



Photo by Morgan Paul

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Wire the Money and Run

August 19th, 2010 ·

Hollywood Horror Story about how we treat disabled and seniors

By David Robb



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Eunice Bellah at senior's home: Tough and determined

HOLLYWOOD, CA (Hollywood Today) 8/19/10 — Eunice Bellah, the 88-year-old widow of Oscar-nominated art director Ross Bellah, sits in a wheelchair in the lobby of the Courtyard Plaza senior assisted living facility in Van Nuys, staring into space. She's been diagnosed with "mild cognitive impairment," but she knows who her friends and enemies are.

One of the latter, she said, is her former trustee and accountant, Aron Shlain.

According to court records and subpoenaed documents, Shlain last year sold her house and two of her cars; listed her personal possessions on Craig's List, and then wired the proceeds – nearly a million dollars – to a bank in Israel.

Then he closed his accounting office and disappeared.

“Aron is a rotten bugger,” Eunice says. “He should be put in jail.”

So far, however, the LAPD has yet to issue a warrant for his arrest. They aren't even investigating it.

“There is no active case on this right now,” said LAPD Det. Marjan Mobasser, who had once been assigned to the case.

Ross Bellah was an art director with hundreds of screen credits on such shows as “I Dream of Jeannie” and “Bewitched.” He was nominated for an Oscar in 1957 for “The Solid Gold Cadillac,” and received Emmy nominations in 1975, 1986 and 1987. He worked in the art department at Columbia Television for 35 years, and retired as the head of the department in 1989 at the age of 82.

He designed his own home on Bellingham Avenue in Studio City, complete with a Japanese garden that neighbors called “an oasis.”

“He designed everything,” recalled his longtime neighbor, Herb Adelman, a production manager and member of the Directors Guild's board of directors for 27 years. “It was a small house – very Japanese – very Frank Lloyd Wright. Everything looked out onto this beautiful Bonsai garden. It had two running streams, a waterfall and a real koi pond. It was very peaceful.”

When Ross' health began to fail in 2003, Shlain, who had been his tax accountant since 1986, got him to sign a document making Shlain his successor trustee. In the event of Ross' death – and if Eunice were to be declared incompetent – Shlain would become the trustee of their estate.

Ross died on Feb. 2, 2004, at the age of 97.

Eunice, an artist with a studio in the house that her husband designed, lived there until she fell and broke her arm on Dec. 12, 2008. She was taken to Sherman Oaks Hospital, where she stayed for four days before being sent to recover at the Chandler Convalescent Hospital in North Hollywood.

None of her friends or neighbors knew where she was, and began to worry when the gardeners stopped coming to tend the lovely garden, and when mail started piling up, and then stopped being delivered altogether.

On March 27, 2009, Shlain moved Eunice into a “shared room” at the Courtyard Plaza in Van Nuys. She had an incontinent roommate and very little else but the clothes on her back and a framed picture of herself in happier days.

“It was just terrible,” Adelman said. “She was sharing a room with an Alzheimer's patient and the smell of urine. She had none of her artwork, no television, no telephone. Nothing.”

Greg Alpert, Eunice's old friend and former tenant in her guesthouse, visited her at Courtyard on June 1 – her 86th birthday – and was so alarmed by her condition that he called Adult Protective Services, who later sent an investigator to look into it. Showing up on the day Eunice's roommate died, she reported that she couldn't determine that there was any problem.

Alpert, a longtime film location manager, immediately went to Eunice's house, and with Adelman's daughter, Andrea, brought her back some clothes, a dozen pieces of her artwork, a box of personal photographs, her television and her husband Ross' ashes.

In July, Shlain found two doctors who declared Eunice to be incompetent. He was now in charge of her finances, and in control of her estate. He then set about finding a buyer for her house, cars and personal belongings.

On Aug. 28, 2009, Shlain sold her house, a separate guesthouse, and two lots on Bellingham Avenue for \$900,000. He said that he had Eunice's permission to sell the house, even though she'd been declared incompetent only a month earlier.

Alpert, however, knows different. After he found out about the sale, he told Eunice, and she was shocked.

"Who does he think he is?" She asked Alpert, shaking his head.

Shlain then put the money from the sale into an account he controlled – money that was supposed to be used only for taking care of Eunice. But he wasn't spending much of it on her; according to his estranged wife, he was spending lavish sums on prostitutes, fancy clothes and expensive vacations in luxury hotels.

