

TOXIC: THE BRITNEY SPEARS STORY
CHAPTER 6: CIRCUS

WITNESS DOCS

SCENE TAPE: [SOUNDS OF WALKING]

TESS (AT COURTHOUSE): Oh my god what's this? Little display here of Black's Law Dictionary.

TESS BARKER, HOST: Babs and I are on the top floor of the Stanley Mosk courthouse, just outside the cafeteria. We've stumbled across some kind of installation of various law textbooks. It's off to one side, next to some orange cones and janitor's buckets.

BABS (AT COURTHOUSE): So it's like a little it's like a display in a glass case of all these I guess maybe what-

TESS (AT COURTHOUSE) : The guy who wrote Black's Law Dictionary? We should note, this is like a corner kind of by the restroom

BABS: It's like on the cafeteria level.

TESS (AT COURTHOUSE): There's a knocked over book...

BABS (AT COURTHOUSE) : I guarantee you we're the only people who looked at this maybe ever

BABS GRAY, HOST: Black's Law Dictionary was first published in 1891, and it's still the most widely used law dictionary in the U.S.

TESS: According to the most recent edition of Black's Law, probate is defined as: "The judicial procedure by which a testamentary document is established to be a valid will." In modern language, probate is the court that handles all of a person's assets after they die. And that's what we're here to observe today: probate court.

BABS: The probate court also handles trusts and, ding, ding, ding, the word of the day - conservatorships. Black's Law defines a conservatorship as "a person who is appointed by a judge to manage the affairs of a person who does not have capacity to manage their own affairs, often called conservator of the estate for financial matters and conservator of the person for healthcare, living arrangements and personal matters."

TESS: This is a pretty big deal. Legally speaking, the conservator really *becomes* that person. And this process - of one person gaining control of someone else's rights - goes down in a courthouse just like this one. And Britney's own conservatorship case is handled here.

BABS: But today, on a random Tuesday in June 2021, we're here to learn more about the cases that *aren't* Britney's. We want to see what goes down in probate court on a daily basis. So we head down the escalators to check it out.

[BUSY HALLWAY SOUNDS]

TESS: Lawyers walk past, dragging their files behind them in rolling briefcases. One wears a Gucci face mask. Court employees come and go from behind doors with combination locks on the handles. Family members huddle around benches and courtroom entrances. They look tense and speak to one another in whispers.

TESS (AT COURTHOUSE): 245, 213, 215... This place is so confusing.

BABS: Tess and I slip quietly into the room we're looking for. We're there to observe a probate judge who's got 23 cases on his docket. And that's just for his first hour of the day. Each case moves fast. A hearing gets delayed because an attorney has filled out a form incorrectly. One woman, who seems nervous, tells the judge she's looking for basic information on her dead uncle's will. The judge tells her he can't help her. He knows nothing about her case.

[MORE COURTHOUSE SOUNDS]

TESS: To be honest - probate law seems like something most people don't pay attention to until they have to. It's confusing, and convoluted. And today at the courthouse, we even see lawyers and judges unable to agree on what the law means at times.

BABS: In all of the probate hearings we attend today, Tess and I are the only observers. The clerks seem surprised to see media in the audience. But Britney Spears is in a probate conservatorship - and that means that there are people like us watching.

THEME MUSIC ENTERS

TESS: So far in this podcast, we've walked through Britney history — from her life as a child performer up through the weekend in 2008 she was conserved at age 26. But starting in this episode, we're also zooming out to look at the complicated and far-reaching system that Britney's case is a part of. Because, while our interest in conservatorships started with Britney, it turns out her story is just one of many.

BABS: According to 2018 data from the AARP, Britney Spears is one of over *a million* people under conservatorship or guardianship in the United States. Experts have told us that number is rising with each passing generation.

TESS: As we'll learn, many of the people who work inside the system believe they're helping people in need. Much of what happens in probate conservatorships *is* well-intentioned.

BABS: But there are also people who feel brutalized by probate conservatorships. They say they've been tormented by a system that's robbed them of final years with their loved ones, and drained their relative's life savings. They report watching helplessly as their parents or spouses died alone and neglected.

