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# Don't Be Like These Famous People— Get Your Will Done

Estate planning is the process of protecting your wealth and transferring a legacy to your heirs, who may be your spouse, children, grandchildren, charities and others. It doesn't matter how wealthy you are, because in most cases your family is the first to come to mind when you think about distributing your assets at death. Part of that process is also to protect that wealth so you will have it to distribute.

A proper estate plan will, first and foremost, preserve your assets and distribute them in the manner you choose. If you do not have an estate plan, the state of your residency will dictate how your estate will be distributed through laws known as intestacy laws. Dying intestate means dying without a Last Will and Testament, also known simply as a Will. A Will is a basic building block of a proper estate plan.

A Will may be complemented by other estate-planning tools such as trusts, living wills, healthcare proxies, powers of attorney and life insurance. Together, these documents and financial products may also:

- Protect your minor children in the event you are not around to do so.
- Protect a spouse or partner from financial hardship if you're no longer around.

- Give children and/or grandchildren a financial foundation on which to build their lives.
- Fulfill obligations to a child or other family member with special needs, or to elderly parents, to provide continuity of care.
- Ensure protection for yourself and family in times of sickness or medical incapacity.
- Leave a social legacy to your community through charitable giving.

For wealthy individuals and families potentially subject to estate and inheritance taxes, estate planning may also help to minimize or avoid those taxes. Regardless of wealth, done correctly, the Will and other estate-planning tools may help to maintain family harmony when you're gone.

The planning process starts with going to an estate planning attorney to get a Will and complementary documents drafted and signed. That's where many estate plans fail because death or incapacity are not topics we like to talk and think about, leading to procrastination. There is also, of course, the fact that

attorneys are not inexpensive. However, the failure to plan may be disastrous.

Here are just a few examples of people you may have heard of, who had the resources, but didn't plan. Don't be like them!



## Martin Luther King, Jr.

This civil rights icon and Nobel Peace Prize winner died in 1968, without a Will. His four children fought endlessly, and in 1993—25 years after his death—the family agreed to set up a corporation to control his assets, including the licensing and use of King's name, image, speeches and appearances. Despite the corporation, family members continued to sue each other for various reasons, including most recently, settling a lawsuit in 2016 concerning the sale of King's Nobel Peace Prize medal and personal Bible.<sup>1</sup>



## Pablo Picasso

The famed artist died in 1973, leaving behind a wife, four children from three different women, only one of whom he was married to, and many grandchildren. Over a period of six years, Picasso's descendants fought over his assets and the rights to his name and spent some \$30 million on legal and administrative fees to settle the disputes and his estate. Not long after that, another dispute arose.<sup>2</sup> All because of the lack of a Will and direction from Picasso.



## Sonny Bono

Salvatore Phillip "Sonny" Bono was half of the popular singing duo of Sonny & Cher. After his singing career ended, he became a politician—first as the Mayor of Palm Springs, California, and then as a U.S. Congressman for California. After he died in a skiing accident in 1998 without an estate plan, Mary Bono, his fourth wife, endured several lawsuits. One alleged unpaid alimony and child support by Sonny's second ex-wife, singing superstar Cher, and another alleged paternity from a "love" child. His estate was finally distributed to his two children from two different marriages, and to Mary, the mother of his two other children.



## Jimi Hendrix

James Marshall "Jimi" Hendrix was a rock-and-roll legend known for being a guitar virtuoso. He died in 1970 without a Will. As a result, Jimi's father, Al Hendrix, inherited Jimi's estate through intestacy laws. The estate grew tremendously in value in the ensuing years, but Al died in 2002 leaving the entire estate to his adopted daughter, Janie, from a second wife, to the exclusion of Al's natural-born son and Jimi's brother, Leon. Leon and Janie battled over the estate and finally settled in 2015, 45 years after Jimi's death.



