



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

October 2025 Episode

The Skeleton in the Cemetery Board's Closet

Susan: Hello ethical people. I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission welcoming you to The Voice of Ethics, the podcast where we dive into stories about ethics in government. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's challenging, and other times it's just downright spooky. *Toccata and Fugue musical excerpt* Yes, it's that time of year when we peek behind the veil of the unknown and into the netherworld of ghosts, goblins and kids in really cute costumes.

So to get you into the mood, I have a Halloween trivia question for you. Where do ghosts go on vacation? To Lake Erie. *ghostly "ooooo" sound effect* You get it? Lake Erie, it's eerie? Okay, moving right along. This week, a haunting we will go into the world of ethics and you guessed it, cemeteries. Enter if you dare. *creaking and flapping sound effects*

So for the first time on this podcast, I am bringing in an ethics pal to join me in our conversation today. I have the honor of introducing to you Molly Bruns, one of our investigative attorneys here at the Ohio Ethics Commission. Molly, we've known each other for, what, 17, 18 years? Something like that?

Molly: A long time, yes Susan.

Susan: A long time! So Molly has been with us a long time, she is an absolute asset to the Commission. Some of you may have actually talked to her over the years and gotten some good thoughts, and maybe some information she shared with you along the way. So I've invited Molly into our conversation to talk about cemeteries and the Ethics Law. So, Molly, before we get into the actual meat of the episode, I have to ask you. You're a mom.

Molly: I am, I am.

Susan: Tell me some of your favorite kid Halloween costumes you've ever seen your kids go out in.

Molly: My daughter's first Halloween costume she was a peapod. I would have to say that is my absolute favorite.

Susan: Did you sew that?

Molly: No, the store

Susan: I wouldn't do it. Good for you. Good. Well done, Mom. Working moms don't have to sew on top of everything else.

Molly: No, you're right about that.

Susan: All right so, excellent. All right, so, I asked Molly to join us today because when I was thinking about cemeteries, I thought, surely there's one out there that doesn't get too darn spooky, but still highlights why the Ethics Law is so important. So, Molly, you and I kind of chose a story together that you wanted to share a little bit. Can you give us a little background on kind of what happened there?

Molly: Yes. Thanks, Susan. Thanks for having me on your podcast to share a little bit about the Ohio Ethics Law and Cemeteries. So some of the cemeteries that are out there are public entities. They are run

by a government or several governmental entities. The allegation came in that a cemetery board member participated in the hiring of his family member. When we brought the individual in to interview them, it was explained to us that there were three open positions with the cemetery. They were temporary summer positions. They needed people to mow, keep up the cemetery grounds, weed eating, you know, just general seasonal jobs like that.

Initially, the three open positions were offered to three different individuals that were not family members. For some reason or another each person chose not to accept the position.

At that point, the cemetery board member looked into being able to offer the positions to individuals that were younger than 18. When it was determined that it was permissible, he had a son that was under the age of 18. It was brought to his attention that maybe his son could be hired.

His son was eventually hired. The cemetery board member participated in the voting process, as well as two other board members approved the hiring. So it wasn't just the father that participated in the hiring, it was all three trustees, cemetery board members approved the hiring. So the son eventually worked for the cemetery for three years.

Susan: So, in fairness, even though this was a problem, we could talk more about why that's a problem under the law, to be fair, I imagine those are not the easiest positions to fill. I mean, they had three people decline. It must be a struggle to some, in fairness to those folks. Is that fair? You've noticed that?

Molly: I'd say, definitely.

Susan: Yeah.

Molly: And that is kind of what we have been told throughout, you know, when we investigate these kind of cases. Temporary seasonal positions are not the easiest to hire. They're not easy to hire because a lot of times they're not very high paying. They are, again, temporary, so maybe only for three months out of the year. And they are typically part time.

Susan: Yeah.

Molly: So it's not like it's a person being hired 40 hours a week for an entire year. They're being hired for maybe 3 or 4 months out of the year, and they may only work 10 to 20 to 30 hours a week. And again, their pay is not very high. They don't get benefits. And a lot of times it's working out in the hot weather.

Susan: So it's understandable if they could just kind of throw their hands up and go, "Oh my gosh, let's just hire so-and-so who's home from college." I get that. But it doesn't change the reality that the Ethics Law says we can't be part of hiring our relatives, I assume. Right?

Molly: Right

Susan: Even for temporary things, is that still fair?

Molly: Yeah. Yes, mhm.

Susan: What does the statute, kind of, without getting too deep into, like, legal language, what in general does the statute say? Like, let's say there's somebody out there right now that they're a public servant, and they do have a relative who's interested in looking for a public job. Just in general what's a good thing for them to know?

Molly: So the Ohio Ethics Law states that public officials and employees cannot authorize a family member's employment or use his or her position in any way to obtain a public job for a family member.

Susan: So the fact that this guy voted on it was problematic.

Molly: Correct.

Susan: But even if he hadn't voted, the fact that he participated, he discussed, he recommend, he said, "Yeah, my kid'll do it. I'll make my kid do it so he doesn't play video games all summer." That's equally problematic. Is that fair?

