

Stocco, Janet

From: Bread and Roses <breadandroses17@hotmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, November 3, 2021 10:30 AM
To: Stocco, Janet
Subject: Presentation to the Commission to Incorporate the Probate Courts into the Judiciary November 1, 2021 by Camille Desoto, revised November 1, 2021

This message originates from outside the Maine Legislature.

From: Bread and Roses <breadandroses17@hotmail.com>
Sent: Monday, November 1, 2021 4:07 AM
To: Bread and Roses <breadandroses17@hotmail.com>
Subject: Presentation to the Commission to Incorporate the Probate Courts into the Judiciary November 1, 2021 by Camille Desoto

**Presentation to the Commission to Incorporate the Probate Courts into the Judiciary November 1, 2021
by Camille Desoto**

Good morning Senator Carney and Representative Cardone and all other distinguished members of the committee, My name is Camille Desoto (nee Carol Aft). I am here today to provide testimony to support incorporating the Probate Courts into the Judiciary. I believe this is critically needed in order to provide oversight to protect individuals that are involved in the probate system.

As with almost everything, there is more to the story so I have included in my testimonial hand outs, my story that I wrote for NAMI Maine speakers series called Breaking Point. I invite you to read it to gain a more in depth understanding of what happened to me and my journey through the Portland District Court and Cumberland County Probate court.

A little over ten years ago, in 2009, I suffered a nervous breakdown after two tragic deaths in my life. I became clinically depressed and ultimately institutionalized in Riverview Psychiatric Center. While there, my now ex-husband abandoned me, hired an attorney to prevent me from returning to our home in Falmouth, Maine and serve me divorce papers. He was successful at taking full control of all of our financial assets, custody of our child and control over our estate in Falmouth and my inheritance. Thereafter, I was released to an apartment in South Portland, destitute.

I was appointed an attorney by Judge Eggert that set up a special needs trust as part of the divorce decree. I attempted to fire the attorney over this matter, but Judge Eggert disallowed it.

I contested the creation of the special needs trust within 30 days of the divorce decree and once again was disallowed the dissolution of the trust.

I am a well educated woman with a B. S. Degree in Business Administration and an emphasis area in Accounting. I graduated in 1988 with honors from University of Missouri in St. Louis and had been accepted into a Masters of Tax program. At the time of the divorce hearing at Portland District Court, I had over 25 years of professional accounting experience.

I had fully recovered from my nervous breakdown while at Riverview and despite the devastating losses, felt fully competent to manage my own finances, what little they were at the time.

Mercilessly, I had been placed in such a disadvantaged state by being divorced into poverty suddenly and unprepared. I had no idea that my husband would be abandoning me at Riverview and take all our money, our child and leave me destitute.

It took 10 months from the divorce decree for the trust to be created in which my ex-husband would pay spousal support into. During the interim he was required to pay for only my basic living expenses and no more. This left me with little money for food, supplies and necessities. Quickly I learned how to live poor while he continued to live in our estate with our son on his executive salary of over \$150,000 per year. When the trust was set up I was to receive \$24,000 per year.

I guess I had never thought that my husband would leave me behind. We had lived together and married from the time I was 28 years old until he divorced me at 50 years of age, almost half my life.

Once the trust was actively receiving money and assets, it quickly became a tool for abuse and manipulation by the trust administrators. I reported this to the court, but the Portland District Court took no action.

In 2012, I represented myself in court again to try to have the trust dissolved. Judge Goranites rejected dissolution of the trust. I had done everything I was supposed to show the court that I could manage my funds such as returning to college to refresh my tax knowledge to get a job, managing my household finances, volunteering, etc....I had created a new healthy life, but still the court cruelly denied me my financial freedom from the abuse of administrators.

In 2015, I asked the Portland District Court to overturn an unconscionable stipulation I signed that ended the spousal support and gave me a small portion of my inheritance. I had proof that I had been coerced into signing it. But Judge Darvin refused to support me and once again my wealthy ex-husband won, while I continued to struggle financially.

In 2019, I once again tried to have the trust dissolved and Judge Cashman ruled that the jurisdiction of the trust was with the Cumberland County Probate Court and would not hear my case.

In 2020, I finally presented my case to Judge Aranson of the Cumberland County Probate, ten years after inception of this egregious trust and was finally given the grace of termination of the trust, but only with the last administrator, my brother Kenneth Aft, giving his consent. And my brother did graciously provide the written consent on August 9, 2021. Less than two weeks later he died, a young man of 62 years old of a very untimely death.

