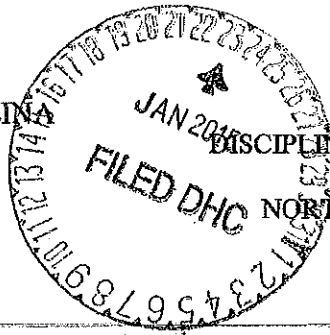


STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA  
WAKE COUNTY



BEFORE THE  
DISCIPLINARY HEARING COMMISSION  
OF THE  
NORTH CAROLINA STATE BAR  
14 DHC 28

THE NORTH CAROLINA STATE BAR,

Plaintiff

v.

ORDER OF DISCIPLINE

ERTLE KNOX CHAVIS, Attorney,

Defendant

THIS MATTER was heard on January 8, 2015 by a Hearing Panel of the Disciplinary Hearing Commission composed of Donald C. Prentiss, Chair, Joshua W. Willey, Jr. and Michael S. Edwards pursuant to 27 N.C.A.C. 1B § .0114 of the Rules and Regulations of the North Carolina State Bar. Margaret T. Cloutier represented Plaintiff, the North Carolina State Bar. Defendant, Ertle Knox Chavis, represented himself.

Based upon the pleadings, stipulations, and evidence presented at the hearing, the Hearing Panel hereby finds by clear, cogent, and convincing evidence the following

#### FINDINGS OF FACT

1. Plaintiff, the North Carolina State Bar (hereinafter "State Bar"), is a body duly organized under the laws of North Carolina and is the proper party to bring this proceeding under the authority granted it in Chapter 84 of the General Statutes of North Carolina and the Discipline and Disability Rules of the North Carolina State Bar promulgated thereunder.

2. Defendant, Ertle K. Chavis (hereinafter "Chavis" or "Defendant"), was admitted to the North Carolina State Bar on August 24, 1975 and is, and was at all times referred to herein, an Attorney at Law licensed to practice in North Carolina, subject to the rules, regulations, and Rules of Professional Conduct of the North Carolina State Bar and the laws of the State of North Carolina.

3. During the times relevant herein, Defendant actively engaged in the practice of law in the State of North Carolina and maintained a law office in Lumberton, Robeson County, North Carolina.

4. Defendant was properly served with process, a hearing in this matter was set, and the matter came before the Hearing Panel with due notice to all parties.

5. Between January 1, 2009 and June 30, 2012 (hereafter "the audit period") Defendant maintained a client trust account with BB&T Bank, account number ending in the digits 8807 (hereinafter the "trust account").

6. Defendant used the trust account as a general trust account in which Defendant deposited and disbursed client funds.

7. Defendant collected payments from various third parties on behalf of his client D.M.

8. Defendant did not deposit all of the funds received on behalf of D.M. into his trust account.

9. Although Defendant was due fees from some of the payments, the payments did not solely consist of his fees. Defendant was not entitled to keep all of the undeposited funds he received on behalf of D.M.

10. Defendant used for his own purposes the undeposited payments he received on behalf of D.M. to which he was not entitled.

11. Defendant misappropriated entrusted funds belonging to D.M.

12. Additionally, despite having deposited into the trust account only \$51,464.08 on behalf of D.M, Defendant disbursed \$77,724.88 from the trust account on behalf of D.M., a difference of \$26,260.80.

13. Defendant occasionally deposited significant amounts of his personal funds into the trust account for personal reasons unrelated to proper maintenance of a trust account.

14. Defendant's personal funds deposited into the trust account were insufficient to cover the \$26,260.80 overdisbursement of funds on behalf of D.M.

15. Defendant used entrusted funds held in a fiduciary capacity for other clients for some or all of the \$26,260.80 overdisbursement of funds on behalf of D.M.

16. Defendant misappropriated entrusted client funds from the trust account for a portion of the excess disbursements he made on behalf of D.M.

17. Defendant was required to hold at least \$44,285.92 in his trust account on behalf of client S.G. from at least January 1, 2009 to May 19, 2009.

18. On multiple occasions between January 1, 2009 and May 19, 2009, the balance of Defendant's trust account fell below \$44,285.92.

19. Defendant used entrusted funds held in a fiduciary capacity for S.G. for the benefit of himself and/or others.

20. Defendant misappropriated client funds from the trust account he received on behalf of S.G.

21. On May 19, 2009, check number 12028 payable to S.G. in the amount of \$44,285.92 cleared the bank.

22. Defendant used entrusted funds held in a fiduciary capacity for other clients for some or all of the \$44,285.92 disbursement to S.G.

