Mary K. Wimsett: The misconceptions about guardianship are that it's always going to be an ugly, horrible legal battle, and it doesn't have to be that way. Many, many times we are able to guide the family through the process in a way by the end of the process the guardianship is set up, and there still can be a healthy relationship among the family members.

Or we often mediate these cases, and we often come to an agreement. I think a common misconception is that it has to be this full guardianship, and there has to be this antagonistic relationship, and that's not always the case. Our goal is to go in with a caring approach to help the family help their family members in a way that's loving and kind, but also legally what needs to happen.

Guardianships are needed typically when family needs to take care of family. What a guardianship does is it enables the guardian to help make decisions about that person's life, so help manage where they live, help manage their health care, help manage their finances. There also are professional guardians available if there is no one in the family that's willing or able to serve.

There are full guardianships, or plenary guardianships, which are the types of guardianships you see typically when an elderly person needs to be cared for, an adult needs to be cared for, because of dementia, or because of mental illness, and for some reason they're just not able to handle their own affairs.

There are also guardian advocacies, which are unique to Florida. To qualify for a guardian advocacy, you have to have a special disability. There's a list of disabilities in the statute, and you can call us, and we'll be happy to tell you if your guardianship will qualify.

Finally, there are also guardianships of minors, so you see those for family members to help take care of minor children.

For all guardianships except for guardian advocacies, you do have to have an attorney to assist you with that process. It's actually required in the statute.

A common fear, and a legitimate concern, is that it will create an antagonistic relationship. A part of the dementia is not trusting family, paranoia. There's not really an easy way to get around that piece of the antagonism. Of course, we try our best in our interactions with all the family members to be as professional, and kind, and sympathetic as possible so that not to cause any undue friction or unnecessary hard feelings between the family members.

One of our goals at the beginning is to really thoroughly explore with the family if there are any other alternatives other than guardianship, but many times you can't. So many times you're stuck with a guardianship being the only way that you can secure your family member's safety and have that peace of mind that your family member will be protected.