TESS: And now we've heard Britney *herself* call out the various abuses she's endured under her conservatorship. So when there is foul play in conservatorships, what mechanisms, if any, are there to stop it?

BABS: That's what we're getting into today on Toxic - because we've talked to people who've been victimized by this system, in states all over the country. And we know that Britney is far from alone.

THEME POST AND OUT

BABS (QUESTION): What initially got you interested in a career in law?

JUDGE MARY THORNTON HOUSE: Well, this is kind of sad, but I didn't want to teach third grade.

BABS: This is Judge Mary Thornton House.

JUDGE HOUSE: I am a retired Superior Court judge. I was a probate judge for 8 years which is actually kind of a long time for a judge to do probate cases. You can burn out on it. It's very, very emotionally volatile.

TESS: Judge House has over 20 years of legal experience. She's no longer a sitting judge, but she does still work as a conflict mediator.

TESS: Judge House was a probate judge in the Los Angeles courts -- the same county where Britney is conserved. She's as close as we can get to talking to one of the judges who have actually heard Britney's case. We've reached out, but Britney's judges either aren't interested or aren't allowed to comment on Britney's case.

BABS: After studying Britney's and other cases so closely, we were curious to ask Judge House what really goes on in those courtrooms. What does the day to day of an LA probate judge look like?

JUDGE HOUSE: Well, you take the bench at 8:30 and I would prepare either the day before or the night before. And there's a regular calendar call at 8:30. It can have anywhere upwards to 50, 60 matters on the calendar. And then at 10:30, you do the guardianships and the conservatorships. And then you do afternoons the rest of the week on the case you started on Monday. So you're looking at 50 to 60 cases a day. Ideally 20 cases a day would be better because you can really review the files and remember them.

BABS: Obviously seeing 50 to 60 cases *in a day* is no easy task. Judge House says she had to make up mnemonic devices to remember her cases. She'd pick out some tiny detail to latch on to. The lemonade case. The Disneyland case.

TESS: According to California law, probate conservatorships are for when someone is unable to feed, clothe, or shelter themselves. When a conservator steps in, they handle everything from paying bills for the conservatee to selling their property. They arrange for medical care and can decide who may visit the conservatee.

BABS: Each conservatorship can also give the conservator specific powers. Britney has said in court that her conservators control everything from the medication she takes to whether she can have a manicure or take vitamins for her hair. Britney has even told the court that her conservators won't let her drink coffee.

TESS: You do not fuck with Britney's coffee. I mean, come on. That's like denying Popeye his spinach.

BABS: These are very big restrictions on someone's life. So we wanted to know from Judge House — how do you decide when someone needs a conservatorship?

JUDGE HOUSE: Typically what happens is there's some triggering event. You know, dad wanders around the block and can't find his way home. He's obviously had problems before this, but it's at the point where you have to step in and make sure that they're taken care of.

TESS: Judge House says there are actually *many* scenarios that could warrant someone being conserved.

JUDGE HOUSE: There's all kinds of issues: if they're wandering, unable to keep their medicine straight. I mean, there's so many things that get pointed out that you have a pretty good idea whether someone is in need of aid or not. I know you keep wanting me to give you that absolute formula, but there isn't one, okay, there just isn't one.

TESS: Whether or not someone needs to be conserved is sort of a gray area. It's up to the judge to ultimately make this call.

BABS: So how does someone actually conserve someone else? In most cases, Judge House says, the person seeking the conservatorship lets the court know. Then, the court says, "Okay, you have someone you think needs to be conserved, we'll send someone out."

JUDGE HOUSE: A probate examiner goes out and interviews a proposed conservatee, and checks their home and talks to them. We get what we call a capacity declaration that has to be filed with every conservatorship where a doctor has indicated that there are deficits significant enough to register after testing in memory or cognition.

TESS: As a reminder, court documents show Jamie Spears' team never filed a capacity declaration in Britney's case.

BABS: Judge House declined to answer specific questions about Britney's case. But she says that in general, capacity declarations measure whether a person is able of making his or her own decisions.

JUDGE HOUSE: The court appoints counsel for a proposed conservatee and they do their own investigation. So by the time I've read a file on a conservatorship, I've got a doctor's report, I've got a court appointed attorneys report, I've got a probate examiners report. So there's a lot of work that goes into these cases even before I review the file.

