

DISTRICT COURT OF APPEAL OF FLORIDA, FIRST DISTRICT

H. Lee Mills v. Helen M. Mills

Mills v. Mills, No. 1D13-2152 (Fla. 1st DCA June 24, 2014) · No. 1D13-2152

SUMMARY

The Florida District Court of Appeal reversed an involuntary dismissal in an incapacity proceeding, holding that the trial court applied the wrong burden of proof (clear and convincing evidence instead of competent substantial evidence) and improperly weighed conflicting evidence at the close of the petitioner’s case-in-chief. The correct standard on a motion for involuntary dismissal is whether the non-moving party has adduced competent substantial evidence that, viewed in the light most favorable to that party, would sustain a judgment in his favor, and the court may not weigh evidence at that stage.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	District Court of Appeal of Florida, First District
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Per Curiam; Thomas; Ray; Makar
JURISDICTION	Florida
DOCKET	1D13-2152
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Appeal from an order granting involuntary dismissal at the close of the petitioner's case-in-chief in an incapacity proceeding.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	De novo review of the trial court's application of the legal standard for involuntary dismissal.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished
PARTIES	H. Lee Mills v. Helen M. Mills

TOPICS

- civil procedure
- motions to dismiss
- guardianship procedure
- elder law
- evidence

PRACTICE AREAS

- Civil Procedure
- Elder Law
- Guardianship and Conservatorship

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the trial court applied the correct burden of proof in granting a motion for involuntary dismissal at the close of the petitioner's case-in-chief.
2. Whether the trial court improperly weighed conflicting evidence at the close of the petitioner's case-in-chief.

HOLDINGS

1. The correct standard for granting a motion for involuntary dismissal is whether the non-moving party has adduced competent substantial evidence, not whether the party has met its ultimate burden of proof by clear and convincing evidence.
2. A trial court may not weigh evidence, even if conflicting, when ruling on a motion for involuntary dismissal at the close of the non-moving party's case-in-chief; that task is reserved for after all evidence has been presented.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“If substantial competent evidence has been adduced, though conflicting, which, when considered in the light most favorable to the non-moving party would sustain a judgment in favor of that party then the motion should not be granted.” (slip op. at 2)

“a trial judge cannot weigh evidence when ruling on a defendant's motion for involuntary dismissal following the presentation of a prima facie case by a plaintiff.” (slip op. at 3)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

H. Lee Mills petitioned to determine the incapacity of his mother, Helen M. Mills, alleging declining mental and physical health, memory failure, confusion, and irrational behavior. During his case-in-chief, witnesses testified about Mrs. Mills's longstanding odd behavior and phobias. A three-member examining committee unanimously concluded she lacked capacity. Her primary care physician testified she was frail but felt she was competent. At the close of the petitioner's case, Mrs. Mills and intervenor Lyn Mills moved for involuntary dismissal, which the trial court granted, finding the petitioner had not proven incapacity by clear and convincing evidence.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

H. Lee Mills filed a petition to determine the capacity of his mother, Helen M. Mills. At the close of the petitioner's case-in-chief, the trial court granted motions for involuntary dismissal. The petitioner appealed.

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Remanded to the lower court for further proceedings consistent with this opinion.

CASES CITED

- *Curls v. Tew*, 346 So. 2d 1242 (Fla. 1st DCA 1977)
- *Crowe v. Crowe*, 763 So. 2d 1183 (Fla. 4th DCA 2000)
- *Teller v. Richert*, 744 So. 2d 1230 (Fla. 3d DCA 1999)
- *Valdes v. Ass'n I.N.E.D., H.M.O., Inc.*, 667 So. 2d 856 (Fla. 3d DCA 1996)
- *Tillman v. Baskin*, 260 So. 2d 509 (Fla. 1972)

OPINION

H. LEE MILLS, Appellant, v. HELEN M. MILLS, Appellee. IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF APPEAL FIRST DISTRICT, STATE OF FLORIDA NOT FINAL UNTIL TIME EXPIRES TO FILE MOTION FOR REHEARING AND DISPOSITION THEREOF IF FILED CASE NO. 1D13-2152 _____/ Opinion filed June 24, 2014. An appeal from the Circuit Court for Levy County. Ysleta W. McDonald, Judge.