Shlain and his wife Alla had separated after 18 years of marriage, but they were still living in the same house. On Sept. 27, she said, he came home in a foul mood and beat her up after a night of partying with his new girlfriend.

"He...hit me in the chest with all his strength," she said in a petition seeking a restraining order. "The pain was so severe that I thought he broke my spinal cord."

She called the police and he was taken to jail. Shlain told the court that he never struck his wife.

Growing increasingly suspicious, Alpert, who believed that her house had been sold for well below the market price, hired an attorney, Linda Paquette, to try to freeze Eunice's assets and to get a new court-appointed trustee for her until everything could be sorted out. But the case quickly fell into a legal morass.

Paquette retained Louanna Law, a private social worker with the Huntington Senior Care Network, to make an evaluation of Eunice's situation and needs.

Law visited Eunice at Courtyard on Oct. 28, 2009, and described her as deeply depressed and "grieving the loss of her home." Law also wrote that Eunice "states specifically that Aron Shlain is using her money and housing against her wishes, causing her emotional harm," and that Eunice "does not know how Mr. Shlain came to 'be in charge' of her finances, and that she does not want him to be in charge of her finances."

Eunice told Law that her only two friends were Herb Adelman and Greg Alpert, neither of whom stood to inherit anything from her estate.

On Oct. 19, Paquette filed a petition asking the court to appoint Dr. Vida Negrete, a specialist in the protection of senior citizens, to serve as the trustee of Eunice's estate, and Alpert to be the conservator for Eunice's person, so that she could receive proper medical attention and care.

On Oct. 29, Paquette filed another petition with the court requesting Shlain's immediate suspension as Eunice's trustee. A hearing was set for Dec. 11.

Two weeks later, Mary Creutz, Eunice's newly court-appointed lawyer, spoke to Hope Aguilar, Shlain's attorney, who assured her that Shlain is a very "straight up guy" who had gotten a fair price for Eunice's home.

Creutz was skeptical, though, writing, "Several facts seem to be troublesome...and need further investigation... Why does there not seem to have been any effort by Aron Shlain to keep her in her home of many years, when there were apparently enough funds to maintain her there with round-the-clock care?"

Over the next few months, Alpert and Shlain would become bitter enemies. Alpert accused Shlain of not taking proper care of Eunice, and of selling her home for below market value. Shlain denied it all, saying that he was her only real friend, and that only he had her best interests at heart. He said he sold her house, which was badly in need of repairs, at a fair price – and with Eunice's consent – in order to preserve her assets in a highly volatile housing market. As for Alpert, Shlain wrote in a declaration to the court that he was "surprised that he has fabricated terrible stories about me and spread them around the neighborhood where Eunice lived."

The first hearing in the case was held on Dec. 11 before Superior Court Judge Michael Levanas, who ruled against Paquette's request to have Shlain suspended as Eunice's trustee.

"I am not going to do anything...in terms of making any removal," he said. "Mr. Shlain will continue to be the trustee."

Eunice's court appointed attorney, Mary Creutz, agreed with the ruling, stating: "I need some time with this case to see whether Mr. Shlain is as bad as he's painted to be."

On Dec. 31, Shlain, using two attorneys funded by Eunice's money, filed an objection to appointing Alpert as Eunice's conservator.

At another hearing on Feb. 11, 2010, Paquette again asked – practically begged – the judge to remove Shlain as Eunice's trustee, saying that Shlain "took advantage of her and sold her house out from under her and all of her belongings before she was even dead...If selling this woman's house from under her isn't enough to convince this court to at least suspend (Shlain), then what does it take?"

Paquette told the court that Shlain was a "predator on the elderly," and called him Eunice's own personal Bernie Madoff.

Stewart Neuville, another of Shlain's lawyers, assured the court that Eunice's trust fund "is safe and secure," and called Alpert an "interloper who seeks somehow to gain control of Eunice's assets."

"The corpus of the Trust is safe and secure," Neuville told the court, "and is being managed competently by a professional certified public accountant."

None of that turned out to be true, but once again, the judge demurred and let Shlain stay on as Eunice's trustee and in total control of her money.

The judge scheduled another hearing for March, but bank records subpoenaed in the civil proceedings show that on March 3, Shlain withdrew \$886,040 from Eunice's trust account and wired it to a

woman named Natalya Vronsky at Bank Hapoalim in Tel Aviv. A few weeks later, he closed his accounting office on Wilshire Boulevard and vanished.

