his father's accounts by about \$7,300 and did not pay it back until he confronted her with the

bank account statements. "She never would have given that back on her own," Vassallo said. The \$7,300 plus a \$3,000 retainer fee came before a judge approved them and even before she submitted a petition to the court for that money.

To address the \$180,000, a deal was struck in mediation, allowing James' brother and sister to pay back half the money over 15 years and keep the rest.

Vassallo never signed the agreement and vehemently opposed it.

After The Post asked Savitt about **\$10,000 in U.S. savings bonds**, James Vassallo said she told him the bonds had been located and provided her accounting of expenses.

Still missing is reimbursement for his dad's Hyundai and assets from a savings account and a safety deposit box, Vassallo said. "My father said it was over \$100,000 in there."

But the knife in James Vassallo's heart came when Savitt and Judge French allowed his father to be permanently placed with his sister, Susan Mast. Savitt is paying the sister \$2,400 a month for the father's care under a **settlement agreement** that bears the guardian's signature. Little of the money initially taken has been returned.


Albert Jr. says his father consented in court to remain with his sister, but James Vassallo says the judge never should have asked his incapacitated father if he wanted to live with Mast considering the money owed.

Mast cursed at a reporter when asked about the case and threatened legal action. Her brother, Albert Jr., said the money he got from his father was a gift to help him pay his medical bills.



Trust attorney John Pankauski, who has represented Savitt, was forced to defend himself in a divorce case that Judge Colin presided over from accusations that he was part of a strategy to get Colin recused. (Damon Higgins/The Palm Beach Post)

Vassallo has also questioned Judge

French in court about whether any money from the bank accounts of Savitt's wards went to satisfy the foreclosure judgment on her Delray Beach home. He also objected at a hearing to attorney John Pankauski's  bill — which at the time was for \$18,000 and heavily redacted.

"I asked the judge, 'What are you going to do, rubber stamp everything?' and French told me that Pankauski should have charged my dad \$40,000," Vassallo said.

Now Vassallo has hired attorney Dougherty, hoping he can work the same magic he did for James Hilton by detailing questionable actions by Savitt for the court. Vassallo hopes this would force her to resign or have a court remove her.

Albert Vassallo Sr. remains alert and talkative. Interviewed at a Deerfield Beach senior center, he said he doesn't trust Savitt. "She doesn't show me any reports. At least, show me where the money is going," he said.

James Vassallo can't sleep at night, poring over bills and other documents, thinking what he could have done differently. His apartment is piled high with stacks of court papers.

"I was the one who brought this woman into my father's life," he said. "And what is she doing? She is taking the money that these seniors worked so hard for, set aside for their children, for their grandchildren."

Data editor Mike Stucka, researcher Melanie Mena and staff writer Holly Baltz contributed to this story. Web page production by Kristyn Wellesley and Gurman Bhatia.



### The entire series



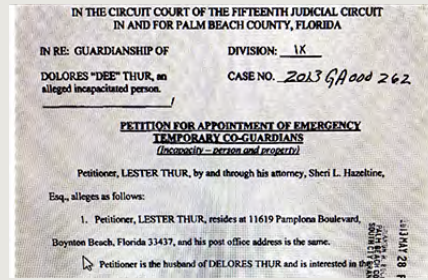
### The judge



### The couple's financial picture



### Explore the documents



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