BABS: These court-appointed counsel reports Judge House is talking about are something we are really interested in. As we said last episode, court records show Britney's court-appointed lawyer Sam Ingham gave the judge a report claiming that Britney didn't have the capacity to hire her own lawyer.

TESS: The California Probate Code only calls for these reports to contain things like professional info about the attorney and their fees. But, as Judge House is indicating, and from our own research watching extremely dry seminars on the subject, it's become the norm for court-appointed lawyers to add into these reports their recommendations about the conservatorship.

BABS: We feel like this is a conflict of interest. The lawyer, who stands to make money from being appointed, is communicating to the judge on whether the conservatorship should go forward.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Even though the person you're appointed to may not have capacity or may have diminished capacity, your primary duty is still to represent their interests.

BABS: This is a seminar from the LA Bar Association, in which the speaker says it is a court appointed lawyer's job to represent their *client's* wishes -- *not* to tell the judge whether their client needs a conservatorship. So it's odd that while the bar association is saying "just stay in your lane"...in the real world, lawyers are regularly writing investigative reports about their potential clients. Here's more from that same seminar.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Remember, you are not the court investigator. You're not the person that's supposed to obtain all the facts and let the court know everything that's happening. That's not your job.

BABS: Regardless of what's being said here, it's become common practice for judges to lean on the opinion of these court appointed attorneys. It seems like this is a way to help overworked judges wade through their caseload. Also in this seminar, the speakers actually acknowledge that these reports raise ethical questions and are an area of long standing controversy in their profession.

TESS: So, the judge considers this report from the attorney, as well as the other information in front of them, and they move forward with a decision.

JUDGE HOUSE: A fair amount of people who are conserved have no idea that they're having problems. And so they're very, very angry that someone is taking over control of their lives. But they don't get it. They don't they don't remember or can't remember or have other other problems.

TESS: They're very angry that someone is taking over control of their lives, but they don't get it. Listening back, this statement from Judge House was a bit unsettling. It touches on very real issues of consent. Why should someone not be believed about who they want to control their lives? Where does the boundary lie between ensuring someone's welfare and violating their civil rights? That's something we're gonna explore more in another episode of Toxic.

BABS: It's also important for us to mention that lots of families don't seek out the court's help in dealing with the care of a family member in need. Some families just settle things internally. But...we were shocked to learn that probate conservatorships in California aren't just between families. *Anyone* can seek to conserve anyone else.

JUDGE HOUSE: It can be anybody: a spouse, a sibling, a mother, father or any interested person. I saw a fair amount of neighbors picking up the slack with older people.

TESS: On the one hand, this is good! If someone really needs help and they don't have family around to do it, there are options. But, not all conservators are people the conservatee knows. The whole business of conservatorships has also opened up a professional opportunity.

BABS: Judge House told us that a judge can appoint something called a public guardian, aka a private professional guardian, aka a fiduciary. We are going to refer to this role as a *professional conservator*, 'cause that's what they are.

TESS: Professional conservators get appointed in cases where the conserved person has enough money to cover the professional's fees.

JUDGE HOUSE: It's for people that have a fair amount of assets, but they have no one to take care of them. The public guardian likes to get those cases because they get paid, I'm not sure how much, but they get an hourly rate. They do a good job. But it's a cottage industry. I mean, we're seeing an increase in private professional fiduciaries who are coming in and picking up the reins, so to speak. If they had enough money and there was family discord, I would recommend and appoint a private person because they can be the referee.

BABS: So all those things the conservator does - the medical appointments, the paying of bills, the selling of property. A professional conservator charges a fee to do that. They also choose doctors and caregivers for the person they're hired to manage.

TESS: One reason we were so interested in professional conservators is that Britney currently has one. Her name is Jodi Montgomery - she replaced Britney's dad as Britney's conservator of the person in 2019.

BABS: We should clarify, Britney's conservatorship is split in two - there's one of her *person* -- that deals with all her day to day life and medical stuff. And one of her *estate* that deals with all her money. This is actually a common arrangement in California probate. So Jodi is now in charge of Britney's person, and, as of recording, Jamie is still in charge of Britney's estate. However, if Jamie is removed, and the conservatorship stays in place, a professional would take over the estate as well.

