

SUPREME COURT OF MONTANA

Brummer v. Stahl

175 P.3d 304 (Mont. 2007) · No. DA 06-0814 · Decided October 22, 2007

SUMMARY

The Montana Supreme Court affirmed a judgment dividing assets between former domestic partners who were never married. The Court held that the appellant could not raise a partnership-assets theory for the first time on appeal and that substantial credible evidence supported the District Court's allocation of the parties' property based on their respective contributions.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Montana
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Justice John Warner; John Warner; James C. Nelson; Patricia Cotter; Jim Rice; Brian Morris
JURISDICTION	Montana
DECIDED	October 22, 2007
DOCKET	DA 06-0814
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Stahl appealed from a district court judgment dividing property acquired during the parties' long-term domestic relationship.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Findings of fact are reviewed for clear error; conclusions of law are reviewed for correctness. A factual finding is clearly erroneous if it is unsupported by substantial credible evidence.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	nonprecedential
PARTIES	Christina Stahl, a/k/a Criso Stahl v. Vincent Brummer

TOPICS

- family law
- real estate
- appellate procedure
- standard of review
- preservation of error

PRACTICE AREAS

- family law
- real estate
- appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the district court erred by failing to divide the parties' assets under the law governing partnership assets.
2. Whether the district court clearly erred in evaluating the parties' contributions and dividing the assets.

HOLDINGS

1. The Supreme Court declined to consider Stahl's partnership-assets argument because she did not raise it in the district court and her counsel stipulated that the division would be based on the parties' respective contributions.
2. The district court did not clearly err in dividing the assets because substantial credible evidence supported its judgment and the court properly considered conflicting evidence concerning the parties' payments and contributions.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"Factual findings are clearly erroneous if they are not supported by substantial credible evidence, which is "evidence that a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion; it consists of more than a mere scintilla of evidence but may be somewhat less than a preponderance."" (¶ 6)

"We will not second guess a District Court's determinations of which evidence to accept in light of conflicting testimony." (¶ 8)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Brummer and Stahl were in a domestic relationship from 1987 to 2004 but never married. They generally kept their assets separate, except that they jointly acquired or contributed to a mobile home, 40 acres of real property and improvements, a Lincoln Continental, and certain personal property. At trial, the parties stipulated that the property division would be based on their respective contributions and that neither had an interest in the other's carpentry business or retirement accounts.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Brummer filed a complaint seeking division of real and personal property after the parties' domestic relationship ended. Following a bench trial, the Twentieth Judicial District Court entered judgment awarding Stahl the mobile home and automobile and awarding Brummer the real property and most of the personal property. Stahl appealed, arguing that the assets should have been divided as partnership assets and that the district court improperly evaluated the evidence.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Wareing v. Schreckendgust, 280 Mont. 196, 202-03, 930 P.2d 37, 41 (1996)
- Johnston v. Palmer, 2007 MT 99, ¶ 26, 337 Mont. 101, 158 P.3d 998, ¶ 26

- In re Marriage of Schnell, 273 Mont. 466, 472, 905 P.2d 144, 148 (1995)
- Bonnie M. Combs-DeMaio Living Trust v. Kilby Butte Colony, Inc., 2005 MT 71, ¶ 9, 326 Mont. 334, 109 P.3d 252, ¶ 9

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

2007 MT 275N VINCENT BRUMMER, Plaintiff and Appellee, v. CHRISTINA STAHL, a/k/a CRISCO STAHL, Defendant and Appellant. No. DA 06-0814 Supreme Court of Montana. Submitted on Briefs: October 10, 2007 Decided: October 22, 2007 For Appellant: Michael Sol, Sol & Wolfe Law Firm, Missoula, Montana For Appellee: Keith W. McCurdy, McCurdy Law Firm, Polson, Montana Justice John Warner delivered the Opinion of the Court. ¶1 Pursuant to Section 1, Paragraph 3(d)(v), Montana Supreme Court 1996 Internal Operating Rules, as amended in 2003, the following memorandum decision shall not be cited as precedent.

It shall be filed as a public document with the Clerk of the Supreme Court and its case title, Supreme Court cause number and disposition shall be included in this Court's quarterly list of noncitable cases published in the Pacific Reporter and Montana Reports. ¶2 Christina (Criso) Stahl appeals from a judgment of the Twentieth Judicial District, Lake County, dividing assets between Stahl and Vincent Brummer.

We affirm. ¶3 Stahl and Brummer had a domestic relationship lasting from 1987 until 2004, but never married. During that time, they kept most of their assets separate, with a few exceptions. They purchased a 1990 Nashua mobile home and 40 acres of real property on which they built various improvements, and both contributed payments to a Lincoln Continental automobile.

On February 25, 2005, Brummer filed a complaint requesting a division of these properties, as well as raising issues about the ownership of personal property. ¶4 On September 22, 2006, the District Court held a bench trial. At trial, the parties stipulated that the division of assets should be based on Stahl's and Brummer's respective contributions to acquiring the property.

They also stipulated that Stahl had no interest in Brummer's carpentry business and that he had no interest in her retirement accounts. Thus, the only properties at issue during the trial were the Nashua mobile home, 40 acres of real property, a Lincoln Continental car, and personal property, including oak chairs, guns and artwork. ¶5 During the trial, both parties presented extensive and conflicting evidence about their contributions to the properties.

On November 1, 2006, the District Court entered its judgment, awarding Stahl the Nashua mobile home and the Lincoln Continental and awarding the real property and majority of the personal property to Brummer. Stahl appeals, claiming the District Court improperly divided the assets, and the assets should have been divided as partnership assets. ¶6 We review a district court's findings

of fact to determine whether they are clearly erroneous and we review conclusions of law to determine if they are correct.

Wareing v. Schreckendgust, 280 Mont. 196, 202-03, 930 P.2d 37, 41 (1996). Factual findings are clearly erroneous if they are not supported by substantial credible evidence, which is "evidence that a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion; it consists of more than a mere scintilla of evidence but may be somewhat less than a preponderance."

Johnston v. Palmer, 2007 MT 99, ¶ 26, 337 Mont. 101, ¶ 26, 158 P.3d 998, ¶ 26 (citation and quotation omitted). ¶7 Stahl argues that the District Court erred because it did not follow the procedure for dividing partnership assets.

We disagree. First, she did not argue at the District Court that she and Brummer were engaged in a partnership, and we will not address an argument for the first time on appeal. In re Marriage of Schnell, 273 Mont. 466, 472, 905 P.2d 144, 148 (1995). Further, her counsel stipulated at trial that the division of assets should be based on the parties' respective contributions to the properties. ¶8 Stahl also argues that the judge ignored evidence she introduced at trial about her contributions and argues that the judge treated the parties differently in evaluating their contributions.

Upon review of the record, we conclude that the District Court did not commit clear error in its division of the parties' assets. The record shows that there were numerous disparities regarding each party's payments and contributions, and the District Court considered the weight and credibility of the evidence presented.

We will not second guess a District Court's determinations of which evidence to accept in light of conflicting testimony. Bonnie M. Combs-DeMaio Living Trust v. Kilby Butte Colony, Inc., 2005 MT 71, ¶ 9, 326 Mont. 334, ¶ 9, 109 P.3d 252, ¶ 9. Substantial credible evidence supports the judgment entered by the District Court. ¶9 Affirmed. JUSTICES JAMES C. NELSON, PATRICIA COTTER, JIM RICE, and BRIAN MORRIS, concur.