

Florida woman works to get life back 2 years after escaping guardianship

Guardian's registration revoked amid multiple violations

A woman fights to get her life back nearly two years after being freed from Florida's broken court-ordered guardianship system; the guardian has her registration revoked

ALTAMONTE SPRINGS, Fla. — Under court-ordered guardianship, Jan Garwood lost her home, her car and all her rights.

We reported in 2020, how she used a secret cell phone and social media to escape a locked dementia unit and had her rights restored.

But nearly two years later Garwood, who is now 73, is still struggling to get her life back after escaping from Florida's broken guardianship system.

Garwood escapes guardianship, despite difficult odds

"God smiles on me all the time," Garwood said.

She attributes her faith and optimism to her strong Jewish faith.

Garwood overcame nearly insurmountable odds to get her rights restored after spending three years under the control of two professional guardians.

"I was very lucky," Garwood said, describing getting out of guardianship.

But she says Florida's court-appointed guardianship system doesn't offer any resources for people after they get their rights restored.

The ABC Action News I-Team first spoke to Garwood in April 2020. She sent a message on Facebook, then called on Facetime from a locked dementia unit using a secret cell phone snuck in by her son Alex.

"It's hard to put a word on it. Heartbreaking, frustrating, challenging. Trying to get past people. Hiding my phone so I can get out and call people and try to get help," Garwood said in our first recorded phone call. "There shouldn't be anybody that should be able to have 100% control over anybody's life."

One of Garwood's biggest concerns at the time was that COVID was spreading through her ALF and she had no way to protect herself from being infected.

"I went on Facebook and I said if anybody out there is reading this, I'm locked up in an assisted living and I can't get out and I need an attorney," Garwood said in a

recent interview.

Garwood landed in guardianship in 2017 after she was injured in a car crash while grieving the death of her son.

A judge ruled she was not capable of taking care of herself and removed all her rights and her ability to control her resources.

“Are you Janice Garwood?” Disgraced former professional guardian Rebecca Fierle was appointed to care for her. Garwood met her for the first time when Fierle rang her doorbell.

“She just looked at me and said are you Janice Garwood? And I said yes. And she said good. Get your keys. You’re coming with me,” Garwood said.

Fierle later resigned from all her cases after state investigators alleged she was responsible for the death of a man under her care.

Fierle was charged with two felonies and is awaiting trial.

Denise Willis was appointed Garwood’s new guardian.

At this court hearing, Willis asked for permission to sell Garwood’s home to an employee of the assisted living facility where Garwood lived.

The house was not listed for sale and never had a formal appraisal.

The house was in a neighborhood of \$400,000 to \$500,000 homes but was sold to the ALF employee who had a business relationship with Willis for \$250,000.

Garwood, a former realtor, objected to the sale.

“This is all money and I really resent it. Every penny I have is gone. It’s not right,” Garwood told the judge at the hearing.

He allowed the sale to go through.

Doctor determines Garwood has capacity.

A short time later, Garwood made a Facebook plea and guardianship reform advocate Hillary Hogue paid her a visit.

Hogue put her in touch with attorney Vito Roppo.

“I filed a motion to be appointed as her counsel at her request and I put in there that I believe she should be re-examined,” Roppo said.

A different judge ordered a new evaluation by a doctor, who gave her a nearly perfect score stating that “she is fully capable of handling and executing her own personal, medical and financial day-to-day affairs.”

Within weeks, Garwood had her rights restored. She now shares an apartment with her son Alex and his girlfriend.

“I only have my Social Security. She took everything else,” Garwood said.

Records show that Willis deposited \$171,000 from the sale of Garwood's home into a special needs trust Garwood can't directly access.

Her current apartment is furnished with furniture she found by the dumpster or bought from a nearby thrift store.

“This isn't what I would go out and buy, but there's nothing wrong with it. I was lucky the day I moved in, they started putting out furniture,” Garwood said.

A program from her mother's funeral, a family menorah and a picture of Garwood's late father were among the few items Alex was able to save out of Garwood's 2,700-square-foot home.

“The rest of it's just gone. We don't know if it's in a trash can or in storage,” Garwood's son Alex said. “There's no communication from Denise Willis trying to make things right. “

County and state investigators identify guardian committed multiple violations

Willis was investigated by the Seminole County Inspector General's Office last September, which concluded Garwood's Nissan Rogue was sold significantly undervalue, 13 months of her Social Security income was unaccounted for and the guardian did not get the required court approval before depositing proceeds from Garwood's home sale into a special needs trust.

The Florida Office of Public and Professional Guardians revoked Willis' registration in April after finding multiple violations in six cases, including incomplete accountings, failing to visit wards and missing personal property.

Willis did not respond to our request for comment.

Garwood said despite all her challenges, she knows God's still smiling.

“I believe that I have to go through what I have to go through so I can tell somebody else what happened and save them from going through it,” she said.