TESS: Checking out Jodi's other conservatorship cases, she's got at least 18 living wards. And she currently oversees 95 million dollars in assets. This number includes the estates of numerous deceased people.

BABS: Since 2019, Jodi has been in charge of Britney's personal life. Britney has testified that Jodi has severely restricted her activities -- things like not allowing Britney to visit a friend she met in AA. Jodi is also in charge of Britney's medical care. And Britney has told the court that she doesn't like the therapist that Jodi has chosen for her. That Britney feels uncomfortable going to visit him at his office.

TESS: Obviously taking over a person's medical decisions and estate planning is giving someone a LOT of power. We were curious what kind of training goes into becoming a professional conservator. According to information we've reviewed -- and the informational videos we've watched -- this is a job opportunity available to many people. Cue the music please!

CORNY 80S CORPORATE MUSIC ENTERS

BABS: If you want to become a professional conservator in California, here are some of the requirements:

TESS: You must not be guilty of financial crimes/fraud.

BABS: You need a couple years experience as a conservator for a family member.

TESS: Or a bachelor's degree. And that can be in any field - from engineering to screenwriting.

BABS: You can major in screenwriting?

TESS: Yes. And then, you must complete 30 hours of training.

BABS: By comparison, it takes at least 200 hours to become a yoga teacher in California. Which sounds like my own personal worst nightmare. Namaste.

CORNY MUSIC FADES OUT

TESS: Being a professional conservator can pay quite well - they can adjust what they charge, based on the size of a client's estate. And in the probate court, there are a lot of large estates at play. Here's Judge House again:

JUDGE HOUSE: The amount of wealth that goes through the probate court is phenomenal. I remember just for the fun of it, I added up all the orders I signed in a given day and I had dispersed close to 30 million dollars.

TESS: It's impossible to say how much money in the U.S. is currently tied up in probate conservatorships — the lack of data has even caught the attention of Congress. But in 2015, the Wall Street Journal estimated there were over *270 billion* dollars in total assets under conservatorship across the country.

BABS: We ran the numbers, and this will buy you approximately 69 (nice) billion Frappucinos.

TESS: That's a venti amount of money... so, how do you make sure it's being managed well? How do you catch instances of abuse? We asked Judge House.

TESS (QUESTION): Is there anything codified within the probate court system as a system of checks and balances just to ensure that the conservator and the court appointed counsel are doing the work they're supposed to do?

JUDGE HOUSE: Well, once a conservatorship is established, they have to do accountings and file them with the court. And we have probate attorneys and examiners who are very, very astute at looking at an accounting.

BABS: These accounting reports Judge House is talking about are a basic part of every conservatorship. They're kind of like a giant CVS receipt for the court: A detailed record of what the conservator spent the conservatee's money on. Typically, there'd be things like medication, groceries, rent. A part of the judge's job is to make sure the expenses are reasonable.

JUDGE HOUSE: I come in to work and I'd have a stack this high. I'd read the report. Sometimes I'd say, well, I think we need to bring a lawyer in on this one. You know, there's something going on here. Yeah, things like things out of the ordinary, you know, concert tickets, vacations, lavish vacations

BABS (QUESTION): And can you always tell, like, you know. That that money was being spent for the conservatee?

JUDGE HOUSE: Well, again, it's supposed to be and if it's normal expenses like laundry, food, health care, you get an idea of what's appropriate as an expenditure.

TESS: Accounting reports aren't just for expenses. They're also supposed to show all the money that is coming INTO a conservatee's accounts. For many conservatees, this might be social security or medicare payments. But for Britney, it's way more than that. Her reports should account for everything she's earned in the last 13 years as an international popstar.

BABS (QUESTION): How often would you see someone coming through was a conservatee who was currently working and earning a lot of money?

JUDGE HOUSE: Pretty rare. Pretty rare, I. Like I said, the bulk of the conservatorships I dealt with are the early onset cognitive impairment problems, senior citizens or the developmentally disabled who have autism or Down syndrome or some kind of other limiting circumstances.

MUSIC POST

TESS: At the end of the day, Judge House said she realized her decisions on the bench carried a lot of weight.