My feeling about having proper oversight, especially in probate cases, is that the administrators have free reign over the assets and can easily abuse, manipulate, terrorize, traumatize, and exploit those that they manage the trusts for. As I was.

I feel very humbled by all of this. The court system which I believe should have protected me created a monster in the form of a trust.

I was told that there would be many benefits that I would be eligible for with the trust, such as SSDI, section 8, etc. But I never received any benefits from it.

In retrospect, I see that surviving divorce and the loss of access to my son took all the life out of me; added to that was withstanding the abuse of this trust by the administrators.

Gratefully, during this time I was fortunate in finding God, or I should say, God found me.

And I was able to sustain the belief in myself.

My hope is that this commission will incorporate the probate courts into the judiciary system so that what happened to me will never be allowed to happen to others.

The message that I leave you with today is:

At some point in your lives you may become disabled mentally, physically or spiritually without any fault of your own, and you will need a justice system that not only incorporates compassion into it's rulings, but fairness and honesty in it's courts.

Having strong oversight of the probate court system by incorporation into the judicial system guarantees and protects the most vulnerable of society.

Please review and use my Portland District Court Case POR FM 09-711, 026 and Cumberland County Probate Case 2021-0115 to get a detailed case history.

Thank you for listening to my testimony. It has been an honor and privilege to speak before you today.

Sincerely, Camille Desoto, nee Carol Aft

Stocco, Janet

From: Bread and Roses <breadandroses17@hotmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, November 3, 2021 10:32 AM
To: Stocco, Janet
Subject: Breaking Point by Camille Desoto

Follow Up Flag: Follow up
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This message originates from outside the Maine Legislature.

Breaking Point: A Journey Through Mental Illness

by Camille Desoto nee Carol Aft
Dedicated to my best friend and sister, Rachel Friedman,
who never gave up on me

My name is Camille Desoto. I am a mother, an author, a college graduate, professional accountant and president of my own successful company and was part of the mentally ill community.

I am speaking to you today to reduce the stigma of mental illness by explaining how one can easily lose their mental health in a society that gives very little attention to stress, trauma, and lack of compassion in the workplace. Needed are programs and education in personal resiliency and coping methods to confront daily life and trauma informed societies that support mental health.

I have written three books and many stories. This- my own story—is by far, the most difficult one to write. Telling it means reliving painful memories of the past. But it is important to tell so that others will know and understand.

My entry into the abyss started with a tragic death—that of my father. One of the most wonderful people throughout my entire life. My hero. Gentle natured and goofy. He was raised in an orphan home from the age of five becoming a college graduate in electrical engineering and a well decorated two time war veteran. He successfully raised six children, all well educated with outstanding careers. It was an undeserved death caused by a careless hospital error. His colon was punctured during a routine colonoscopy. He lingered in a septic state for weeks in the hospital and then his body gave out. Helplessly, I watched as my father, a man who vigilantly stood by my side always, slowly slipped away. And there was nothing I could do to save him. Grief set in and took my soul captive.

Less than one year later, the tragedy was repeated. This time it was my closest sister's husband. Another fatal hospital error. He died during a routine minor operation due to food aspiration into his lungs. The medical staff forgot to pump

his stomach prior to surgery. He was brain dead after the operation, taken off life support and died a quick and sudden death. He, too, was someone I loved dearly.

Weakened emotionally already by grueling years of supporting my husband's highly demanding executive career with a very small support system consisting only of my sister. The difficulty and hardship of multiple domestic and international moves combined with years of singly raising our son due to my absent husband's hundred hour work weeks had worn me down. My beauty and youth had faded with the years, replaced with wisdom and a foresight allowing me to see the writing on the wall: I was to be replaced for a newer, younger model as I approached forty five years of age, despite providing my husband with twenty years of dedicated marriage. I had sacrificed my entire youth to a man who would show no loyalty in return.

I don't know exactly when my breaking point occurred. Grief had engulfed me for two long years. But the real struggle came when I went from grief counseling with psychologists to medication with psychiatrists. I wanted that quick fix of feeling better by taking drugs. With it came a cocktail of psychotropic drugs and a wide variety of diagnosis. I became an interesting assortment of psychiatric labels: clinically depressed, schizoid, schizo-affective, schizoid depressed, bipolar one, bipolar two, depressed with psychotic features. It wasn't until my husband came home one day to find that I hadn't slept for three days and had micro-organized every shelf and drawer in the house, that he became suspicious that something was off. That's when I attempted to taper off Prozac understanding that the manic state it had put me in would eventually do me in.

