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Gene Hackman's Estate: A Wake-Up Call

The recent passing of legendary actor Gene Hackman has revealed a complicated estate situation that serves as a powerful warning for everyone - married couples especially - regardless of your net worth.

Whether you have significant assets or just want to ensure your wishes are honored during your lifetime and you don't leave a mess of open loops, creditors, and pain for your loved ones, getting your estate plan done right so it doesn't fail when the people you love need it is the answer. Unfortunately, many estate plans, even plans prepared by top lawyers and law firms, are ticking time bombs that will blow up when it's too late. However, the right estate planning process, which I call Life & Legacy Planning, can save your loved ones from the cost of failed planning. In this article, we will look at the lessons from the Hackman family estate plan, and I'll explore the importance of having a well-structured Life & Legacy plan, the risks of outdated documents, and key strategies to prevent inheritance disputes.

Let's first explore what's happened.

What Happened

Gene Hackman, the two-time Academy Award winner known for films like *The French Connection* and *Unforgiven*, and his wife Betsy Arakawa were recently found deceased in their Santa Fe, New Mexico home. Court documents [reportedly](#) reveal that Arakawa, 65, died on February 11 from Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome, a rare disease contracted through contact with mouse droppings. Hackman, who was 95, died a week later from natural causes related to heart disease and complications from Alzheimer's disease.

The couple's wills, both dated from 2005, show they each intended to leave their estates to one another. Hackman's will named Arakawa as the personal representative of his estate and the recipient of his "entire estate" as successor trustee of the Gene Hackman Living Trust. Similarly, Arakawa's will specified that her estate would go to the trustee of Hackman's trust if he outlived her.

Unlike many couples, who leave their assets to each other and don't have a plan for what happens if they die together or close together, the Hackmans had contingency plans in place. Since both Hackman and Arakawa are deceased, Julia



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L. Peters, who was named as the second successor personal representative in Hackman's will, has taken over the duties of managing both estates. The first successor named in the wills, attorney Michael G. Sutin, is also deceased.

Court documents show that Peters, who works for a trust company, was appointed as the personal representative for both estates in March 2025. Peters filed appropriate paperwork to admit Hackman's will to probate and begin the administration process.

The Simultaneous Death Problem Most Couples Ignore

Most married couples do exactly what Hackman and Arakawa did—they name each other as the primary beneficiary on everything: wills, trusts, life insurance policies, retirement accounts, and more. But what happens if you and your spouse die together or a short time apart? Chaos, delays, and assets potentially going to unintended beneficiaries can result. Not to mention, your loved ones will almost certainly have to go to court, which is set up for conflict and can be very expensive. The best practice is to name backups, or contingent, beneficiaries so that your plan works.

Arakawa seemed to have considered this possibility in her own estate planning. Reports indicate her will contained a provision that if she and Hackman died within 90 days of each other, her assets would go to a charitable trust, as she had no children of her own.

Blended Family Considerations

If you have a blended family, things can get complicated. With Arakawa and Hackman dying within days of each other, it may be difficult to sort out who the beneficiaries are. His plan says she receives his assets, and her plan says he receives her assets. This creates a loop that needs to be sorted out. If Arakawa's assets go to a charitable trust instead of to Hackman's estate, Hackman's kids may receive nothing from her estate.

Hackman's will acknowledges his three adult children from his previous marriage to Faye Maltese: Christopher Hackman, Elizabeth Hackman, and Leslie Allen. Court records show that notices regarding Peters's appointment as personal representative were sent to all three children in March 2025.

While the publicly available documents don't reveal how Hackman's assets will ultimately be distributed among beneficiaries, Peters noted in court filings that after specific bequests to "identified beneficiaries," the remainder of Hackman's trust will be "distributed in accordance with the desires of Gene Hackman as expressed in the trust document." The trust documents themselves have not been made public, which is one of many reasons you likely want a trust to govern the distribution of your assets at the time of your death..



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The Life & Legacy Planning Difference

The Hackman case demonstrates several important estate planning principles that anyone, regardless of net worth, can learn from. As a Personal Family Lawyer® firm, I create plans for clients using the Life & Legacy Planning® process, which means your plan works when you and your loved ones need it to. All my Life & Legacy plans are comprehensive and customized to fit your particular family dynamics, your assets, and your wishes.

When you work with me, these are just a few of the strategies we can use that may make sense for you:

1. Name Contingent Beneficiaries for Everything

For every asset and in every document, we'll name not just primary beneficiaries but also contingent beneficiaries. This includes your will, trust, life insurance, retirement accounts, transfer-on-death accounts, and any other assets with beneficiary designations. When you work with me, we start by inventorying all your assets so nothing gets missed, and all accounts that need beneficiaries are handled properly.

2. Include Simultaneous Death Provisions

If you're married, we'll include provisions in your will and trust that specifically address what happens if you and your spouse die simultaneously or within a short time of each other. The standard "120-hour rule" in many state laws may not be sufficient for your needs. We'll also address what happens if any beneficiary you've named dies before you.

3. Create a Revocable Living Trust

A properly structured revocable living trust can provide more precise instructions for various scenarios and is often more flexible than wills are. Trusts also offer privacy, can save money on taxes, and can bypass the probate process, keeping your loved ones out of conflict and saving them time and money.

4. Include Special Provisions for Blended Families

If yours is a blended family, we will include customized strategies so your children are never accidentally disinherited.

5. Review and Update Regularly

Hackman's will was reportedly last updated nearly 20 years before his death—a dangerously long period that would put anyone's estate plan at risk.

If you want to ensure your plan works, it must reflect your life as closely as possible when something happens to you, whether death or incapacity. Thus, it's imperative that your plan is reviewed at least every 3 years and after any major



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life event such as the death of a beneficiary, marriage, divorce, or birth. Even if you haven't had a significant life change, your assets may change - you inherit a significant sum, or instance - or the law could change. Any of these scenarios could put your plan at risk of failing.

Most attorneys will not review your plan with you regularly. My Life & Legacy Planning process, on the other hand, offers a complimentary three year review. We can catch vulnerabilities in your plan before they become problems for your loved ones.

Your Next Step

As the Hackman case illustrates, effective estate planning isn't just about creating documents—it's about creating a comprehensive plan that anticipates any scenario, stays updated over time, and protects all the people you care about.

As your Personal Family Lawyer®, I support you to create a Life & Legacy Plan that works when you need it to work. That's why I start with a Life & Legacy Planning Session, where we'll discuss not just who gets what but what happens in complex situations like simultaneous deaths, incapacity, or beneficiaries who predeceased you. We'll also discuss what will work for your unique family situation, whether you're part of a blended family, have children with special needs, or face other circumstances that require specialized planning.

Don't leave your legacy to chance or create accidental disinheritances through incomplete planning. Together, we can create a plan that truly protects you and everyone you love most.

To get started, all you need to do is click here to schedule a complimentary 15-minute consult call:

<https://calendly.com/lauren-tlppc>

This article is a service of The Legacy Planners P.C., a Personal Family Lawyer Firm. We don't just draft documents; we ensure you make informed and empowered decisions about life and death, for yourself and the people you love. That's why we offer a Life & Legacy Planning Session, during which you will get more financially organized than you've ever been before and make all the best choices for the people you love. You can begin by calling our office today to schedule a Life & Legacy Planning Session.

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