

Matter of Calhoun

2010 NY Slip Op 30715(U)

March 12, 2010

Surrogate's Court, Nassau County

Docket Number: 305708

Judge: John B. Riordan

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SURROGATE'S COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK
COUNTY OF NASSAU

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In the Matter of the Account of Proceedings of
Eric P. Milgrim, Public Administrator of Nassau County,
as Limited Administrator of the Estate of

File No. 305708

Dec. No. 134

YEOLANDA CALHOUN,

Deceased.

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Before the court is the first and final account of the Public Administrator for the estate of Yeolanda Calhoun, who died intestate, a resident of Hempstead, on June 21, 1993, leaving one daughter, April Lowry, surviving. Limited letters of administration were issued to the Public Administrator on September 10, 1998 and modified on January 11, 2007 to enable the Public Administrator to collect the surplus money resulting from a foreclosure sale of decedent's real property.

The account filed by the Public Administrator shows the receipt of \$17,670.16 of estate principal, which was supplemented by income collected totaling \$208.50. This resulted in total charges of \$17,878.66. This amount was reduced by administrative expenses through September 30, 2009 in the amount of \$2,946.75, leaving a balance of \$14,931.91 on hand. The Public Administrator seeks approval of the accounting, approval of commissions, the fixing of fees for the services of the attorney and accountant, and authorization to distribute the net estate to the Nassau County Department of Social Services in full satisfaction of its claim in the amount of \$177,020.06 against the decedent's estate. In addition, the court must release the administrator from the surety bond.

Regarding the fee of the attorney for the estate, the court bears the ultimate responsibility

for approving legal fees that are charged to an estate and has the discretion to determine what constitutes reasonable compensation for legal services rendered in the course of an estate (*Matter of Stortecky v Mazzone*, 85 NY2d 518 [1995]; *Matter of Vitole*, 215 AD2d 765 [2d Dept 1995]; *Matter of Phelan*, 173 AD2d 621, 622 [2d Dept 1991]). While there is no hard and fast rule to calculate reasonable compensation to an attorney in every case, the Surrogate is required to exercise his or her authority "with reason, proper discretion and not arbitrarily" (*Matter of Brehm*, 37 AD2d 95, 97 [4th Dept 1971]; see *Matter of Wilhelm*, 88 AD2d 6, 11-12 [4th Dept 1982]).

In evaluating the cost of legal services, the court may consider a number of factors. These include: the time spent (*Matter of Kelly*, 187 AD2d 718 [2d Dept 1992]); the complexity of the questions involved (*Matter of Coughlin*, 221 AD2d 676 [3d Dept 1995]); the nature of the services provided (*Matter of Von Hofe*, 145 AD2d 424 [2d Dept 1988]); the amount of litigation required (*Matter of Sabatino*, 66 AD2d 937 [3d Dept 1978]); the amounts involved and the benefit resulting from the execution of such services (*Matter of Shalman*, 68 AD2d 940 [3d Dept 1979]); the lawyer's experience and reputation (*Matter of Brehm*, 37 AD2d 95 [4th Dept 1971]); and the customary fee charged by the Bar for similar services (*Matter of Potts*, 123 Misc 346 [Sur Ct, Columbia County 1924], *affd* 213 App Div 59 [4th Dept 1925], *affd* 241 NY 593 [1925]; *Matter of Freeman*, 34 NY2d 1 [1974]). In discharging this duty to review fees, the court cannot apply a selected few factors which might be more favorable to one position or another but must strike a balance by considering all of the elements set forth in *Matter of Potts* (123 Misc 346 [Sur Ct, Columbia County 1924], *affd* 213 App Div 59 [4th Dept 1925], *affd* 241 NY 593 [1925]), and as re-enunciated in *Matter of Freeman* (34 NY2d 1 [1974]) (see *Matter of*