## Prince

More recently, Prince Rogers Nelson, known commonly as Prince, died in 2016 leaving behind a sister and five half-siblings. Prince was widely regarded as one of the greatest rock musicians of his time. He was known to be very careful about the distribution of his music, but he was unconcerned with the planning of his estate, and he died without a Will. At the end of 2020, his estate had not been settled, but it is estimated that more than \$45 million has been spent on administrative and legal fees so far.<sup>3</sup> Also, as much as half of his wealth—upwards of \$300 million or more—may go toward estate taxes because Prince did no estate tax planning either.

Numerous other well-known individuals and ultra-wealthy people have died without Wills and estate plans. Included in that list are billionaire Howard Hughes in 1976; professional football player Steve McNair in 2009; and famous musicians and singers including Aretha Franklin in 2018; Amy Winehouse in 2011; Bob Marley in 1981; and others. More recently, Tony Hsieh, founder of Zappos, an online shoe and clothing retailer now owned by Amazon, died in 2020 and was worth nearly \$1 billion. These cases led to lawsuits, family discord, extraordinary administrative and legal fees, and/or emotional distress for all concerned.



## Heath Ledger

In 2008, Heath Ledger, a successful actor and rising star, died. He was a celebrity who actually had a Will but unfortunately, it was written before his marriage to Michelle Williams, also a successful actor, and the birth of their daughter, Matilda. The Will directed that his estate be distributed to his parents and sisters. Heath and Michelle divorced prior to his death. Thankfully, a legal dispute was avoided when Heath's family disclaimed any inheritance, and Michelle made no claims against the estate so that Matilda would inherit everything.



## The Lessons Learned From These Famous People:

- Everyone needs a will regardless of net worth.
- Even the wealthy who can most afford it and need it for tax purposes, neglect basic estate planning.
- Estate planning can ensure that family members from multiple marriages are not ignored or forgotten.
- Neglecting estate planning can lead to lawsuits and extraordinary administrative and legal fees. More important, it can lead to family discord and break families apart.
- Even if you have already created an estate plan, it must be reviewed on a regular basis, particularly if there has been a significant life event, such as a marriage, divorce, newly born or adopted child, change in wealth status, and more.
- Life insurance can be used to help replace wealth lost to taxes, administrative and legal fees; equalize inheritances; and help ensure that children from prior marriages are well cared for.

As you can see, having a Will and complementary estate-planning documents and life insurance are a necessity for everyone with family members and loved ones, regardless of wealth. Estate planning is a dynamic process. Plans must be reviewed on a regular basis to match current family and financial circumstances, goals and objectives. Don't be like the famous people described in this article. For more information on how you can protect your wealth and transfer a legacy to your heirs in the manner you choose, please discuss your estate-planning objectives with your Security Mutual life insurance advisor, who can coordinate your efforts, along with your attorney and tax advisor, to complete an estate plan.



**For more information on how you can protect your wealth and transfer a legacy to your heirs in the manner you choose, please discuss your estate planning objectives with your Security Mutual Life Insurance Advisor who can coordinate your efforts, along with your attorney and tax advisor, to complete an estate plan.**

## Sources

- <sup>1</sup> Courthouse News Service. "Martin Luther King's Bible, Nobel Prize Go to Estate." Courthousenews.com. <https://www.courthousenews.com/martin-luther-kings-bible-nobel-prize-go-to-estate/> (accessed December 18, 2020).
- <sup>2</sup> The Wealth Advisor. "When Pablo Picasso Died He Left Behind Billions Of Dollars Worth Of Art. . . Yet He Left No Will." Thewealthadvisor.com. <https://www.thewealthadvisor.com/article/when-pablo-picasso-died-he-left-behind-billions-dollars-worth-art-yet-he-left-no-will> (accessed December 18, 2020).
- <sup>3</sup> Morgan, Richard. "Fight over Prince's \$200M estate could go on for years." Pagesix.com. <https://pagesix.com/2019/04/19/fight-over-princes-200m-estate-could-go-on-for-years/> (accessed December 18, 2020).

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