

Erotica to Funerals, It's All In a Day's Work

By Joe Lambe; The Kansas City Star

One odd display in the downtown law office of Berry F. Laws III hints at his unusual work that sometimes takes him into the dark realm of unrepentant greed.

A plaster cast of a hand sits on top of a pulp paperback called *The Wicked Guardian*. The hand is cast in an obscene gesture.

Years ago, Jackson County probate workers who stole a \$500,000 doll collection from an elderly ward of the court left Laws, the investigating attorney, that plaster hand and book on the victim's mantel as a taunting message, but now they're trophies. Laws helped get felony convictions for the three former county workers and crooked auctioneer. Then, in a groundbreaking case, he sued and got Jackson County to pay the victim \$500,000.

Since, then, Laws, 51 has delved into many other strange affairs. He manages a prom complex and last month was appointed to manage a failing inner-city funeral home.

"It's not exactly the conventional practices of law," he said, "but it makes my life interesting, and I can't wait to get here in the morning."

He does fiduciary work – courts hire him to manage the money of others and account for it. It might be in a big estate fight or obscure cases of people declared incompetent.

Few lawyers do it, and Laws does a lot of it. He said he has managed about \$150 million of other people's money in the last decade.

Former Jackson County Probate Judge John Borrón, who retired last year, started hiring Laws as a court troubleshooter about 15 years ago.

"He became one of my principal troubleshooters," Borrón said recently and then, "the go-get-'em guy; I sleep well when he's on the go."

Laws must be not only an aggressive lawyer and an investigator, Borrón said, but also a shrewd businessman and a negotiator so he can work out deals to resolve disputes among heirs.

"If they didn't have somebody forcing them to get things resolved," he said, "there would be nothing left."

What he does first is always the same: take control of the case and follow its trail.

He already had experience running two funeral homes in Independence. So he moved fast when the E.R. Morris Funeral Home in Kansas City was failing in business and floundering in probate court.

The Jackson County probate judge appointed Laws last month to operate the funeral home, investigate its problems and see whether the business can be saved.

He already has reported that the Morris Funeral home at 4316 Troost Ave. owes about \$1.5 million in back taxes and debts, was grossly mismanaged and that some income was missing or not accounted for. But he also said good management could have made it viable.

He said he still has not been given all the financial records and may not be able to determine what happened to the missing money. He intends to report this week to probate court with a plan to save the business.

Court officials have praised Laws for skillfully handling a business a bit off the norm – the Jackson County porn complex – and Laws takes pride in it.

In 1988, Laws was appointed to administer Erotic City, 8401 E. Truman Rd, after owner Elvin Lester Boone Sr. died without a will. Boone's eight children were fighting for a share.

Laws started by taking stock of the X-rated bookstore, the lingerie, the video booths, the sex aids, and the juice bar with naked dancers.

“All is authorized by law,” he said, and the business pulled in piles of cash.

The operation has made more than \$5 million for the heirs. Lawsuits kept it in probate for years, but Laws expects a final settlement next month – his exit ticket.

The big public cases are one thing, Laws said, but the strangest insights into humanity sometimes come in smaller estates.

Take the on years ago of a woman reputed to be a religious cult leader who took thousands from her followers and spent it on real estate, jewelry and cars. It turned out the woman was herself bilked – her \$50,000 diamond and other gems were fakes.

Her family, however, believed in her power and at first refused to claim the body because they expected a resurrection, Laws said. They finally realized she wasn't coming back.

“You can't make up stuff like that,” he said. “Truth is stranger than fiction.”