The lovely old house that Ross and Eunice had lived in for so many years has since been bulldozed to make way for two gaudy new McMansions.

A hearing was held on March 11 under a new judge – Judge Roy Paul – but at that time no one knew yet that Shlain had wired Eunice’s money out of the country.

Answering Paquette’s petition to suspend Shlain as the trustee, the judge said: “I am not sure whether I want to suspend immediately without a lot of understanding, which I don’t have yet, as to other than allegations of misappropriation...”

“We are very used to these kinds of cases,” the judge noted. “We go slow and easy and work through them.”

In retrospect, “slow and easy” was just what Shlain was counting on.

The judge set another hearing for April 23, 2010, and ordered Shlain to be there.

Shlain didn’t show up for that hearing, and on April 23, Judge Paul finally suspended Shlain as the trustee and instructed Eunice’s new court-appointed attorney, Lawrence Lebowsky, to “immediately contact law enforcement” about the wiring of Eunice’s money to Israel.

“Get this together,” he told Lebowsky. “Get law enforcement involved.”

“Right now,” Judge Paul told the lawyers, “my concern is the preservation of any assets, to get the proper law enforcement to see if, in fact, they are opening a case. If there is going to be any freezing on passports if somebody is leaving the country. I have no clue what is going on here.”

So far, no arrest warrant and no bench warrant has been issued.

Hope Aguilar, Shlain’s former attorney, declined comment.

“I can’t say anything about Aron Shlain,” she said. “I’m not really his attorney anymore.”

“Eunice’s situation is tragic,” Herb Adelman said, “but the court system is even more tragic. The court system is so broken. Last fall, we alerted the court what was going on, and the court assigned two or three people to look into it. No one did an immediate accounting. That wiring of the money could have been stopped last October.”

Alpert and Linda Paquette are currently trying to get Eunice into a nicer facility closer to her old neighborhood and friends.

“At this point,” Alpert said, “it’s really all about improving Eunice’s quality of life.”

19 responses so far ↓

- [1 Nancy](#) // Aug 20, 2010 at 10:15 pm

What a SAD, shameful story this is and TOO common of a story. Elder abuse is wide spread and the courts should speed up these procedures to protect our aged population. We all will be there eventually and have the right to dignity. This "accountant" has legally stolen money from Eunice and should be prosecuted. Maybe the court system should be held accountable also.

- [2 BJ](#) // Aug 20, 2010 at 10:59 pm

This is just the tip of the iceberg. In Los Angeles probate court, and perhaps elsewhere, the deck is stacked against those seeking swift and clear justice for victims of financial predators. As victims' resources are swindled & exploited, the court dallies with doubt, a lack of swift clarity, and court appointments that work against the victim; that lead to expending more of the victim's resources, thus prolonging any measure of justice. Slow and easy certainly didn't serve Eunice Bellah. And what about her home and all her life long personal belongings? What an outrage. Where is the accountability? Shame on those who haven't served Mrs. Bellah.

- [3 Federico](#) // Aug 21, 2010 at 9:06 am

This is the Power of the Court System and all the incompetent court-appointed-lawyers failing at their best. Get it straight, this is what they do and how they do it. A remarkable corrupt system that continuously fails to do the their job, over and over and over again, abusing their authority in every possible way...

- [4 Brent](#) // Aug 24, 2010 at 2:27 pm

Thank you Hollywood Reporter columnist David Robb for writing about what incompetent judges are doing to elderly victims of financial abuse. too bad that a vigilant press is necessary to alert a mayor, city manager, police chief, or in this case judges, that there are consequences if they act badly. This exposure, as in the City of Bell debacle, will hopefully save others from Judge Michael Levanas and Judge Roy Paul by their immediate retirements. I pray this exposure comes in time to win for victim Eunice Bellah the nicer place to live that her Hollywood family of friends Herb Adelman and Gregory Alpert want for her with whatever money is left.

