

Like These Celebrities, You Need an Estate Plan, Too

The Legacy of Film Legend Val Kilmer

Actor Val Kilmer's passing in April 2025 highlights estate planning issues that can affect almost anyone. Although Kilmer was a celebrity, these issues—including managing real estate in more than one state, deciding what happens with digital assets, and using charitable gifts to leave a legacy and help reduce estate taxes—are concerns that can be especially important for individuals who have an out-of-state summer home or cottage, a creative or online-persona-based career, or a favorite charity they want to support after their death.

Kilmer, best known for playing Iceman in *Top Gun*, Doc Holliday in *Tombstone*, Jim Morrison in *The Doors*, and Batman in *Batman Forever*, died with an estimated net worth of \$10 to \$25 million.¹ At the time of his death, he was a divorced father of two adult children. He also owned a California home, a New Mexico ranch, and digital assets that included a synthetic recreation of his voice.

Public Life, Private Death

While his two children are expected to inherit most of his estate, his estate plan details have not been made public, as is typical of celebrities and other high-profile individuals who want to protect their privacy and that of their loved ones. It is usually only when beneficiary or creditor conflicts emerge and subsequent court filings are made that estate plan details leak to the public.

That may be the first lesson from Kilmer's estate: it appears that he was proactive in his estate planning, which likely helped reduce conflict and keep his affairs private. For someone who spent his later years retreating from Hollywood to his New Mexico ranch, privacy was likely a priority.

Estate Taxes

Kilmer's net worth may have exceeded the 2025 federal estate tax exemption of \$13.99 million per individual, meaning that his estate could be subject to federal estate tax.

California (where Kilmer died) has no state-level estate tax, and neither does New Mexico (where he owned a ranch), so state estate taxes should not be a factor. However, the federal estate tax could take up to 40 percent of the value of Kilmer's estate above the federal exemption limit.

Unlike married couples, unmarried individuals cannot take advantage of the unlimited marital deduction, which allows spouses to transfer accounts and property to each other estate tax-free.

Estate tax reduction strategies available to both married and unmarried individuals include making lifetime gifts, applying valuation discounts for certain assets, and using special types of trusts, such as a grantor retained annuity trust. Charitable giving may also be an effective technique for lowering estate taxes while supporting causes that matter to you.

Charitable Planning

¹ Val Kilmer's Net Worth in 2025: Top Gun Star's Fortune and Inheritance Plan Revealed, FM. (Apr. 2, 2025), <https://www.finance-monthly.com/2025/04/val-kilmers-net-worth-in-2025-top-gun-stars-fortune-and-inheritance-plan-revealed>.

There is a good chance that philanthropy figures largely in Kilmer's estate plan. He was involved in numerous causes throughout his life, supporting organizations focused on environmental issues, animal rescue, human rights, poverty, families of police officers who were killed on 9/11, and more.² If he used charitable tools such as charitable remainder trusts, charitable lead trusts, or donor-advised funds as part of his estate plan, he may have reduced taxes while supporting causes he cared about. You do not have to be ultrawealthy to use these strategies. Charitable giving at any income level can be a meaningful way to create a legacy and express your values in a tax-advantageous way.

Real Estate in Multiple States

Kilmer owned real estate in both California and New Mexico, which may have triggered an *ancillary probate proceeding*—a second probate process that takes place in the state where you own real property that is outside the state of your primary residence.

An ancillary probate can mean more paperwork, delays, and legal fees. State laws differ, and if you pass away owning real estate in more than one state, your family could be left dealing with multiple court systems that often require different approaches to administration.

Fortunately, there are ways to avoid ancillary probate. For example, you can transfer out-of-state property into a revocable living trust to avoid probate while keeping your affairs private. Other tools—such as transfer-on-death deeds, life estate deeds, or titling property jointly with someone else can also minimize or eliminate the need for probate as long as these methods are legally recognized in the state where the property is located.

If Kilmer had a revocable living trust, it might have streamlined the administration of his real estate, avoided probate, and maintained privacy—key considerations for anyone with real estate in multiple states.

