

From Game Shows to Estate Plans: Insights from Regis Philbin

Regis Philbin, the Guinness World Record holder for the most hours on US television, was a familiar face in millions of homes for decades. By the time he retired from his show *Live with Regis and Kelly* in 2011, he had spent more than 16,740 hours in front of the camera.¹

Philbin passed away in 2020, leaving behind an estate worth approximately \$150 million² that was likely divided between his wife, Joy, and children. He had four children: Danny (who died in 2014) and Amy from his first marriage and daughters Joanna and Jennifer with Joy. While Philbin accumulated most of his net worth as the host of game and talk shows, his estate planning documents and court records show that he also left millions in other assets behind.

More Properties, More Problems

At the time of his passing, Philbin owned at least two properties: a Manhattan apartment³ and a Beverly Hills condo.⁴

According to Radar Online, Philbin's estate filed a will with New York Surrogate's Court (i.e., probate court) that listed \$16.5 million in property and millions more in stocks, bonds, and cash to be overseen by Joy as the executor of his will.⁵ However, a large portion of his estate was placed into a trust containing assets not listed in the will, court documents show.⁶

That trust could have contained his New York and California homes, which would have spared Joy and the rest of his loved ones considerable hassles by having to probate properties in multiple states.

Real property titled in an individual's name (as opposed to being held in a revocable living trust) that is located in a state other than where the individual lives may require a separate probate proceeding in each state where the property is located. State laws vary, but New York's probate process is notoriously slow and burdensome (especially in New York County, where Manhattan is), while California's comes with both statutory attorney and statutory executor fees based on the estate's gross value. Regis Philbin: 6th paragraph down, dealing with real property. Add at the end of the paragraph. The Massachusetts probate process is as troublesome as that of New York. Therefore, avoiding it by means of a Revocable Trust may be a good idea!

¹ *Most hours on US television*, Guinness World Records Limited 2025, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/most-hours-on-us-television> (last visited July 30, 2025).

² *Regis Philbin Net Worth \$150 Million*, Celebrity Net Worth (Jan. 30, 2025), <https://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-celebrities/regis-philbin-net-worth>.

³ Mike Mishkin, *Upper West Sider, Regis Philbin, Dies at 88*, I Love the Upper West Side (July 25, 2020), <https://www.ilovetheupperwestside.com/upper-west-sider-regis-philbin-dies-at-88>.

⁴ *Teles Cofounder Ernie Carswell Reps Regis Philbin in Condo Buy*, Medium (Mar. 2, 2016), <https://medium.com/real-estate-reimagined/teles-cofounder-ernie-carswell-reps-regis-philbin-in-condo-buy-effed2929507>.

⁵ Douglas Montero, *Regis Philbin's Will Reveals TV Legend Left Behind \$16 Million In Property, Put Wife Joy in Charge of Estate Worth \$150 Million*, Radar (June 1, 2021), <https://radaronline.com/p/regis-philbin-will-16-million-wife-joy-kids-millions-kelly-ripa>.

⁶ *Id.*

Predeceased Heirs and Plan Updates

A notable aspect of Regis's plan was that he updated it following the death of his son, Danny.

Born with a spinal cord defect, Danny died of natural causes in November 2014, predeceasing his father by nearly six years.⁷

Regis signed his final will just two months later, on January 15, 2015.⁸ The timing of these events is probably not a coincidence. Regis's 2015 estate plan is a case study in why estate plans must change with life. The death of a child, the birth of a grandchild, a new marriage, or a change in financial circumstances are some key life events that should trigger you to revisit your plan. An outdated estate plan may not reflect your wishes at the time of your death and could result in outcomes you would never have chosen.

My Three Daughters

Blended families are becoming increasingly common in America. Today, approximately one in six children grows up in a blended household, and nearly two in five families include a stepparent.⁹ These numbers continue to rise as remarriage becomes more common.

While Philbin did not necessarily live in a blended household, he did have children from different relationships. It would not be uncommon in this situation to face challenges when deciding how to fairly structure an estate plan. Reports indicate that Philbin took a thoughtful approach, providing for his surviving spouse and their children in common while also making provisions for the children from his earlier relationship.

However, when it came to appointing someone to carry out the terms of his will in probate court (called the *executor* in New York), Philbin prioritized his wife and their children by leaving clear instructions: "I appoint my spouse, Bette Joy Philbin, as my Executor of this Will," Philbin's will states.¹⁰ "If my spouse shall not qualify or, having qualified, at any time shall not continue to act, then I appoint my daughter Joanne Philbin as successor Executor of this Will."¹¹ "If Joanne Philbin shall not qualify or, having qualified, at any time shall not continue to act, then I appoint my daughter, Jennifer Philbin, as successor Executor of this Will."¹² This language provides a crucial estate planning lesson: to build contingencies into a plan, including having backup decision-makers and heirs.

While Danny's passing underscores the need to update documents as circumstances change, some changes could occur after your death, which is why every estate plan should include

⁷ Stephanie Dube Dwilson, *Daniel Philbin's Cause of Death: How Did Regis Philbin's Son Die?* (EntertainmentNow (Dec. 19, 2024), <https://entertainmentnow.com/news/daniel-philbin-regis-son>).

⁸ Douglas Montero, *Regis Philbin's Will Reveals TV Legend Left Behind \$16 Million In Property, Put Wife Joy in Charge of Estate Worth \$150 Million*, Radar (June 1, 2021), <https://radaronline.com/p/regis-philbin-will-16-million-wife-joy-kids-millions-kelly-ripa>.

⁹ Kristin McCarthy, M.Ed., *Blended Family Statistics: A Deeper Look Into the Structure*, Love to Know (Aug. 5, 2021), <https://www.lovetoknow.com/parenting/parenthood/blended-family-statistics>.

¹⁰ Douglas Montero, *Regis Philbin's Will Reveals TV Legend Left Behind \$16 Million In Property, Put Wife Joy in Charge of Estate Worth \$150 Million*, Radar (June 1, 2021), <https://radaronline.com/p/regis-philbin-will-16-million-wife-joy-kids-millions-kelly-ripa>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

backup executors, trustees, and beneficiaries to ensure that someone you trust—and chose—is always available to step in.

However Philbin ultimately structured his estate plan, he was wise to put one in place. By doing so, his intentions and wishes had the force of law. Without a clear and carefully designed plan, blended families often face confusion, disagreements, or even legal disputes over inheritance. Philbin's example shows how proactive estate planning can help avoid conflict and preserve family harmony.

Your Estate Plan Is a Lifeline

As a former host of the *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* game show, Philbin gave contestants three “lifelines” to help them answer a question if they needed it: narrowing down their multiple choice options from four to two, phoning a friend to ask them for their insights, or polling the audience. You need a more reliable strategy for your estate plan, however. Philbin did not leave his “final answer” up to chance and neither should you.

Instead of phoning a friend, call us to schedule a time to work on your estate plan—a lifeline for you and your loved ones.