

\$1 MIL PENSION PICKLE

Widower's battle

By ZACH HABERMAN

A Brooklyn man says he was left destitute when his late wife's pension, worth nearly \$1 million, was awarded to his sister-in-law on a technicality — and is hoping the state's highest court will hear his case.

"I lost the best thing that ever happened to me," said Bruce Friedman, 61, of his late wife, Anne.

"I had no idea there was a question I wasn't the beneficiary."

The Friedmans were happily married for nearly 20 years when Anne, a former city school principal, died suddenly of a massive heart attack in September 2001.

Friedman said he never doubted he'd be entitled to the lump-sum payment of \$900,862 because the Teachers' Retirement System sent out annual statements that indicated his wife had named no beneficiary.

That would make him, as her closest relative, the beneficiary.

But after she died, officials found a form which had been filled out 27 years ago, four years before the couple met on a 1978 blind date.

It indicated Anne's mother, uncle and sister should collect.

Anne's mother and uncle died, so the money was awarded to the sister, Virginia McLaughlin — and Friedman complains that she won't give him a cent.

"I think Anne would just be shocked," said Friedman, adding that he's just making ends meet.



THE FRIEDMANS
Legally unprepared.

"[Virginia] won't sit down with me or my attorney. I'm just baffled."

McLaughlin declined to comment.

A Manhattan Supreme Court ruling held that Anne's intention of making her husband the beneficiary could not be assumed and that the paperwork on file was clear, said Joseph Harberson of the Corporation Counsel's office, which is representing the retirement system.

"We feel we're complying with the law as it stands."

The Supreme Court decision was upheld by the Appellate Division in December.

Friedman said he wants to go to the Court of Appeals because, "all I know is it's my last chance."

Friedman's lawyer, Sanford Young, described last month's decision as "sobering," and added had some advice for all couples:

"Make sure you update your pension beneficiary forms. If you don't, your spouse and family may wind up with nothing."