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ROSA AND RAYMOND PARKS INSTITUTE FOR SELF DEVELOPMENT

The civil rights activist and the long wool coat she wore during the month of December, 1955 are inextricably linked as symbols of the struggle for racial equality. A Detroit probate judge has recently ruled, however, that the coat worn by Rosa Parks at the time of her arrest in Alabama, captured in iconic photographs and rendered in bronze in the United States Capitol Building, is worthless.

The coat was an important element of a settlement reached in 2007 in Mrs. Parks' estate between her nieces and nephews (who were not beneficiaries of Mrs. Parks' estate) and the actual beneficiaries of her estate, her friend, Elaine Steele, and the charity they established in 1987, the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development. The nieces and nephews claimed to have possession of the coat and promised to deliver it to the Institute for inclusion in its valuable civil rights artifact collection, in exchange for a 20% share in the net proceeds from the sale of the artifact collection.

The artifact collection was sold for \$4.5 million in 2014 to philanthropist Howard Buffett, who then donated the collection to the Library of Congress. The nieces and nephews received almost \$1,000,000 from the sale, but never delivered the coat as promised.

Steele and the Institute sued the nieces and nephews for breach of contract in the Wayne County Circuit Court. That court erroneously transferred the action to the Wayne County Probate courtroom of Judge Freddie G. Burton, Jr. At trial, Steele and the Institute introduced an 84 page, certified appraisal declaring the value of the coat to be \$1.35 million. The nieces and nephews did not submit any contrary evidence, instead relying on their assertion that the coat was an "urban legend". Judge Burton refused to allow the case to be heard by a jury, and then ruled, on July 6, 2017, that the coat had no value. Steele and the Institute have appealed this decision to the Michigan Court of Appeals.

This is not the first highly questionable decision rendered by Judge Burton in the estate. In 2011, the Michigan Supreme Court reversed a collection of orders in which Judge Burton awarded Mrs. Parks' entire estate to two Wayne County attorneys who had never met Mrs. Parks and who were initially appointed by Judge Burton to administer the estate for the benefit of Steele and the Institute. The Supreme Court also ordered Judge Burton to immediately remove these two attorneys, John Chase, Jr. and Melvin Jefferson, Jr., from all involvement in the estate.

Additional information concerning the coat controversy and the estate can be found on the website of the Institute's counsel, Steven G. Cohen, at www.cohenandassociatespc.com, or by contacting Mr. Cohen at 248-762-6516.