Molly: Yes, yes. The Ethics Law is pretty clear in that you can't, directly or indirectly participate in the hiring process. So, ways that you could indirectly participate, would be asking a fellow board member or fellow trustee to hire your family member or discussing the position filling out the application for your child. Things of that sort.

Susan: Yeah. So I get legally and as an attorney, certainly you understand why. But just as somebody who's been around the Ethics Law for a long time and you've seen kind of the after effects, and just as a Ohioan, in your mind after all these years of being at the Ethics Commission, what, why are these laws still important? Why does it still matter? Like, I can understand someone thinking, in the public, "What's the big deal?" It was, you know, his son needed something to do for the summer, and the guy was trying to make sure the cemetery lawn got mowed. Honestly, just as people who care about ethics, why do laws like this still matter?

Molly: Well, laws like this still matter because public money is being used and and the public wants to make sure that every public agency, every public entity is using fair hiring practices. And even though his son may have been qualified or may have been the most qualified, it is still a family member, a child, of a public official or employee. So one will never know for sure if it was a fair hiring practice.

All Ohio citizens have the right to expect that government jobs will be awarded to the most qualified candidate, not merely to the most family connected candidate.

Susan: So even though, like in a situation in general, not just cemeteries, but just in general in hiring, even if my relative is uber qualified, I still have to recuse though, right?

Molly: Correct.

Susan: That's fair. Okay. That's fair.

Molly: Yeah. I mean, the Ethics Law doesn't absolutely prohibit two or more family members from working at the same public agency. There are still rules in place so that the family members do not participate in each other's employment.

Susan: Yeah, that makes sense. That makes sense. Certainly, you have a great deal of respect for the investigative authority, the work, the processes, the results of the Ethics Commission all these years. But I have to ask, though, I'm going to go back to the fact that you're a mom. I have to believe, Molly, that you would still rather have one of your kids, you have kids in college already. I have to believe, or high school, you would rather have them come to you first and say, "Hey, Mom, Dad, would this be a good idea?" rather than after the fact saying "Mom, Dad, there's something I have to tell you." Can you relay that feeling as a mom and to what your advice might be as an attorney with the Ethics Commission for people listening?

Molly: Yes, Susan, most definitely. I feel that for those of you listening, if something comes up in your public life that is going to affect or touch on your private life, no matter how small, please reach out to the Ohio Ethics Commission and ask first. We have numerous resources out there to assist in making some of these decisions, and since we deal with it on a daily basis, we have a lot of knowledge to give

individuals in order to make sure that they're following the Ohio Ethics Law and don't find themselves facing criminal charges because they are participating in matters that affect themselves personally.

Susan: Yeah. And I've always often joked to Molly and the other folks in the investigative unit here that it's always been my goal to make them the least busy section of the Ethics Commission. But so far you guys have been pretty busy the last 20 years that I've been here. Maybe we need to work on that, right?

Molly: *laughs* Yes, yeah.

Susan: Get people to not commit the crimes.

Molly: Maybe this will help!

Susan: *laughs* Maybe this will help, yeah, yeah. So I would note too, just for everybody listening, a lot of the wonderful resources that Molly is referencing, I will have some of those in our show notes. Certainly you can always go to our website, but we are going to put a couple Advisory Opinions and fact sheets, in our show notes.

Molly did mention at one point that some of the people we're talking about were minor kids, which does make a difference to some degree, Molly. Actually, that can be a little bit different even, can't it? More restrictive. Is that correct?

Molly: Yes, yes it is.

Susan: We're going to talk about that even more in more detail in future episodes. But if you're wondering about your minor kids versus your relatives that are 18 or older, do look at the show notes, go to our website because you will find there's prohibitions either way, but it's even more stringent when it comes to minor kids. So do check out the show notes.

Molly, have I missed anything that you want to like add for, uh, any sage advice out there?

Molly: Don't hire family.

Susan: There you go. That's pretty succinct. There's the CliffsNotes of our whole episode everybody. All right, Molly, thank you so much for joining us. It's been a pleasure. I act like I'm not going to see her again, folks, I'll probably see her later on as we like go get water at the drinking fountain. But thank you, Molly, for joining us on the episode today.

Molly: Thank you, Susan, for having me!

Susan: And for everybody else that's it for this week. We hope you had a spooktacular time listening to this episode. I'm grateful that you joined Molly and me because as we all know, teamwork makes the scream work am I right? *scream sound effect*

Molly: Right.

Susan: Molly's rolling her eyes at me with all the advice and wisdom of an attorney, I have to tell you, folks. So, everybody, please join me again in two weeks when we'll leave this most frightful time of the year and instead begin to face the reality that winter is coming, *wind sound effect* and that somehow some folks have even found a way to make wood chippers and wood splitters unethical. You won't want to miss that chilling episode.

Until then, since we've already identified where ghosts go on vacation, I have to end this episode with the same question about mummies. Hey, Molly, where do mummies go on vacation? *laughs*

Molly: Susan, I have no idea.

Susan: The Dead Sea. *laugh sound effect*

Molly: *laugh* Good one Susan, good one.

Susan: It's terrible, I know it's terrible. Hey, everybody be well. Take care and be ethical. Bye bye.