23. Defendant misappropriated entrusted client funds from the trust account for the \$44,285.92 expenditure to S.G.

24. During the audit period Defendant disbursed from the trust account more funds on behalf of the following clients than he held for each client, in the following amounts:

<u>Client</u>	<u>Amount</u>
Branch	180.00
Britt	400.00
W. Cox	39.00
A. Cross	249.99
D & D	125.00
Flowers	14.88
D. Hunt	12.68
R. Hunt	100.00
R. Hunt	131.00
Johnson	495.00
N. Jones	30.00
L&S Holding	14,928.41
Lee	125.00
D. Locklear	628.00
T. Locklear	48.25
W. Locklear	200.00
Lowery	299.90
R. Morris	3.00
P&R	17.00
Poolet	2.00
Prevatte	1.60
Revels	30.00
Stone	50.00
Thompson	28.00
Townsend	300.00

Vendetti	5.29
Willoughby	<u>10.00</u>

Total	\$18,454.00
-------	-------------

25. Defendant used entrusted funds held in a fiduciary capacity for other clients for some or all of these disbursements.

26. Defendant misappropriated entrusted client funds in the amount of \$18,454.00 from the trust account.

27. On January 20, 2012 check number 13304 in the amount of \$64.00 cleared the bank. Check 13304 was made payable to Sampson County Register of Deeds and was for the benefit of Defendant's client Mr. D.

28. At the time check number 13304 cleared the bank on January 20, 2012, no funds were on deposit in the trust account for the benefit of Mr. D.

29. Defendant did not deposit any funds for Mr. D. into his trust account until February 22, 2012.

30. Defendant used entrusted funds held in a fiduciary capacity for other clients to cover check no. 13304.

31. Defendant misappropriated entrusted client funds in the amount of \$64.00 from the trust account.

32. Defendant conducted a real estate closing for his client J. F. in May 2010.

33. Subsequent to J.F.'s closing, Defendant erroneously wrote and mailed check number 12580 for \$595.00 to the wrong payee. Check number 12580 cleared the bank on May 21, 2010.

34. When Defendant realized he had sent the \$595.00 payment to the wrong payee, he wrote and mailed check number 12698 for \$595.00 to the correct payee, New Century Bank. Check number 12698 cleared the bank on August 11, 2010.

35. At the time check number 12698 payable to New Century Bank cleared the bank on August 11, 2010, Defendant held no funds on behalf of J. F. in his trust account.

36. Defendant used entrusted funds held in a fiduciary capacity for other clients to cover check number 12698.

37. As of June 30, 2012 Defendant should have held in the trust account at least the following entrusted funds for the following clients:

<u>Client</u>	<u>Amount</u>
Britt	11.47
J. Campbell	17.00
J. Campbell	16.70
R. Collins	105.92
Frierson	938.45
R. Herring	54.43
B. Hunt	227.80
Jacobs	1533.32
Johnson/Ramsey	150.00
P. Jones	87.51
J. Lee	1000.00
T. Lee	1000.00
N. Locklear	7.00
Mansfield	548.00
Melvin	30.00
P&R	10.76
Powell	14.28
T. Ramsey	16.00
H. Revels	552.92
J. Staten	60.00
W. Wardlaw	1355.34
R. Wilkins	<u>25.20</u>
Total	7,762.10

38. As of June 30, 2012, the balance of Defendant's trust account was \$2,874.97. Defendant has insufficient funds in the trust account to distribute approximately \$7,762.10 to the clients listed in the preceding paragraph.

39. Defendant failed to reconcile the individual client ledger balances for the trust account with the general ledger and adjusted bank statement balances for the trust account at least quarterly between January 1, 2009 and June 30, 2012.

41. Defendant often represented a mobile home dealer regarding transactions in which the dealer was involved in the sale of mobile homes.

42. To facilitate the sale of a mobile home to its customer T.C., the dealer helped T.C. find a buyer for T.C.'s real property in another county. The dealer arranged for T.C. to sell T.C.'s property to J.B.

43. T.C. and J.B. agreed that T.C. would sell the property to J.B. for \$110,000.00. J.B. would pay T.C. \$10,000.00 in cash and make payments on T.C.'s existing mortgage without informing the mortgagee of the sale.

44. All parties came to Defendant's office on or about September 30, 2009 and the dealer directed Defendant to prepare documents for the sale of T.C.'s real property to J.B.