Clearly, the drugs weren't fixing my problems, they were helping me to get the household in order, my son off to school and managed and all checkbooks balanced, but at that rate burn out was right around the corner.

My first hospitalization happened as an outcome. Tapering off any SSRI too quickly is extremely dangerous, as I unfortunately found out. Spring Harbor was ready and willing to welcome me aboard.

After I was released, I tried to feng shui my life, clearing the clutter of all negative energy. It seemed to be successful, at least for a while. I still struggled with depression, but dealt with it by exercising and volunteer work. Thinking I was on safe ground, I decided to attempt a part time job. A return to my career as an accountant.

I accepted a position with a small firm in my community, performed well, was dedicated and quite competent. And then one day, I walked into work and my boss said I was fired. No reason, just "Here is a two week paycheck, and don't come back". It didn't make sense. For the first time in a long while, my life had been going quite well. Then came the unexpectedness of being fired without any explanation. THIS became my breaking point. I had worked at this job for months without any reprimands, negative feedback, nothing and yet they fired me. And I broke.

I called to request meetings or at least an explanation of why I was fired. No response. I sent letters asking why.

Then, I did get a response: a protection from harassment order. I was stunned. I had never had any involvement with the law in my life. Then I really went over the deep end. No sleep. Crying spells. And I turned to alcohol. Alcohol in my coffee. Alcohol when I picked my son up from school, alcohol for dessert. I went back to taking the Ambien to get to sleep at night. A real decline of my mental health. I sent one last letter to my former employer which probably did not make

any sense at all, due to most of anything was done in an alcoholic state. That's when the police came to arrest me for a violation of a PFA in a "no contact" state. I was arrested with police leaving my grade school son home alone without me.

Had at any point, the police asked me "What happened?" or "Why are you doing this?" I would have answered, "I just want to know why I was fired. I didn't do anything wrong." Any answer would have been kind and compassionate. But nobody asked and nobody cared.

This arrest began the destruction of my life, my family's life and our sacred family home. Informed and compassionate intervention of non-violent acts related to mental illness by the criminal justice system has the power to spare lives and families. Unfortunately, I was not afforded such grace.

I somehow ended up in a psychiatric prison called Riverview Psychiatric Center, after transfer from the Cumberland County Jail. I thought I had reached the absolute bottom of the abyss at that point, but wasn't there just yet. At Riverview, I was housed with murders, sociopaths and people who had committed assaults, among the many others in the forensic unit. I was at Riverview for close to three months waiting for and then participating in forensic testing to see if I was responsible enough to face my crime: writing non-violent crazy letters to a former boss asking why I was fired. The so called crime that destroyed my life and my family and mercilessly took away everything good in my life. I was transferred to the civil non-forensic side of Riverview for another three months until allowed to be released. In all, the six months at Riverview provided my husband more than ample time to take full control of all of our assets, prepare to divorce me, prevent me from returning to our home, and gain full custody of our child. I lost it all and was divorced into poverty.

Many states have laws to protect the mentally ill from being abandoned in institutions as I was. Maine does not. A truly unconscionable way to allow divorce of a spouse.

Ironically, during my time in Riverview, my mental health soared. I was fully engaged in the Treatment Mall education program, excersized, wrote in my journal, socialized with the community. My self esteem recovered and I had found my place. I knew, I mean I really knew that I was better and begged my husband to allow my return home. But, he said no. A cruel reality. Working through intense despair, I did come to accept that I would not be going home, not knowing where I would go. I mean I had no home to go home to. Riverview was my home. I pleaded to stay. But despite my pleas, I was told "Riverview was not a forever place and that I would need to go."

So I did go, but not before the doctors forced medication upon me. I never understood why. An explanation was never provided. I guess, they just wanted me doped up enough so that I would not cause trouble when I left.

My life after Riverview was a new reality. An unfamiliar life. A new home apart from everything I knew and loved. A very small apartment in transitional housing. I didn't realize how unsafe it was. I had never lived in substandard housing. Going from living an upper middle class life to being poor was a disasterous adjustment. I was targeted immediately by my neighbors, broken into chronically and goaded.

