PARROTHEAD PITFALL: CHOOSING THE WRONG TRUSTEE CAN BE COSTLY

When music icon Jimmy Buffett passed away in 2023, the majority of his $275 million estate was transferred into a marital trust designed to provide for his widow, Jane Slagsvol. Buffett appointed Slagsvol as co-trustee alongside his long-time business manager, Richard Mozenter. What was intended to be a straightforward administration of a well-structured trust has instead evolved into a bitter legal battle—a powerful example of the risks involved in selecting the wrong trustee.

What Went Wrong?

Slagsvol has filed to remove Mozenter as co-trustee for several reasons:

01. Poor Investment Performance
The trust reportedly earned less than 1% return, which Slagsvol says is inadequate to cover her expenses.

02. Lack of Communication and Transparency
She alleges Mozenter has failed to share key information about trust finances and investments.

03. Breakdown in Trustee Relationship
Slagsvol accuses Mozenter of being "openly hostile" and possibly undermining her interests. Mozenter, in turn, is trying to remove Slagsvol as co-trustee.

04. High Trustee Compensation
Mozenter collected $1.7 million in trustee fees in 2024, raising further concerns about the trust's management.

Lessons in Choosing a Trustee

This dispute highlights how even a well-funded and well-intentioned estate plan can go sideways when the wrong people are in charge.

Choose for Competence, Not Comfort

- It's tempting to appoint a spouse, friend, or cousin.
- But familiarity doesn't guarantee objectivity, financial know-how, or professionalism.

Think Like a Business Owner

Choose your trustee like you'd choose a CEO:

- Financially competent
- Trustworthy
- Emotionally neutral and collaborative

Why Consider a Corporate Trustee?

A corporate trustee often offers clear advantages:

- **Professional Expertise.** Corporate trustees have deep knowledge of trust law, tax strategies, and financial management. They can handle trusts with the structure and discipline they require.
- **Impartiality**. Unlike individuals, corporate trustees don't get emotionally involved.
- **Continuity and Stability.** Individual trustees can become incapacitated, biased, or pass away. A corporate trustee provides ongoing, consistent service, regardless of personnel changes.
- **Regulation and Oversight.** Corporate trustees are regulated and insured, with accountability processes in place. This minimizes risk of misconduct and ensures fiduciary duties are fulfilled.
- **Efficiency, Transparency and Communication.** Standardized reporting systems keep beneficiaries informed and ensures transparent communication.

Key takeaway

Jimmy Buffett's estate may have had the right structure—a marital trust—but the wrong trustee choices are now causing costly and emotional legal conflict.

To protect your legacy:

- Avoid choosing trustees based solely on personal ties.
- Strongly consider appointing a corporate trustee.
- Always include clear instructions, and if using co-trustees, ensure they are compatible.

The wrong trustee can jeopardize everything you built. The right trustee can protect your legacy with professionalism, clarity, and peace of mind.

Please reach out to Heather Pesikoff, Head of Trust Services or the Corient Trust Team trust@corient.com with any questions.