



The Freedom Files

A Pursuit of Justice Podcast

Dr. Sam Sugar

From Physician to Guardianship Reform Activist

By Trinity Pierce

Dr. Sam Sugar, an internal medicine specialist, spent his whole life dedicated to the service of others as a primary care physician.

Now, co-founder of the non-profit organization Americans Against Abusive Probate Guardianships (AAAPG), he continues to serve others as an advocate for guardianship reform.

Guardianship, called conservatorship in some states, is a legal process in which a judge determines that an adult lacks the capacity to make his or her own decisions in matters such as finances, health care, social interactions, choice of residence, marriage, or sexual relationships. Once incapacity is determined – often without due process of law – a guardian is appointed to take control of the adult’s life.

Former Congressman Claude Pepper, chairman of the House Select Committee on Aging, once had this to say about these legal proceedings:

While guardianship was designed to protect the elderly, it is a process that is often used to take advantage of them. Guardianship in many ways is the most severe form of civil deprivation which can be imposed on a citizen of the United States.”

It is estimated that more than 1.5 million adults in the United States are currently living under an order of guardianship, with tens of thousands of new petitions being filed each year. Guardianships mostly affect seniors who have cognitive challenges, adults who have suffered brain injuries or illnesses, and adults of all ages who have developmental disabilities.

Sugar first started engaging in public advocacy for guardianship reform after he experienced the system himself.

“About ten years ago, a family member wound up in a professional guardianship that was initiated as a result of family dysfunction,” Sugar said. “Prior to that, surprisingly, I had never even heard the term ‘guardianship’, let alone understood what it entailed.”



Dr. Sam Sugar

After Sugar witnessed the miscarriage of justice and was exposed to the “racket” of guardianship abuse and exploitation, he thought his family were just unfortunate victims of a one-off event, Sugar said. Sugar, however, found that his family’s situation was not unique. He started encountering people with similar experiences within his own neighborhood, and that was merely the tip of the iceberg.

“I ultimately came to realize that this is a gigantic racket that exists not just in South Florida, but in all of Florida,” Sugar said. “And not just in Florida, but in every state in the United States, and that it involves literally millions of individuals, families, and untold billions of dollars in exploitation money.”

Sugar is a child of Holocaust survivors. His family migrated to America when he was two years old. As a hard-working, educated, successful person, Sugar said, he is the embodiment of the “American Dream.” That is why when he learned about the corruption within the guardianship system within America, a country supposedly renowned for its justice system, he became concerned.

“This whole racket is so egregious and so incredible and so unexpected that people simply cannot believe it’s happening,” Sugar said. “They believe it once it happens to them, but by then it’s way too late.”

Sugar claims the racket works by redirecting money away from its rightful inheritors into the bank accounts of lawyers, guardians, judges, and others who are involved in the “racket”.

According to Sugar, it is easy for people to get trapped in unhealthy guardianship situations because the system is largely a secret.

“You have absolutely no idea that it exists. You have no idea how overwhelming

and difficult and egregious it can be, and you have no idea what to do even if you've been trapped in it.”

Instead, other issues tend to take the forefront of the public's attention. Some possible reasons why guardianship abuse is not commonly talked about include reasons like ageism and even resentment from the younger generations towards the older generations.

“They have money and assets and homes, whereas other people don't, and there are many people who say, ‘they lived their lives, it's time for them to die, and it's time for the next generation to take what they have,’” Sugar said.



The general lack of awareness about the issue of guardianship abuse can be helped by media like movies and books, but unless people become interested in the issue, the ignorance surrounding it will not completely disappear.

Thus, when Sugar encountered numerous people who had gone through a similar crisis as his own, he was determined to attempt to increase knowledge and to expose the corruption within the guardianship system.

Sugar received a chance to do so when one of his patients, a wealthy philanthropist and businessman, offered to donate for a few years if Sugar formed a non-profit organization. With just one push, Sugar established the AAAPG. Through the AAAPG, people could not only learn about the issues within the system, but victims could also coalesce into a recognizable group.