Spousal Support

Kilmer married actress Joanne Whalley, whom he met during filming of the cult classic film *Willow*, in 1988. Their divorce was finalized in 1996, not long after the birth of their son.

A person's past divorce can create headaches if things were not properly cleaned up at the time of their death. For example, if the person never changed the beneficiary on their life insurance or retirement accounts, an ex-spouse might still be entitled to that money, even if that was not the deceased person's intention. Also, while there is no public record of Kilmer owing ongoing support to his ex-spouse at his death, unpaid spousal or child support can become debts of the estate, reducing the inheritance that heirs and beneficiaries receive. Property that was supposed to be transferred to the deceased person in the divorce may still be in the ex-spouse's name (either individually or jointly with the deceased person), leading to confusion and possible legal disputes. To avoid these complications, it is a good idea to review divorce paperwork and ensure that all financial responsibilities are settled and incorporated into the estate plan, and all accounts and property are properly titled or have beneficiary designations that align with their new life circumstances.

Digital Assets

² Val Kilmer: *Charity Work, Events, and Causes*, Look to the Stars; The World of Celebrity Giving, <https://www.looktothestars.org/celebrity/val-kilmer> (last visited July 30, 2025).

Whether you are a blockbuster movie star, an influencer earning income on YouTube or Substack, or someone who simply keeps their photos in the cloud or has a Venmo account, digital assets are part of everyday life, presenting new questions—and challenges—for estate planning.

In Kilmer's last appearance in a major film, *Top Gun: Maverick*, a company called Sonatic helped Kilmer digitally recreate his voice (lost after throat cancer treatment) using AI technology and past recordings.³ This voice recreation has financial value, so what happens to the legal rights to it now that Kilmer has passed away? That answer will largely depend on state law. California law extends a person's rights to their name, image, and voice for 70 years after their death.⁴ This means that Kilmer's children, who presumably control his estate, have the exclusive right to approve any future use of his likeness, such as a film cameo, commercial appearance, or holographic performance.⁵

Kilmer's digital estate may also include intellectual property such as unpublished writings, scripts, digital art, or other assets stored on devices or in the cloud. Any intellectual property stored digitally, either locally or remotely, including notes, photos, and videos, could be considered a digital asset and should be planned for in an estate plan accordingly.

For noncelebrities, the types of digital assets at stake may differ, but the need to plan is just as urgent. We now live in the age of the microcelebrity, where being an influencer is a career goal for over half the members of Gen Z,⁶ and digital assets (e.g., videos, photos, online courses, and virtual goods) are core to personal branding, income generation, and legacy. They may also hold deep sentimental value for people who are not "internet-famous."

If you have digital photos, videos, online accounts, or cloud storage accounts, creating digital asset inventories, establishing powers of attorney with explicit authority over digital access and management, and appointing a digital executor or trustee are essential first steps for creating a plan for such assets. Digital asset planning is an evolving area that requires creativity and ongoing updates.

We're Your Huckleberry

Kilmer's legacy reminds us that even the most iconic lives require careful planning to preserve their voice—literally and figuratively—for the next generation.

When it is time to plan your own estate, find an advisor who can look you in the eye and confidently tell you (as Kilmer's Doc Holliday said in *Tombstone*), "I'm your huckleberry."

³ Philip Ellis, *Fans of Val Kilmer Can Hear His Voice Again Thanks to Artificial Intelligence*, Cancer + Careers (Apr. 2022), <https://www.cancerandcareers.org/newsfeed/news/posts/2022/4/fans-of-val-kilmer-can-hear-hi>.

⁴ Sam Fielding, *Val Kilmer's Legacy: Who Controls His Voice, Image, and Royalties After Death?*, Lawyer Monthly (Apr. 2, 2025), <https://www.lawyer-monthly.com/2025/04/val-kilmer-estate-voice-image-legacy>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Gili Malinsky, *57% of Gen Zers want to be influencers—but "it's constant, Monday through Sunday," says creator*, Makelt (Sept. 14, 2024), <https://www.cNBC.com/2024/09/14/more-than-half-of-gen-z-want-to-be-influencers-but-its-constant.html>.