Additionally, the stress of being in the outside world was quite a shock physically. The outside light hurt my eyes. Riverview kept the lights dim. Outside time there was quite limited. I hadn't driven in six months while being institutionalized, so driving was extremely stressful. My ex-husband did not supply enough money for me to live on. And when I returned to the court representing myself, the judge refused to allow me \$100 more a month to financially survive.

Eventually I became homeless living out of my car. Meanwhile, my ex-husband celebrated victory and independence from me, winning control over our near million dollar estate and full custody of our only child.

Homelessness became the greatest obstacle in overcoming poverty. Living out of my car posed great problems. Resourcefully, I found that I could rent a tent site, but only for a few sequential weeks at a time. This allowed access to cooking with a campfire which was a quality improvement in my homeless life. Eventually, I saved up enough money for a weekly apartment rental. But then I ran out of money and was back to my car. And then winter started to set in and I faced dying of exposure by living out of my car. There was no room at the shelters. Back then, the city of Portland did not open overflow shelters.

Giving up hope, I called my rabbi at 2 o'clock in the morning, shivering, begging for help. He did not accept my phone call or even return my call. This is when I did give up. I took the last remaining pills of Ambien and parked my car in front of my synagogue, not expecting to wake up.

But then, God woke me up. Or possibly it was the woman from the synagogue knocking on my car window, yelling at me "YOU CAN'T PARK THERE!" I awoke dazed. I looked at her and said, "Yes, I would leave". I understood that the Jewish community did not want me unless I was a financially contributing member.

I drove away from the synagogue dazed but fully alive. And was glad that they did not call the police for parking in front of their synagogue. The Jewish community not only rejected me, but truly failed me.

But God did not. I saw that God for some reason wanted me to live.

Having no money, and one charge card with no balance left, I overcharged the card and filled my car with gas three times. Just enough to make it to my hometown of St. Louis, Missouri. I begged my wealthy surgeon sister for help. She refused. So I threatened her with a legal suit, and she showed up to cosign for an apartment.

This became the one lucky break that I needed to get on my feet. Had I not had the gumption to provoke her for help, I would not have survived the odds that were stacked against me.

While there I was able to secure a part time job and find free counseling offered by a seminary. The therapy I received helped me to go forward with my life. I was able to resume my career in public accounting for a very kind tax attorney and CPA. Subsequently, within a year I had saved enough money to return to Maine and fight for custody of my child. This time, I would not give up.

Thereafter in Maine, my ascent from the abyss was so slow that it was hardly discernible. I was required to attend DBT classes two to three times a week for six months and visit a psychiatrist every few weeks. DBT became a critical turning point in my life. Originally developed for trauma victims, now DBT is in widespread use for re-creating an emotional infrastructure for rape victims and those suffering from ACE which is chronic childhood abuse, among many other types of mental illness. It includes development of coping techniques, emotional regulation, cognitive behavioral therapy, and a variety of other therapies.

Sometimes, when I look back at the losses that I sustained, I am profoundly sorrowful. I cry easily at the thought of having lost my only child. It's way beyond my comprehension or ability to cope with. This happens all too often among the mentally ill, we lose our children. But I know that despite my sorrows and sadness that my life has meaning and purpose. And when I force myself to look to the future, I know I have made it. And have become much stronger in spirit and resilience to face whatever life presents me. My faith in God has never been stronger and I know that good things will once again happen in my life.

The message that I leave you with today is this :

**The only one that can throw you away is you.
Believe in yourself and the world will open up to you.**

Thank you for listening to my story. We will all live real life dramas at some point in our lives and somehow survive them as heroes in our own little way.

March 17, 2016

A special thank you to Project Semicolon for connecting people through the art of compassion.

Life Is A Journey

*Life is a journey, a going, a growing from stage to stage
From childhood to maturity and youth to age,
From ignorance to awareness and ignorance to knowing,
From foolishness to discretion and perhaps to wisdom,
From weakness to strength or strength to weakness, and often back again.
From offense to forgiveness
From loneliness to love.
From joy to gratitude
From pain to compassion
From grief to understanding.
From fear to faith
From defeat to defeat
Until looking backward or ahead
We see victory lies not in some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey
Stage by stage:
A sacred pilgrimage.
Lived through hardship and grace.*