JUDGE HOUSE: I think the first time I put that robe on it was the heaviest article of clothing I've ever worn. And it's very humbling, I think, because I want not only to make a decision for people, I want to make the right one. And you know, what did Eleanor Roosevelt say? Do one thing a day that scares you. Well, that was every day, you know, because I knew I was impacting people's lives.

BABS (QUESTION): How do you grapple with that? You know, sitting in court and dealing with the family, you know, disputing something. How do you know who to listen to or who to trust?

JUDGE HOUSE: See, that's the thing, you never know. You see people in court for a very short period of time. If you do a hearing, you do learn a little bit more about them because you can watch their body language. But, you know, I think that was probably the most humbling part is, I was hoping by my experience and my knowledge of the law and my knowledge of people, I was hoping I was making the right decisions. But sometimes you can't, you don't have enough information.

beat

BABS: We really get the sense from Judge House that she believes in the probate court system. She took her job seriously and she trusts that checks and balances are in place to prevent abuse from occurring.

TESS: But the fact of the matter is - the court's resources are limited. There's not enough money for new training. Judges are overworked and burnt out. Many advocates feel that this fatigue leads judges to lean too heavily on the opinion of court appointed lawyers. In Britney's case, for example, a lot of us are wondering... why hasn't the judge done more to help Britney? After Britney's explosive testimony, everyone in the courtroom was looking at the judge like Ok, what now? But she just turned it over to the attorneys... like business as usual.

RICK BLACK: Everybody in the system denies that the system is dysfunctional.

BABS: This is Rick Black. He believes fraudulent conservatorships are a huge issue.

RICK: There's known dysfunction in the system. And the people who work in the system every day fully understand the latitude they have to take advantage of the dysfunction.

TESS: Rick is the founder and executive director of CEAR, the Center for Estate Administration Reform. It's a foundation that provides assistance to victims of fraudulent conservatorships. Conservatorships are sometimes called guardianships, by the way. You'll hear Rick use "guardianship" a lot.

BABS: We chatted with Rick over zoom as he sat in his home office in North Carolina. As you'll hear, he is extremely passionate about probate reform. Rick learned about conservatorships the way a lot of people do... through a family tragedy.

MIDROLL BREAK

RICK: The date, June 22nd, 2013, will be seared in my wife and I's memories for as long as we live.

TESS: June 22nd was the date that Rick Black and his wife began an 8 year long odyssey, the likes of which they never imagined could happen in the United States.

BABS: On that day, Rick and his wife gave her father, Del, a call. Del was 82 years old, lucid and in good shape. He was living in Las Vegas, across the country from Rick and his wife. They had noticed some strange charges on Del's bank account.

RICK: We discovered that her father was being exploited by his landlord and friend of 30 years.

BABS: They found out Del's landlord was forging checks in Del's name.

RICK: She was even eavesdropping and in essence took him hostage. We immediately went to Las Vegas to assist him. We were not allowed to speak with him or see him. We called the police and asked them to intervene.

TESS: When the police went to Del's house, they found him captive in his own home.

RICK: They saw that he was quite disheveled and vulnerable, and the woman would not allow anyone to speak with him or see him or allow him out of the home, but they refused to engage, they instructed us that it was a, quote, civil matter. They deferred us to this thing called guardianship.

BABS: A guardianship. Rick and his wife had no idea what this was, but the police and Rick's *own* attorneys said it was their best option to help Del. So Rick's wife filed to be her dad's guardian.

TESS: When the court hearing came, Del's landlord showed up saying she would take the best care of Del. Rick and his wife tried to prove that the *landlord* was the person *harming* Del, by not letting him see his family.

BABS: Because Rick's family and the landlord were at odds, the judge put a *professional* conservator in control of Del. And then, a year later, that same judge gave control of Del's life back to the landlord. The same woman who had been forging checks in Del's name became his legal guardian.

TESS: Rick and his wife were never able to see Del alone, again.

RICK: And unfortunately, my wife's dad died two years later, never leaving the home of his exploiter. It cost him his life. It cost our family over a million dollars. And he died alone, his foot black with gangrene due to an unaddressed infection. And our lives were forever changed.