45. On or about September 30, 2009, T.C. and J.B. signed the documents Defendant prepared. One document was a warranty deed prepared on behalf of T.C. conveying the real property to J.B.'s corporate entity. Another document was a promissory note prepared on behalf of J.B. in which J.B.'s entity promised to pay \$99,865.42 to T.C. in monthly installments over 30 years. A third document was a deed of trust pledging the property as security for the indebtedness owed by J.B. to T.C.

46. The warranty deed that Defendant prepared did not note that the property was being conveyed subject to the lien of the existing mortgage. Rather, it stated that the property was being conveyed free and clear of all encumbrances.

47. The promissory note that Defendant prepared stated that the note was secured by a deed of trust that was a first lien against the property described in the deed of trust, when in fact, the existing mortgage was the first lien against the property.

48. T.C. paid Defendant \$150.00 for preparing the warranty deed and J.B. paid Defendant \$200.00 for preparing the promissory note and deed of trust.

49. Defendant collected no other funds from the parties other than his fees. J.B. paid \$10,000.00 by certified check directly to T.C.

50. After T.C. and J.B. signed the documents, J.B. took the original warranty deed and deed of trust purportedly to record them in the other county.

51. Defendant failed to fully inform T.C. and J.B. about his relationship with the mobile home dealer, that they might benefit from separate lawyers to represent them because their interests may not be fully aligned, that his representation of them was limited to preparation of the documents and that he was not advising them of their liabilities, responsibilities and options regarding the transaction other than to describe the possible acceleration of the indebtedness under T.C.'s existing mortgage.

52. Defendant failed to fully inform T.C. and J.B. that because of his existing relationship with the mobile home dealer and the dealer's interest in facilitating the sale of this property so that T.C. could purchase a mobile home from the dealer, Defendant's loyalty to the dealer might conflict with the interests of T.C. and/or J.B. in this transaction.

53. Approximately one month after the parties signed the documents in Defendant's office, the mobile home dealer directed Defendant to prepare a closing statement regarding the transaction. Defendant prepared a HUD-1 form, signed it, and provided it to the mobile home dealer.

54. The HUD-1 form Defendant prepared did not accurately depict the transaction. For example, the form falsely listed the settlement date as September 1, 2009 instead of September 30, falsely listed Defendant as the settlement agent when Defendant did not deposit and/or disburse the settlement funds, and falsely showed T.C. as taking a \$100,000.00 deed of trust when the actual promissory note and deed of trust was for \$99,865.42.

Based on the record and the foregoing Findings of Fact, the Hearing Panel makes the following:

#### CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

1. All the parties are properly before the Hearing Panel and the panel has jurisdiction over Defendant, Ertle Knox Chavis, and over the subject matter.
2. Defendant's foregoing actions constitute grounds for discipline pursuant to N.C.G.S. §84-28(b)(2) in that Defendant violated one or more of the Rules of Professional Conduct in effect at the time of the actions as follows:
  - a. By failing to deposit into the trust account payments that he received on behalf of his client D.M. and instead using the funds for his own purposes, Defendant failed to properly maintain entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(a), failed to promptly deposit all trust funds received in a general trust account in violation of Rule 1.15-2(b), benefitted from entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(j), and engaged in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation in violation of Rule 8.4(c);
  - b. By disbursing \$26,260.80 more for D.M. than he held for D.M. in his trust account, Defendant failed to properly maintain entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(a), allowed another to benefit from entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(j), failed to properly disburse entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(m), and engaged in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation in violation of Rule 8.4(c);
  - c. By depositing his personal funds into the trust account, Defendant deposited funds belonging to the lawyer in the trust account in violation of Rule 1.15-2(f);
  - d. By failing to maintain S.G.'s funds in his trust account and by disbursing \$44,285.92 on behalf of S.G. when he did not hold \$44,285.92 in trust for S.G., Defendant failed to properly maintain entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(a), allowed another to benefit from entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(j), failed to properly disburse entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(m), and engaged in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation in violation of Rule 8.4(c);

e. By disbursing from the trust account a total of \$18,454.00 more for various clients than he held in the account on behalf of those clients, Defendant failed to properly maintain entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(a), allowed another to benefit from entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(j), failed to properly disburse entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(m), and engaged in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation in violation of Rule 8.4(c);

f. By disbursing \$64.00 for the benefit of Mr. D. when he held no funds for Mr. D. in the trust account, Defendant failed to properly maintain entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(a), allowed another to benefit from entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(j), failed to properly disburse entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(m), and engaged in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation in violation of Rule 8.4(c);