Eventually, the AAAPG started participating political activism to improve or even dismantle the system.

“We began our legislative efforts in 2015, and in 2016 we were successful with the unanimous passage of Senate Bill 232 in Florida, which lead to the creation of the Office of Public and Professional Government,” said Sugar.

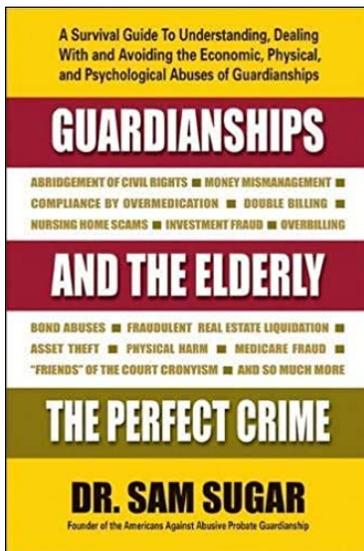
The AAAPG continues to lobby to show lawmakers where guardianship laws fall short and what needs to be done about it.

The AAAPG has also talked to people around the country for nearly a decade and has helped create similar groups in various states.

“I average three or four calls every day, seven days a week from around the country, from individuals who heard about us and want help from us,” Sugar said.

Thus, one of AAAPG’s goals is to make guardianship abuse something that people will want to know about through activism. With more people knowing about the abuse and advocating for reform, Sugar hopes to prevent others from falling into the trap of a toxic guardianship.

“You will be stuck in it forever,” Sugar said. “The only exit from guardianship is in a coffin.”



Sugar also wrote a book to help people navigate guardianships titled “Guardianship and the Elderly: The Perfect Crime.”

“I got a call one day to have lunch with a publisher from New York whose family was victimized by this racket,” Sugar said. “And he demanded that I write a book, and if I did, he promised to publish it.”

After a year of work, Sugar published his book in late 2018. The book was met with a largely positive reaction, and thousands of copies were sold. For Sugar, though, the book was about more than the money.

“The whole point of the book is to explain what I had been telling people on the phone for years, the book explains the system, it explains how it’s supposed to work and how it actually works,” Sugar said. “It gives people advice on how to possibly prevent these things [guardianship abuse] from happening, or what they might be able to do once those happen.”

In short, Sugar states that it is essentially a primer on the topic of abusive and non-abusive guardianship.

While writing a book is not too difficult, forming a national reform network is. Issues with guardianship laws are not federal issues, but instead are problems that vary from state to state. Therefore, it is difficult to form a national network, Sugar said.

That does not mean that it is impossible to cooperate with a large range of people. In fact, the AAAPG’s virtual 2021 Guardianship Symposium on April 11 is designed

to do just that. At the Symposium, Sugar hopes to gather stakeholders from numerous fields, ranging from academia to law enforcement, in order to have an open discussion about new ideas, movements, and techniques. Topics like a proposed uniform guardianship law will be discussed.

“We’ve set up a network of people around the country, especially hotspots, so that if we set up a common purpose and knowledge base, we will be in a better position to either get rid of this guardianship system, replace it with something better, or even replace it with this uniform guardianship law,” Sugar said.

For families looking to put their relatives into guardianships, Sugar advises them to avoid for-profit professional guardianships. Sugar also had advice for other advocates of guardianship reform.

“Form, maintain, support, and strengthen state-based groups,” Sugar said. “Spread the word within your state, work with media, encourage exposure of the racket, and continue to do what you can to lend your experience and knowledge to people who are pushed into this disastrous rabbit hole.”



As his fight for guardianship reform continues, Sugar urges people to watch the new Netflix film “I Care a Lot.” Sugar claims that while the second half is Hollywood nonsense, the first half of the movie accurately depicts the guardianship abuse that is perpetuated by the system.

“Every word is true. Every action is true. Every scene is correct,” Sugar said. “Although people may have trouble believing it, I am here to say, believe it, because it could happen to you today.” ◇◇◇

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