TESS: After Del died, Rick was angry. Angry about what happened to his father in law... and angry about what he saw as incompetence and corruption in the court system. A system that he says drew out his family's case and ignored obvious evidence. In fact, Rick has come to believe that Del's guardianship was ultimately unnecessary-- but his family was pushed into it.

RICK: That caused me to start researching guardianship, talking to people nationwide and very quickly learned that this system, the guardianship system, is not anything like what people lead the public to believe. And that brings us to today and 4,000 cases plus later that we've looked into.

TESS: Record-keeping on conservatorship abuse is, in general, extremely scant. Back in 2016, The US Government Office of Accountability released a report that acknowledged anecdotes of abuse across the country, but the researchers weren't able to measure exactly how widespread the abuse was.

BABS: It's also extremely difficult to prosecute guardianship and conservatorship abuse. In California, for example, there is nothing written into the probate law that penalizes wrong-doing.

If someone has a complaint about a conservator, they can go to the Professional Fiduciaries Bureau. But they might not have much luck. A report from ABC10 Sacramento found that the bureau has only *one person* in all of California who is tasked with investigating allegations of abuse. And that out of 408 complaints filed with the bureau, NONE of them resulted in disciplinary action. Advocates we've spoken with tell us that every day they get pleas for help from victims of abusive conservatorships.

TESS: Rick has worked hard to uncover abuse in this system across the country, and he's had some wins. Rick assisted a case in Nevada, where a professional conservator was convicted of elder abuse and exploitation for stealing money from her wards. She was sentenced to up to 40 years in prison.

BABS: After seven years of working on cases of conservatorship fraud, Rick has identified a few tactics that fraudulent lawyers and professional conservators use consistently.

RICK: We use a phrase to describe every fraudulent conservatorship. Isolate the victim, defame legitimate protectors, liquidate the estate.

TESS: Those are the red flags. Isolate the victim. Defame legitimate protectors, and liquidate the estate. We're gonna go through those one by one to see how they apply to Britney's conservatorship. So let's start with Isolation.

RICK: Isolation is the key to every fraudulent guardianship, and isolation comes in many different forms. We routinely see folks in guardianship being placed in low-end group homes where the treatments and therapies that are claimed to be provided to these individuals are not being provided at all. And they are being fully isolated from any and all loved ones who might be able to speak on their behalf.

TESS: We should mention -- conservators are given full authority on where a conservatee lives and who is assigned as their caregiver. This can be problematic when, for example, the conservator hires a friend who lacks professional credentials, or worse, neglects and isolates the conservatee.

BABS: Britney lives in her own home, not a nursing facility like many of the people Rick works with. But Rick's been paying attention to Britney's case for a while - and he sees those red flags.

RICK: Britney Spears has been isolated in plain sight.

BABS: In Britney's statement to the court in June 2021, she said herself that she's unable to give interviews to the press. And that she's tired of feeling alone. But Britney's isolation is nothing new. Britney's cousin and former assistant, Alli Sims, was very close with Britney at the end of 2007. A year later, Alli spoke about how Jamie Spears and his lawyers stopped her from talking to Britney after the conservatorship was put in place. Here's Alli on Access Hollywood:

ALLI SIMS (ARCHIVAL): And I think that they didn't want any - they've pretty much cut out everyone. And I think they were just trying to keep everyone out, that possibly she would reach out to, maybe, to help change the situation.

BABS: We've talked to multiple people who were at one point close with Britney, but who have had their contact with her cut off.

TESS: Isolate. Defame. Drain the estate. So if it's possible Britney is being isolated, are the people who are trying to help her being defamed?

BABS: As we mentioned in the first episode of Toxic, Lynne Spears asked to be involved in the conservatorship proceedings in the summer of 2019. This was the first time she had ever legally stepped into the situation.

TESS: As of this recording, Lynne has never filed a petition to end Britney's conservatorship, which she could do as Britney's mom. But court records show she *has* fought for Britney in other ways - In 2021, Lynne filed a complaint with the court. According to Lynne, Jamie's lawyers were charging Britney's estate with all kinds of inappropriate fees. This included hours billed for media appearances like this one:

VIVIAN THOREEN (ARCHIVAL): Britney knows that her daddy loves her and she knows that she can call on him any time, conservatorship or not.

