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Judge rules on Copeland records Divorce details to be unsealed

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By Bruce Hamilton
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State Judge Reginald Badeaux said Wednesday he will unseal portions of restaurateur Al Copeland's divorce record, but keep hidden whatever he deems a possible source of embarrassment to the couple's three children.

Badeaux's decision came at a hearing ordered by the Louisiana Supreme Court after The Times-Picayune challenged Badeaux's previous ruling that kept secret the entire case between the millionaire and his fourth wife, Jennifer Devall Copeland.

Badeaux said Wednesday that protection of the children is "at the heart of" his ruling. The court has a fiduciary responsibility to guard their safety as well as to shield them from ridicule, he said.

Badeaux did not give examples of what information would be considered embarrassing to the children. He said he will shield whatever he feels could become a source of ridicule, as well as sensitive financial and custodial information.

Attorneys for Jennifer Devall and Al Copeland argued that the entire record should remain sealed.

"Nothing about this proceeding is of interest to the public," said Copeland's attorney, Robert Lowe.

Mary Devereux, attorney for Jennifer Devall Copeland, said access to the records would interfere with the "fragile truce" the couple brokered. "They don't want to make their divorce a spectacle," she said.

Jennifer Devall Copeland filed for divorce Feb. 17, and it was granted in April. The 22nd District Court sealed the case file.

The Times-Picayune attorney contested the secrecy ruling April 24, but Badeaux rejected the newspaper's challenge.

A three-judge panel of the 1st Circuit Court of Appeal in Baton Rouge upheld Badeaux's decision. The judges were Burrell Carter, Robert Downing and Jimmy Gaidry.

The state Supreme Court overturned all four judges, saying that any secrecy order should be "narrowly tailored to cause the least interference with public access."

That set the stage for Wednesday's hearing. Badeaux took the unusual step of closing the hearing to the public while allowing a Times-Picayune reporter to attend.

At the hearing, Badeaux said he would submit to all parties a detailed order that specifies what records will remain sealed.

Afterward, Times-Picayune attorney Lori Mince said the couple's attorneys failed to prove that anything in the record would violate the privacy rights of Copeland, Devall or the children.

Copeland's divorce from his third wife, Luan Hunter, became a central focus of the federal government's wide-ranging Operation Wrinkled Robe investigation into Jefferson Parish Courthouse corruption. Judge Ronald Bodenheimer pleaded guilty to conspiring to fix the divorce case in Copeland's favor. Copeland has not been charged with a crime in that investigation and has denied knowledge of the conspiracy.

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