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Acquittal Caps Numbing Wait For Juror

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At first, sitting in a crowded auditorium one day last month with nothing to do but catch up on my reading didn't exactly seem like a civics lesson so much as a lesson in why not to bring an absolutely boring book on Congress and foreign policy to pass the time.

The initial waiting time at a jury summons can be agonizing if one remains seated in the same position, reading a textbook, for almost five hours. My neck was sore; my interest level, dead.

The pain of waiting for my name to be called reminded me of the complete inefficiency of government. It was a similar but shorter experience when I had to wait for my driver's license test. Somehow waiting times and government seem to go hand in hand.

After numerous groups had been taken out, my name was called about an hour after lunch. Just when I thought I might make it the whole day without being selected! My fellow selectees seemed to share my disappointment.

We were taken to a waiting area outside one of the courtrooms, where another group met us. In all, there were about 20 of us, with only seven to be eventually selected to come back for the trial.

The case dealt with drunken driving. A young white man was stopped a few months back for weaving inside his lane and at one point veering to the outside of the fog line - this all according to the arresting officer.

After jury questioning, we were all sent back out to wait for our fates. Seven of us would be called back for instructions on when to return for the trial, and the rest, well, the lucky ones - at least it seemed that way to me at the time - got to go home.

When the bailiff returned with the list of jurors, mine was the first name to be called. I assumed I was chosen partly because I was in the front row during the questioning and was the only young white male in the group.

Luckily, the trial lasted only a few hours. Unluckily, jury duty doesn't exactly pay much (\$30).

The only witness in the case was the arresting officer. At first, his testimony seemed convincing. After all, his main job responsibility for more than a decade had been to spot potential drunken drivers and stop them. You would think he would be somewhat of an expert.

But then came the videos that the government lawyers seemed convinced would put the final nail in the coffin. It

was more like a resurrection scene than a burial for the defendant. They proved nothing and, if anything, showed us that the defendant seemed to be behaving and walking fine during his field sobriety tests. He even seemed to talk fine. All that was left was for the defense attorney to show us how the government didn't prove its case, and he did, it seemed, with ease. The defendant had refused to take a blood test. The lack of test results came up in jury deliberations, but we couldn't use that as proof that he was drunk. We deliberated for about five minutes and then handed down our verdict: not guilty.

Starting off waiting in the auditorium, I didn't think I would get anything out of the experience - especially not any reasonable monetary compensation. But I did learn a few lessons. So much so that I almost thought of going to law school - almost.

First lesson: The government isn't always right. Despite what we may be prone to believe, government is made of people, and people make mistakes.

Second, despite what critics may charge, we've got the best justice system in the world. Sure, it has its faults, but I wouldn't trade it for any other existing system. My experience showed me that people are still assumed innocent until proven guilty, and proof is needed before anyone can be convicted.

Third, and quite possibly most important of all, if you're ever called for jury duty, bring something a lot more interesting to read than a textbook and, if at all possible, avoid sitting in the front row for questioning.

Keyword: Community Columnists, to read other recent columns.

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