TESS: This is Jamie Spears' lawyer, Vivian Thoreen, on Good Morning America in 2021. To be clear, Thoreen billed *Britney's* account for this TV appearance defending Britney's... "daddy". Lynne wasn't okay with this, hence her complaint to the court.

BABS: But after Lynne made this complaint, Thoreen came back at her hard. She filed a response that claimed Lynne was exploiting her daughter and didn't know what she was talking about. Jamie Spears has also come out against the entire Free Britney movement. In 2020 he told the New York Post that the movement was "a joke" run by "conspiracy theorists." ...Which I find really offensive... because, y'know, I tell jokes.

TESS: And in July 2021, after Britney's public allegations against her father, Jamie's team accused Britney of perhaps not remembering things correctly. So: Isolate, check. Defame legitimate protectors, check. That brings us to our third red flag: Drain the estate.

BABS: Britney herself has also accused her father and others involved in her conservatorship of profiting from her situation.

TESS (QUESTION): It seems like especially for wealthy people or people who have large estates, their own money can be used as a weapon against them. Can you sort of speak about your experience, if you've seen that happen?

RICK: It's the key premise of all guardianship conservatorship. That is how the system has been designed over the last hundred years. What the public doesn't understand is. Conservatorship is a profit center for members of the California bar, it's a profit center, plain and simple. There's money generated for attorneys by creating as many conservatorships as they can, particularly conservatorships that involve wealth.

BABS: What Rick is saying here is that probate conservatorships make lawyers a lot of money. Especially when the individual in the conservatorship is wealthy. There's also an incentive to delay things because delays mean lawyers can bill more hours. We've been to every single court hearing in Britney's case since April 2019 - and most of the time, it's just issues being postponed.

TESS: In half the hearings we've attended, basically everybody shows up, says they haven't completed their homework, and asks for an extension. Look, I loved to work this trick in college, okay. But, I was a screenwriting major. I was just procrastinating on my paper about the hero's journey in Runaway Bride. (Yes, that is a real paper I wrote, and yes, I got an A.)

BABS: These constant delays in Britney's case make it exhausting if you're a Britney fan following along - some people have flown all the way across the country to come to a hearing that only lasts 15 minutes because they decide to postpone everything.

TESS: And every single hearing means money out of Britney's pocket. Records show one lawyer on her case charges Britney \$1090 an hour. And at these hearings, there's usually at least eight lawyers present, all billing Britney's estate.

THEME MUSIC ENTERS

BABS: Isolate. Defame. Drain the estate. Rick now dedicates his life to making sure those three things don't happen to vulnerable people.

RICK: I spent most of my career at General Electric in running businesses, marketing and sales executive positions. I loved what I did. If someone would have told me in 2013 that I would be doing this seven years later, I would have said you're nuts. I love making money. I probably would have said, I don't believe what you're telling me. Because that couldn't happen in my country -- what you're describing, what a fraudulent conservatorship is, I would have said can't happen. Everybody has defining moments in life. June through August of 2013 changed our lives forever. And I don't have any regrets giving up what I loved for 30 years. But some things are more important than yourself, than your financial success, than your pride. Family is one of those things.

THEME MUSIC UP

BABS: Next time on Toxic: We're following the money to find out: is Britney's team draining her estate? We'll put Britney's financial empire and accounting reports on our radar.

TESS: Thank you to our team at Witness Docs! Abigail Keel, our senior producer. Kevin “KTid” Tidmarsh, our producer. Story editor Gianna Palmer, executive producer Kameel Stanley and head of content Peter Clowney.

BABS: Casey Holford is the technical director for Witness Docs. He mixed this episode and composed all our original music for Toxic.

TESS: Zoe Schwab is our researcher and she’s amazing! Our fact checker is Anakwa Dwamena. Toxic is written and hosted by me Tess Barker

BABS: And me, Babs Gray! You can reach out to the show any time at britneypod@stitcher.com And you can follow us on all the socials @britneysgram. Find transcripts for all our episodes at witnesspodcasts.com.

TESS: Do NOT forget to subscribe to Toxic: The Britney Spears Story in stitcher, spotify, apple podcasts, or wherever you listen. And if you like the show, share a link to the first episode with a friend. It really helps. Thank you!

BABS: Thanks!