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AP Interview: MJ estate executor Branca was close friend, architect of extraordinary wealth

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — A week after Michael Jackson died, his longtime lawyer and friend, John Branca, arrived at a meeting with the singer's family. He carried the pop star's will, and with it, the news on who would benefit from the King of Pop's estate.

"It was very difficult," Branca recalled. "There were a lot of family members there, his sisters and most of the brothers and his mother, Katherine."

He told them three things: Katherine would be guardian of Michael's three children and receive 40 percent of the estate. The children would also receive 40 percent. The remaining 20 percent would go to unspecified charities to benefit children.

"They applauded three times when they were told who got the property," Branca said. "They were thrilled."

It also named Branca as co-executor — meaning that while the money went to the Katherine Jackson and the kids, Branca and music executive John McClain would be in charge of making it.

Katherine Jackson's attorney, L. Londell McMillan, has asserted that she should be given "a seat at the table" in executing deals for the estate. He has also said the family is considering a formal challenge to Branca and McClain, suggesting the two may not be fit to run the estate because of conflicts of interest and other factors. McMillan would not comment Friday on specifics about those objections.

Neither Branca nor McClain is unknown to the Jackson family. During more than 20 years as the pop superstar's lawyer, Branca, 58, was a principal architect of Jackson's financial empire. McClain, a successful record company executive and childhood friend of Jackson's, helped craft the recording



career of Michael's sister Janet.

Branca plays down any conflict with the Jackson family.

"Everything is going to be fine," he said calmly during a wide-ranging interview with The Associated Press.

Branca and McClain have already won court approval for a deal that will bring the estate \$60 million from a movie made of footage shot during rehearsals for the concerts Jackson was to have performed in London. A coffee-table book also was approved. But two multimillion-dollar projects, including a deal to market Jackson merchandise, have been stalled because of objections from Mrs. Jackson's camp.

"We're approaching the \$100 million mark if those two deals in front of the court are approved," said Branca. "That's pretty remarkable — in six weeks as executors, to have brought \$100 million into the estate."

When he met a young Michael Jackson in 1980, Branca was already a successful young entertainment lawyer, and has represented 28 members of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. His clients have included the Beach Boys, The Doors, Aerosmith, the Rolling Stones and countless other top rock acts.

Neil Portnow, president of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, which puts on the Grammy Awards, said Branca has a track record for loyalty to his clients and is "eminently capable" of running Jackson's posthumous business affairs.

"He has the skills, the knowledge, the clout but also the humanity," said Portnow, who has worked with Branca, the outgoing chairman of the Grammys' charitable foundation. "He had a past relationship with Michael, which is so key. He's not a hired gun. ... Neither does he need this. It's probably somewhat distracting from other things he was doing."

Branca took an early interest in music, and played keyboards in a rock band he formed in high school. But music wasn't his only passion: His uncle is famed Brooklyn Dodgers pitcher Ralph Branca, who served up Bobby Thomson's home run that cost the Dodgers the 1951 National League pennant — in what became known as the "shot heard 'round the world."

Branca channeled his interest in music into his budding law career, and started out setting up tours for Bob Dylan, George Harrison and Neil Diamond. He represented the Presley estate for a time, but in 1980 his world changed when an intermediary asked him to meet with Michael Jackson, who he says was 20 or 21 at the time.

"(Jackson) said, 'Do I know you?' It was one of those things you have in life where you feel so comfortable with a person you actually feel you do know them."

He met Jackson's parents briefly, and remembers Mrs. Jackson saying, "Michael, I don't know if he's old enough to be a lawyer."

Branca shepherded Jackson through the phenomenal success of the "Thriller" album in 1982 — and contrary to other versions of the story, he said it was Michael's idea to buy the Beatles catalog after Paul McCartney told Jackson he was investing in buying copyrights to famous songs.

He bought copyrights to such songs as "Runaround Sue" and "The Wanderer," and the work of Sly and the Family Stone.

"And then came the mother lode," said Branca. When he told Jackson about the ATV catalog up for sale, "He started screaming on the phone. I actually have a great note he wrote me. It said: 'Branca, the catalog is mine. Don't lose it by over-negotiating.'"

In 1995, he merged it with Sony to create one of the largest such collections in the world. In earlier years, Branca also helped Jackson obtain the rights to his recording masters and brokered the purchase of Neverland Ranch, originally offered for \$60 million, for a final price of \$17.5 million, including all furnishings.

But life with Michael was not all about money, Branca says. At first they were friends, traveling to Disney World together, socializing at Branca's home. Jackson was the best man at Branca's first wedding, bringing with him his pet chimp Bubbles, who was clad in a tiny tuxedo. Little Richard was the minister.

In 1990, Jackson tearfully told Branca he wanted to try different representation; though Branca wouldn't confirm it, it was widely reported that Hollywood mogul and record company executive David Geffen advised Jackson that Branca's influence in his affairs had grown too large. They remained apart for three years.

Branca returned in 1993, at a time when Jackson was being sued in a child molestation case he ultimately settled. But the relationship was different.

"Later on in his career he really had a line between his business and personal life," said Branca.

In 1997 a will was drafted for Jackson — but not, Branca says, by him. Instead, he said he assigned it to a member of his firm who specialized in wills and trusts. It was redone in 2002, after the birth of Jackson's third child.

Branca said he played no role in advising Jackson on the will, but knew the singer did not want a family member in control of his estate. Jackson also felt he did not have to take care of his brothers and sisters, Branca said.

By 2006, Branca says, his relationship with Jackson was troubled once again. The star was listening to an increasingly odd set of advisers who Branca feared did not have the singer's best interests at heart.

"He was surrounded and I had to resign," he said. "He did not ask me to stay. I resigned amicably."

And then, a little more than a month before Jackson died, the call came from Jackson's former manager, Frank DiLeo. Branca says DiLeo told him Jackson sought his input on what kind of deals they could begin working on; Branca drafted an agenda and met with Jackson on June 17 at the Forum in Inglewood, where the King of Pop was rehearsing for his big comeback.

"I hadn't seen him in several years," Branca said. "We hugged each other. He said, 'John, you're back.' It was very emotional. I showed him the agenda."

It was what Jackson wanted, Branca said — including a concert movie, books and merchandising deals.

"That agenda is exactly what John McClain and I are doing now," Branca said, "for the estate."

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