Berkman, 93 Misc 2d 423 [Sur Ct, Bronx County 1978]). Also, the legal fee must bear a reasonable relationship to the size of the estate (*Matter of Kaufmann*, 26 AD2d 818 [1st Dept 1966], *affd* 23 NY2d 700 [1968]; *Martin v Phipps*, 21 AD2d 646 [1st Dept 1964], *affd* 16 NY2d 594 [1965]). A sizeable estate permits adequate compensation, but nothing beyond that (*Martin v Phipps*, 21 AD2d 646 [1st Dept 1964], *aff'd* 16 NY2d 594 [1965]; *Matter of Reede*, NYLJ, Oct. 28, 1991, at 37, col 2 [Sur Ct, Nassau County]; *Matter of Yancey*, NYLJ, Feb. 18, 1993, at 28, col 1 [Sur Ct, Westchester County]). Moreover, the size of the estate can operate as a limitation on the fees payable (*Matter of McCranor*, 176 AD2d 1026 [3d Dept 1991]; *Matter of Kaufmann*, 26 AD2d 818 [1st Dept 1966], *affd* 23 NY2d 700 [1968]), without constituting an adverse reflection on the services provided. The burden with respect to establishing the reasonable value of legal services performed rests on the attorney performing those services (*Matter of Potts*, 123 Misc 346 [Sur Ct, Columbia County 1924], *affd* 213 App Div 59 [4th Dept 1925], *affd* 241 NY 593 [1925]; *see e.g. Matter of Spatt*, 32 NY2d 778 [1973]).

The Public Administrator has petitioned the court for approval of the payment of \$2,798.75 to the attorney for the Public Administrator in connection with the administration of the estate. This amount has been paid in full. The court has carefully reviewed the affirmation of services and the time records submitted to the court. Contemporaneous records of legal time spent on estate matters are important to the court in determining whether the amount of time spent was reasonable for the various tasks performed (*Matter of Von Hofe*, 145 AD2d 424 [2d Dept 1988]; *Matter of Phelan*, 173 AD2d 621 [2d Dept 1991]). The record shows that the attorney devoted more than 51 hours to this matter through August 2009. The services provided by the attorney included preparing and filing a petition for removal of limitations on letters of

administration and accompanying affidavits; commencing a surplus money proceeding in Nassau County Supreme Court; participating in multiple telephone conferences with a foreclosure referee; collecting surplus funds from the Nassau County Treasurer; and reviewing information concerning the identity and whereabouts of decedent's distributees. In addition, the attorney for the Public Administrator prepared the final account and the accompanying documentation. In view of the exiguous balance that would remain if the attorney were to bill for the full amount of services provided, which would amount to \$8,971.25, the attorney has offered to accept as a total fee the amount paid to date, \$2,798.75. The court commends the attorney for his skillful representation of the Public Administrator and for voluntarily reducing his fee by \$6,172.50, a reduction of 69%. The fee is approved in the amount requested.

The court has also been asked to review the accountant's fees. Typically, an accountant's services are not compensable from estate assets unless there exist unusual circumstances that require the expertise of an accountant (*Matter of Meranus*, NYLJ, Mar. 31, 1994, at 37, col 2 [Sur Ct, Suffolk County]). The fee for such services is generally held to be included in the fee of the attorney for the fiduciary (*Matter of Musil*, 254 App Div 765 [2d Dept 1938]). The purpose of this rule is to avoid duplication (*Matter of Schoonheim*, 158 AD2d 183 [1st Dept 1990]). "Where the legal fees do not include compensation for services rendered by the accountant, there is no duplication and the legal fee is not automatically reduced by the accounting fee" (*Matter of Tortora*, NYLJ, July 19, 1995, at 26, col 2 [Sur Ct, New York County] [internal citation omitted]; Warren's Heaton on Surrogate's Court Practice § 93.08 [7th ed] [citing *Tortora*]).

The accountant has submitted an affidavit of services requesting a fee of \$575.00 for preparation of the estate's final return. The work to be performed by the accountant is not

duplicative of the services rendered by the estate attorney, and the requested amount for these services is reasonable. The court approves the fee in the amount \$575.00, all of which remains unpaid.

The commission of the administrator is approved subject to audit.

The decree shall discharge the surety and shall authorize the Public Administrator to distribute the balance of the net estate to the Nassau County Department of Social Services.

Settle decree.

Dated: March 12, 2010

JOHN B. RIORDAN
Judge of the
Surrogate's Court