g. By disbursing \$595.00 for the benefit of J. F. when he held no funds for J. F. in the trust account, Defendant failed to properly maintain entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(a), allowed another to benefit from entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(j), failed to properly disburse entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(m), and engaged in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation in violation of Rule 8.4(c);

h. By failing to maintain sufficient funds in the trust account for the benefit of his clients who should have had those funds in the account, Defendant failed to properly maintain entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(a), allowed another to benefit from entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(j), failed to properly disburse entrusted funds in violation of Rule 1.15-2(m), and engaged in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation in violation of Rule 8.4(c);

i. By failing to total and reconcile the individual client balances with the current general ledger balance and adjusted bank balance at least quarterly during the audit period, Defendant failed to perform the requisite quarterly reconciliations of his general trust account in violation of Rule 1.15-3(d);

j. By preparing the warranty deed stating that it conveyed T.C.'s property free and clear of all encumbrances and preparing the promissory note stating that it was secured by a deed of trust in first lien position when he knew that T.C.'s existing mortgage was to remain in place, Defendant engaged in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit or misrepresentation in violation of Rule 8.4(c);

k. By placing the interests of the mobile home dealer and his relationship with the dealer above the interests of T.C. and J.B., Defendant engaged in conduct constituting a concurrent conflict of interest in violation of Rule 1.7(a);

l. By failing to fully inform T.C. and J.B. that Defendant's interests in a continuing relationship with the dealer might conflict with their interests, that his



representation was limited to preparation of the documents, and that their individual interests might not fully align with the interests of the other, Defendant did not explain a matter to the extent reasonably necessary to permit the client to make informed decisions regarding the representation in violation of Rule 1.4(b);

m. By allowing the mobile home dealer to direct the manner in which Defendant represented T.C. and J.B., Defendant permitted a person who recommends, engages, or pays him to direct or regulate Defendant's professional judgment in rendering legal services in violation of Rule 5.4(c); and

n. By preparing a HUD-1 that did not accurately depict the transaction, Defendant engaged in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit or misrepresentation in violation of Rule 8.4(c).

Based on the forgoing Findings of Fact, Conclusions of Law, and the evidence presented at the hearing, the Hearing Panel hereby finds by clear, cogent and convincing evidence the following:

#### FINDINGS OF FACT REGARDING DISCIPLINE

1. Defendant has no prior professional discipline.
2. J.B. delayed recording the warranty deed for several months and did not record for several years the deed of trust securing the loan T.C. made to him. T.C. did not appear as experienced in business matters as J.B. and the mobile home dealer and she was unaware of the risks involved in the transaction.
3. Since the initiation of the investigation into his trust accounting practices, Defendant has not taken any steps to learn the basics of trust accounting management either through CLEs or other programs.
4. Since the initiation of the investigation into his trust accounting practices, Defendant has not made any efforts to reimburse the trust account for the deficiency that has existed since June 2012.
5. During the time period at issue in this case, Defendant was delinquent in his payment of taxes to the IRS and the IRS was garnishing Defendant's bank accounts to collect outstanding taxes.
6. By comingling his funds with client funds in the trust account, especially at a time when the IRS was garnishing Defendant's accounts, Defendant placed his clients' funds at risk and placed his own interests above those of his clients.
7. Defendant caused significant harm and potential significant harm to the clients whose funds he was required to hold in his trust account but failed to maintain in trust.

8. Defendant expressed no remorse for his conduct in handling entrusted funds and the real estate transaction involving T.C and J.B. Defendant has made no effort to reimburse the trust account.

9. An injunction prohibiting Defendant from handling entrusted funds was imposed by the Superior Court of Wake County. Since that time, Defendant has continued to allow his office to receive payments made on behalf of D.M.

10. Clients are entitled to representation by attorneys they can trust. A cornerstone of client trust in an attorney is that the attorney will properly protect and maintain entrusted funds. Failure to do so erodes the confidence clients place in attorneys who handle their affairs and harms the public and the profession as a whole.

Based on the established facts and Conclusions of Law above and the additional Findings of Fact Regarding Discipline, the Hearing Panel makes the following:

#### CONCLUSIONS REGARDING DISCIPLINE

1. The Hearing Panel has carefully considered all of the different forms of discipline available to it. In addition, the Hearing Panel has considered all of the factors enumerated in 27 N.C.A.C. 1B § .0114(w)(1) of the Rules and Regulations of the North Carolina State Bar and concludes that the following factors are present:

- (a) Intent of the Defendant to commit acts where the harm or potential harm is foreseeable;
- (b) Circumstances reflecting the Defendant's lack of honesty, trustworthiness, or integrity;
- (c) Elevation of Defendant's own interests above those of the clients;
- (d) Impairment of the client's ability to achieve the goals of the representation; and
- (e) Acts of dishonesty, misrepresentation, deceit or fabrication.

