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# A Curmudgeon Leaves Millions to Poor Children of Panama, and the Battles Begin



Ivan Kashinsky/World Picture Network

Children in La Caseta, one of the poorest areas of Panama City.

By MARC LACEY  
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**PANAMA** — In life, Wilson C. Lucom was not exactly child friendly. The gruff octogenarian never had children himself and was not especially close to the offspring of his third wife, Hilda, either. When he opened his ample checkbook, friends say, it was more likely to finance a conservative political cause than to help underprivileged youths.

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Wilson C. Lucom wanted the sale of his oceanfront ranch, valued at \$80 million, to help feed poor children in Panama.

But Mr. Lucom, a native of rural Pennsylvania who spent much of his life in Palm Beach, Fla., surprised everyone in his will, which was revealed upon his death two years ago at the age of 88. After doling out relatively small portions of his tens of millions to survivors, he left the rest to a foundation he had dreamed up in secrecy to aid the poor children of Panama, where he spent the final years of his life.

While the precise value is not clear, it would be one of the largest, if not the largest, charitable donations in Panama's history. But so far not a single child has had access to the money.

The will has set off a vicious legal battle that is playing out in at least four countries. Criminal charges have been filed, insults traded and threats made. The number of law firms involved exceeds

20. The case is now before Panama's Supreme Court.

"This is all about greed," said Héctor Ávila, an advocate for poor children in Panama who organized a demonstration of young people in May outside the court calling for Mr. Lucom's gift to be honored. Within a week of the protest, Mr. Ávila survived a shooting. No link to the Lucom case has been established.

Mr. Lucom lived a colorful life, serving in his 20s as an aide to Edward R. Stettinius Jr., who was secretary of state under President [Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#). He repeatedly told the story of how he spent time in Ethiopia during the rule of Haile Selassie and had been in San Francisco when the [United Nations](#) was born.

Mr. Lucom married well, amassing a fortune when his second wife, Virginia Willys, whose father had been an Ohio auto tycoon, died in 1981. A year later,

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Mr. Lucom met and wed Hilda Piza, who had been married previously to Gilberto Arias, son of Harmodio Arias and nephew of Arnulfo Arias, both former presidents of Panama.

Mr. Lucom eventually relocated with his new wife to Panama, selling his Palm Beach mansion in 1990 to a relative of the king of Saudi Arabia for \$14.3 million.

Mr. Lucom used his money to bankroll anti-Communist groups, and he helped found the conservative watchdog group Accuracy in Media. In his later years, he frequently wrote commentaries that showed his firm opinions, some of them decidedly unconventional, on the ways of the world. Dropping nuclear weapons, for instance, was one of his preferences for making things right in the world.

In his will, he spelled out how he thought the malnutrition facing one-fifth of Panama's children could be combated. His plan was to buy seeds, supply them to parent volunteers who agreed to donate idle land, and then reap the harvests for hungry children.

Whether his idea had merit may never be known. Mr. Lucom's widow, Hilda Lucom, 84, is fighting to have his will thrown out.

The controversy begins with a charitable act that may have been at least partly rooted in spite. Friends say that Mr. Lucom was not on particularly good terms with his third wife's adult children when he died, which is hinted at in the will.

In it, he granted his wife a monthly pension of \$20,000 and use of his artwork, grand piano and furniture for as long as she lives. He gave her five children, descendants of the Arias family, one-time payments of \$50,000 to \$200,000 each. As for the 7,000-acre oceanfront cattle ranch he had bought from the Arias family, he wanted that sold, with the assets going to the poor.

"He'd say to me, 'Wait until they see my will!' and then he'd start laughing," said Richard S. Lehman, who was Mr. Lucom's longtime attorney and is now firmly enmeshed in the battle. "I don't know if he was moved more by the disgust of his wife's children or his concern for poor children. It was probably a mixture of both."

In interviews, the Arias offspring do not let on that there was any clash between them and the man they alternatively refer to as "Mr. Lucom," "Chuck" or "Uncle Chuck."

But Mr. Lucom's widow is more upfront. "He was a very difficult man," she said in an interview. "He wanted to be No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3."

She added, in a frail voice, "He never talked to me about poor children."

In a court deposition, Ms. Lucom went further. "He didn't like children," she declared.

But in the will, prepared a year before his death, Mr. Lucom appeared to leave no doubt about his intentions. Panamanian courts have backed the will so far, but critics say the courts have shown themselves susceptible to political interference in the past.

"If you ask me if I expect to win it in light of all the corruption I've seen, I don't expect to win it," said Mr. Lehman, who has been suspended by a Panamanian judge as the executor of the will pending a resolution of the legal case.

Arias family lawyers, meanwhile, contend that the will was a scheme concocted by Mr. Lehman to enrich himself.

Just days before Mr. Lucom died, on June 2, 2006, Mr. Lehman created a trust to administer the children's charity fund. He created it in St. Kitts and Nevis, a Caribbean tax haven where Mr. Lucom had gained citizenship to avoid paying American taxes.

To create the trust, Mr. Lehman and Mr. Lucom's friend and publisher, Christopher W. Ruddy, used the power of attorney that Mr. Lucom had issued to them in case he became incapacitated. But Mr. Lucom was still coherent at the time, according to some of those who saw him in the hospital, and the two men acted before they had obtained the necessary letters from doctors saying that Mr. Lucom could not make such decisions for himself, the Arias family



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claimed.

Mr. Lehman disputes that Mr. Lucom was lucid in the hospital.

Once the legal battle began, Mr. Lehman removed Mr. Ruddy and Hilda Lucom as trustees, leaving only himself to decide how Mr. Lucom's money would be spent.

Mr. Lehman said he was only acting to outflank the Ariases, who, he contends, were trying to win the fortune for themselves. Nonetheless, some of Mr. Lehman's actions have been rebuked in the courts.

In Palm Beach, a court-appointed administrator found irregularities in Mr. Lehman's handling of a Lucom bank account in Florida. Mr. Lehman had used \$650,000, commingling some of the funds with his own office account and spending the money to hire lawyers to defend himself and the will in Panama, the administrator found. In addition, the administrator criticized Mr. Lehman for not disclosing to the court that he owed Mr. Lucom \$500,000 at the time of his death.

"I'm not doing this for pleasure," Mr. Lehman said, scoffing at the notion that he had been the one motivated by greed.

With other charges pending, Mr. Lehman now stays out of Panama for fear he might be arrested. He has countersued the Arias family, accusing them of using the family-run newspaper, El Panamá América, to libel him.

If there is a benefit to all the legal wrangling, it is that the value of Mr. Lucom's oceanfront cattle ranch has risen significantly since he died, possibly even quadrupling to \$80 million. Settlement negotiations have taken place, but have gotten nowhere.

As Mr. Lehman put it in a letter to Hilda Lucom seeking to make a deal, "I believe this is a pie that is so large that it can take into account everyone's feeling and rights to their entitlement to benefit from Lucom's fortune."

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