- [5 Kevin Price](#) // Aug 24, 2010 at 3:34 pm

Judge Roy Paul is in Alec Baldwin's book about his journey of divorce with Kim Basinger. Baldwin said the golden rule is that lawyers should avoid making a judge look bad. Impossible in the Eunice Bellah elder abuse tragedy. Judge Roy Paul made himself look as dumb as Judge Michael Levanas when both failed to recognize obvious elder abuse by a Bernie Madoff type CPA. Traffic court would be too challenging for these two. Their immediate retirements would be further waste of tax payer

dollars unless wired monthly to an offshore account in the name of Eunice Bellah to cover the \$886,000 loss under their watch. That would be true justice!

- [6 Faith](#) // Aug 24, 2010 at 5:21 pm

I can't believe the judges in this county are so negligent and unconcerned about protecting the elderly in our midst from predators and elder abusers. What a terrible smirch on our culture that we don't rise up and throw such judges out on their cars!

- [7 Gina](#) // Aug 25, 2010 at 11:27 am

Do we need a law that requires conservatorship judges to pass a closed book exam proving they have sufficient common sense to recognize obvious financial elder abuse?

- [8 george curtin](#) // Aug 25, 2010 at 11:28 am

Commit a minor offense and the authorities will track you down and make your life a misery. Steal a million dollers from a helpless old lady and no one seems to be bothered. Who says crime does'nt pay?

- [9 Alan](#) // Aug 26, 2010 at 12:05 pm

Like the two Arizona judges that took \$2 million in bribes for incarcerating children in a for profit juvenile detention center, did Judge Michael Levanas get a cut for refusing at two hearings to require the Bernie Madoff type CPA to obtain a bond to cover the loss of \$886,000 wired to Israel? Or was Judge Levanas so dumb, he allowed the loss at no charge? Lucky for Judge Levanas there is no jail time for being dumb. Unlucky for anyone who might have a friend or relative subjected to a Judge Levanas ruling. Thankfully the Arizona judges are in jail.

- [10 stuart kahill](#) // Aug 26, 2010 at 11:27 pm

this story is not about the crooked CPA who we all know lurks in nearly every town. it is instead about our justice system and judges that want to keep the status quo, and think they are wiser than the crooks who eventually bring them down. this certainly is not the first, nor last case that these two bumbling fools will allow to roam free, with nearly a million dollars. i am certain Bellah will only see a cemetery before this is over and shame on all of you for your negligence, the ONLY thing you are to prevent.

- [11 Kevin Price](#) // Sep 1, 2010 at 11:53 am

When is the next court hearing for this case? I want to know what Judge Roy Paul defines as true justice for Eunice Bellah in his court room.

- [12 SC](#) // Sep 2, 2010 at 11:47 am

Next Court Hearing:

Monday, September 20, 2010 at 9:30 a. m.

Beacon Street Courthouse
638 South Beacon Street
6th Floor, Department 88C
San Pedro, California 90731

Picture ID is required to enter the courtroom.

Free parking is available across the street at Harbor Boulevard and 6th Street in the Maritime Museum parking lot.

- [13 Ana](#) // Sep 8, 2010 at 1:18 pm

So many people involved in this story need to pay for what they've done to this poor woman's life. Could you imagine something like this happening to you or anyone you love? I believe the judges are almost as guilty as Shlain himself for allowing this to continue. I pray for justice.

- [14 Eric](#) // Sep 11, 2010 at 4:30 pm

Elder abuse cases are grim. I am an attorney in this field, in this area of law, with these judges, and can confirm just how ridiculously frustrating, costly, and unfair these cases can be. That said, the State's (and particularly the LA Probate Court's) resources have thinned tremendously and it has a severe effect on its ability to process cases. In general, I like Judge Paul. I think he is a good judge. There is just more to it than "oh, the judge is bad." Changing judges may not help any. Its tough making life-changing decisions when you have 40+ matters calendared in a day and minimal resources, among other things.

- [15 john](#) // Oct 27, 2010 at 11:11 am

I just bought a Ross Bellah Painting From A guy on Ebay.
He might have got it from the estate sale. I feel I should get it back to her.

- [16 john](#) // Oct 28, 2010 at 8:26 am

I got intouch with her Atty.
I am sending the painting back

- [17 Chris](#) // Jan 11, 2011 at 10:35 am

Does anybody know what has happened in this case??

- [18 Federico](#) // Jan 13, 2011 at 4:57 pm

Yes: Please, someone out there? Let us know what is going on with this case?

David Robb, are you following this story, please let us know what is going on...

- [19 Federico](#) // Jan 13, 2011 at 5:00 pm

To everyone: Eunice Bellah is on facebook.

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