2. The Hearing Panel has considered all of the factors enumerated in 27 N.C.A.C. 1B § .0114(w)(2) of the Rules and Regulations of the North Carolina State Bar and concludes that the following factors are present:

- (a) Acts of dishonesty, misrepresentation, deceit or fabrication; and
- (b) Misappropriation or conversion of assets of any kind to which Defendant or recipient is not entitled, whether from a client or other source.

3. The Hearing Panel has considered all of the factors enumerated in 27 N.C.A.C. 1B § .0114(w)(3) of the Rules and Regulations of the North Carolina State Bar and concludes the following factors are applicable in this matter:

- (a) Absence of prior disciplinary offenses in this state or any other jurisdiction;
- (b) Dishonest or selfish motive;
- (c) Indifference to making restitution;
- (d) Pattern of misconduct;
- (e) Multiple offenses;
- (f) Full and free disclosure to the Hearing Panel and cooperative attitude toward the proceedings;
- (g) Vulnerability of the victim;
- (h) Degree of experience in the practice of law as he has practiced since 1975;
- (i) Lack of reasonable efforts toward interim rehabilitation regarding trust account management;
- (j) Lack of remorse; and
- (k) Allowing his office to continue to receive client funds after the injunction prohibiting him from handling entrusted funds was entered.

4. The Hearing Panel has considered lesser alternatives and finds that a public censure, reprimand, admonition, or suspension would not be sufficient discipline because of the gravity of the harm to Defendant's clients, and because of the potential significant harm Defendant's conduct caused to the public, the administration of justice, and the legal profession.

5. The Hearing Panel has considered all lesser sanctions and finds that discipline short of disbarment would not adequately protect the public, the profession and the administration of justice for the following reasons:

- (a) The factors under Rule .0114(w)(2) that are established by the evidence in this case are of a nature that support imposition of disbarment as the appropriate discipline;

- (b) Entry of an order imposing less serious discipline would fail to acknowledge the seriousness of the offenses Defendant committed and would send the wrong message to attorneys and to the public regarding the conduct expected of members of the Bar of this state; and
- (c) Protection of the public requires that Defendant not be permitted to resume the practice of law unless and until he demonstrates that he has reformed, that he understands his obligations as an attorney, officer of the court, and as a citizen of this state and country. Disbarment is the only sanction that requires Defendant to demonstrate reformation before he may resume the practice of law.

Based upon the foregoing facts, findings and conclusions, the Hearing Panel hereby enters the following

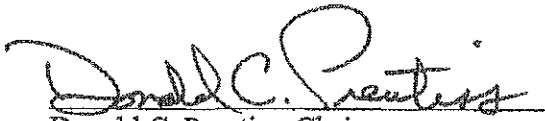
#### ORDER OF DISCIPLINE

1. Defendant, Ertle Knox Chavis, is hereby DISBARRED effective thirty days from the date this Order of Discipline is served on him.
2. Defendant shall surrender his law license and membership card to the Secretary of the North Carolina State Bar no later than thirty days following service of this Order upon Defendant.
3. Defendant shall pay the administrative fees and costs of this proceeding within sixty days of service of the statement of costs upon him by the Secretary of the State Bar.
4. Defendant shall comply with all provisions of 27 N.C.A.C. 1B §.0124.
5. Within sixty days of the effective date of this Order, Defendant will provide the North Carolina State Bar with the following:
  - a. Funds sufficient to allow the State Bar to disburse all amounts due to or payable on behalf of all of Defendant's clients who have or should have funds remaining in Defendant's trust account;
  - b. Current contact information for all clients who have or should have funds in the trust account. Defendant shall cooperate with the State Bar to account for and disburse all client funds as appropriate; and
  - c. An address and telephone number at which clients seeking return of files can communicate with Defendant and obtain such files.

5. Defendant shall return client files to clients within five days of receipt of such request. Defendant will be deemed to have received any such request three days after the date such request is sent to Defendant if the request is sent to the address Defendant provided the State Bar pursuant to this Order.

Signed by the Chair with the consent of the other Hearing Panel members, this the

23 day of January, 2015.

  
Donald C. Prentiss, Chair  
Disciplinary Hearing Panel