News

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The Associated Press

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A judge has denied a request by news organizations including The Associated Press to unseal court records involving the mental competency of billionaire Tom Benson when he rewrote his will to give his third wife ownership of the New Orleans Saints and Pelicans sports franchises.

The news outlets argued public interest in the 2015 case had been heightened by revelations this year that Saints executives engaged in a behind-the-scenes public relations campaign to help the Archdiocese of New Orleans contain the fallout from a clergy abuse crisis.

"Legitimate questions are being raised about the connection between the team and the local Roman Catholic Church," attorneys for the news organizations wrote in a court filing.

But Orleans Parish Civil District Judge Kern Reese said Benson's right to privacy remains sacred even after his 2018 death, and that freedom of the press must be balanced against those considerations.

"I don't think we have the right as a society to go picking through his medical history," Reese said.

The news organizations, which also included CNN, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal, agreed that Benson's medical information should remain shielded but asked that other testimony from the eight-day proceeding be made public.

James Gulotta, an attorney for Benson, said that could result in a "misleading view of what took place" in the case.

"I think the news media is barking up the wrong tree," he said.

It was not immediately clear whether the news organizations intended to appeal the ruling.

Reese had closed his courtroom throughout the 2015 trial, known in Louisiana as an interdiction, saying secrecy was needed to protect Benson's medical privacy rights and confidential information about the business operations of the NFL and NBA clubs.

The case involved explosive claims brought by Benson's heirs that the billionaire's third wife, Gayle, manipulated Benson into rewriting his will and isolated him from his friends and family.

Reese dismissed the lawsuit following eight days of testimony, ruling Benson was mentally sound when he ousted his estranged daughter and grandchildren from ownership positions with his teams.

Gayle Benson, a devout Catholic with close ties to Archbishop Gregory Aymond, inherited Benson's business empire and has defended the Saint's public relations work on behalf of the cash-strapped archdiocese, which recently filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

Aymond served as a witness to the signing of the will that cut out Benson's estranged heirs.

The Saints acknowledged giving church leaders advice on how to handle media attention surrounding the 2018 release of a list naming more than 50 clergy members "credibly accused" of sexual abuse. The team and church leaders have opposed a request by the AP to release thousands of internal emails documenting the public relations work.

Gayle Benson testified during the 2015 interdiction proceedings, but attorneys for Benson argued the trial had "nothing to do with the Archdiocese."

But the news organizations argued that "there has been a continuing public interest in the ownership of the Saints" that increased "because of the actions of Saints personnel under Mrs. Benson's ownership in assisting the Archdiocese of New Orleans."

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