

Nearly half a century after Rosa Parks helped set off the American civil rights movement by refusing to move to the back of a segregated bus, she is at the center of a swirling legal controversy that her relatives say could forever taint her legacy.

Ms. Parks's relatives have squared off against her lawyer and caretaker over who can best protect her interests. The dispute is especially poignant because Ms. Parks, who is 91, may not even be aware of it. Her doctor recently asserted in a court document that she has dementia and cannot testify or be deposed.

The fight stems in part from litigation that has been filed in her name but that her relatives doubt she knows about. They say her longtime caretaker and confidante, Elaine Steele, and her lawyers are seeking monetary settlements for their own gain.

Ms. Steele is the co-founder of the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development, which could share in the proceeds from any settlement. She contends that the suits, over a song invoking her name, are meant to protect Ms. Parks's reputation. Her family argues that they trivialize it.

On Wednesday, the federal judge overseeing the suits, George Steeh, appointed one of Detroit's most respected residents, the former mayor Dennis Archer, to review the matter.

"Rosa Parks is a mother of the civil rights movement," said Representative John Lewis, Democrat of Georgia, who marched alongside her in protests in the 1960's. "It would be very unfortunate if people forgot her raw courage and remembered her as an elderly African-American lady who sued a rock band."

The story of how Ms. Parks reached this point combines heroism with pathos, and regal dignity with seething anger. It is tinged with racism and generous doses of jealousy.

Ms. Parks was a seamstress in Montgomery, Ala., when, on Dec. 1, 1955, she defied

## Rosa Parks Legal 'Cloud

Written by Westside ID221

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segregation laws and insisted on sitting in the front section of a city bus, which was reserved for whites. Her actions led to a yearlong bus boycott that resulted in the integration of the bus system. It also helped focused worldwide attention on racism in the United States and brought the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to broad public attention for the first time.

Two years later, Ms. Parks left Alabama to join her brother in Detroit. She found low-paying work in a factory that manufactured dishrags. Ms. Steele, a young co-worker, became a friend and confidante. Years later, after Ms. Parks had regained a measure of prominence while the civil rights movement was being celebrated, she signed a document giving Ms. Steele her power of attorney.

Although Ms. Parks had no children, her brother had 13. They were close to her for years, but now complain that Ms. Steele has made it all but impossible for them to see her.

"It's gotten to this point over time," said Rhea D. McCauley, one of Ms. Parks's nieces. "Auntie Rosa does feel safe with Elaine. She's been in her life a long time. But if my aunt was still aware of things, she would never have allowed this lawsuit to go forward. She was very protective of her reputation, and now it's being besmirched by greed."

The suit involves a song called "Rosa Parks" that is a protest against the way recording companies treat artists. It does not mention Ms. Parks beyond the title, but it includes the line, "Ah ha, hush that fuss/ Everybody move to the back of the bus." The suit alleges that the song, recorded by the rap / hip-hop group OutKast, defamed her and violated her trademark rights.

Mr. Archer, who is a former justice of the Michigan Supreme Court and immediate past president of the American Bar Association, said the judge's order "really came out of the blue."

"He called, asked me if I could do it, and I said I would," he said. "I plan to make sure her interests are exceptionally well represented."

The lawyer who has been representing Ms. Parks, Gregory Reed, did not return messages left at his office. Ms. Steele declined to be interviewed but referred inquiries to another of her

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lawyers, Shirley Kaigler, who said Judge Steeh's order "does not appear to be appropriate."

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