

Former BigLaw Attorney Admits to Stealing from Client's Estate



Leigh M. Chiles, a former lawyer with Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, has pleaded guilty to wire fraud for stealing \$124,000 from the estate of a former client. Chiles, now 49 years old and resides in Little Rock, Arkansas, entered her guilty plea on Friday, according to a March 17 press release and Law360.

The former BigLaw attorney worked at Baker Donelson for over a decade and focused on litigation under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act. Chiles was a shareholder at the firm before being suspended from practice in July 2018.

The July 2022 indictment alleged that Chiles embezzled funds from the estate of John Paul Mummert after being appointed executrix in September 2018. She had previously prepared Mummert's will before his passing.

According to the indictment, Chiles stole from the estate by writing checks to herself or using estate money to pay her credit card and a second credit card for a business in which she was an investor. The plea agreement requires Chiles to make restitution for the stolen funds.

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A spokesperson for Baker Donelson confirmed to Law360 that Chiles is no longer with the firm and was not working there at the time of the crime. The spokesperson also stated that the matter did not relate to or involve the law firm in any way.

Chiles is scheduled for sentencing on July 17.

This case highlights the importance of ethical practices in the legal profession and the consequences of failing to adhere to these standards. It also underscores the need for proper oversight and checks and balances to prevent embezzlement and other financial crimes.

In this case, Chiles' actions harmed her former client's estate and damaged her reputation and career as a lawyer. The guilty plea will likely result in further consequences for Chiles, including potential disbarment and difficulty finding future employment in the legal field.

Lawyers have a duty to act in their client's best interests and uphold the highest ethical standards. When lawyers violate these standards, they risk legal and financial consequences and damage the public's trust in the legal system as a whole.

Law firms and legal organizations must have proper procedures in place to prevent and detect fraud and other financial crimes. This includes regular audits, internal controls, and employee training on ethical practices and financial regulations.

In conclusion, the guilty plea of former BigLaw attorney Leigh M. Chiles reminds us of the importance of ethical behavior in the legal profession and the severe consequences of violating these standards. The case also highlights the need for proper oversight and controls to prevent embezzlement and other financial crimes.