Larry E. Ciesla, Brent G. Siegel, and Nicolas B. Harvey of Siegel Hughes & Ross, Gainesville, for Appellant. Charles W. Littell, Scruggs & Carmichael, Gainesville; Jesse Caedington, Holden Carpenter & Roscow, Gainesville; Judith Paul, Belo & Paul, LLC, Gainesville; Shannon M. Miller, Gainesville; and Jennifer Cates Lester, Dean Mead & Bovay, P.A., Gainesville, for Appellee.

PER CURIAM. The issue on appeal is whether the trial court properly granted a motion for involuntary dismissal of an incapacity proceeding. Appellant H. Lee Mills filed a petition to determine the capacity of his mother, Appellee Helen M. Mills, 1 in 1 Now deceased, but the case is not moot because there are collateral legal order to potentially challenge certain changes that were made to his parents' estate planning documents by other family members.

In his petition, Mr. Mills described his mother's mental and physical health as "declining" and stated that "[h]er memory is failing and she exhibits confusion, irrationality and fabrication in her behavior." During his case-in-chief, several witnesses offered testimony. Mrs. Mills's granddaughter testified about her grandmother's phobias, routines, examples of odd behavior throughout the years, and said that as long "as you stayed out of her path, you were fine" because she was "like a loaded cannon waiting to explode." An expert committee of three medical professionals also examined Mrs. Mills and unanimously concluded that she lacked capacity.

On cross-examination, counsel for Mrs. Mills and counsel for her other son, Lyn Mills, who intervened in the matter, attempted to impeach some of the assumptions and statements made by the examining committee. In addition, Mrs. Mills's primary care physician testified that she was frail and probably weak, that her husband's medical conditions were causing her a lot of mental anguish, but that he felt as though "she was very competent, able to make decisions." At the conclusion of Mr. Mills's case-in-chief, Mrs. Mills and Lyn Mills moved for an involuntary dismissal, which the trial court granted.

The trial court's Order of Involuntary Dismissal states that Mr. Mills did not meet his burden of consequences that affect Mr. Mills's rights which prevent an otherwise moot case from being dismissed. 2 proving incapacity by clear and convincing evidence. This was error because the correct burden of proof for granting or denying a motion for involuntary dismissal is competent substantial evidence.

See *Curls v. Tew*, 346 So. 2d 1242, 1243 (Fla. 1st DCA 1977); *Crowe v. Crowe*, 763 So. 2d 1183, 1184 (Fla. 4th DCA 2000); *Teller v. Richert*, 744 So. 2d 1230, 1231 (Fla. 3d DCA 1999); *Valdes v. Ass'n I.N.E.D., H.M.O., Inc.*, 667 So. 2d 856, 857 (Fla. 3d DCA 1996). It was also improper for the trial court to weigh the evidence, even if conflicting, at the conclusion of Mr. Mills's case-in-chief because that task is reserved for after all of the evidence has been offered.

This Court has succinctly stated that “[i]f substantial competent evidence has been adduced, though conflicting, which, when considered in the light most favorable to the non-moving party would sustain a judgment in favor of that party then the motion should not be granted.” *Curls*, 346 So. 2d at 1243. This is true even though the trial judge may not personally feel that Mr. Mills sustained his burden of proof at that point in the trial.

See *Tillman v. Baskin*, 260 So.2d 509, 511 (Fla. 1972) (holding that a trial judge cannot weigh evidence when ruling on a defendant's motion for involuntary dismissal following the presentation of a prima facie case by a plaintiff.) It was premature for the trial court to weigh evidence, such as the examining committee's opinions.

Accordingly, the order on appeal is reversed and the matter is remanded to the lower court for further proceedings consistent with this opinion. 3 REVERSED and REMANDED. THOMAS, RAY, and MAKAR, JJ., CONCUR. 4