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## A decades-long dream dashed in dreary basement

Earlier this week, I experienced something I have waited for my entire adult life: served jury duty.

I know most folks equate jury duty with a trip to the dentist or getting that annual physical, but not me. Maybe it's due to how I make my living, but serving on a jury has been a quest of mine for nearly 30 years.

Having covered dozens of trials over the years - from divorce cases to embezzlement to murder - I've often wondered what it is like being one of the people empowered to decide guilt or innocence. That is a lot of pressure to place on a person who may not have a clue as to how our criminal justice system works.

My big chance came Monday, courtesy of 16th District Court in Livonia. Since it was district court, I wasn't going to serve on a big felony case, but hey, after waiting all these years, I was ready for anything.

Told to report at 8:45 a.m., I arrived promptly at 8:30 ready to go. As I pulled into the lot, I noticed a line outside the courthouse entrance that extended quite a ways down the sidewalk. And it had started to rain.

I took my place in line, and began guessing which of the assembled were defendants, attorneys and fellow jurors. I surmised the young man directly in front of me who casually flicked his still-lit cigarette onto the sidewalk no doubt fell into the defendant category, perhaps on a littering charge.

The line came courtesy of a metal detector at the entrance, which was so sensitive that nearly every person I saw had to be further inspected by a wand-wielding court officer. After a 10-minute wait, my excitement grew as I was checked in, handed a badge and a juror's manual, and told to head to the basement, where the jury waiting room was located.

About two dozen people were in the waiting room. It appeared many walks of life and ages were represented by the group, supporting the notion that defendants are judged by a jury of their peers.

After what seemed like an eternity (I ignored the suggestion to bring reading materials), a court officer appeared and immediately pointed out to the group that he was not responsible for us being there so don't take it out on him. Obviously, most of the people he has had to deal with did not share my enthusiasm for jury duty.

The officer gave us a quick rundown of the day, and then had us watch a lengthy video where the court magistrate reviewed in great detail the judicial process and what our responsibilities - indeed, obligations - were as jurors. The magistrate addressed the selection process and why (don't take it personally) some of us likely would be excused by either the prosecutor or defense attorney. If we actually made it onto a jury, we were given a stern warning about not having any contact with the parties involved in the case, and told we could not discuss the trial with anyone until it was over.

The magistrate then (still via video) had us raise our right hands and take what I guess was the juror's oath. The court officer did not appear to be making sure we all were in fact raising our hands and replying "I do" at the appropriate times.

When the video ended, the court officer explained that serving jury duty is a slow process, and urged us to be patient. We simply needed to stay in the room until our name was called. And then he was gone. I looked around the room, determining which of my fellow jurors I would want (and not want) to serve with, and whether I would be picked to serve as jury foreman.

The room grew quiet as the moments passed, with each juror pretty much keeping to herself or himself. I settled in with a three-year-old outdoors magazine I had plucked from a pile of yellowing periodicals stacked next to the entrance.

I was half through a fascinating article on bow hunting for 1,000-pound moose in northern British Columbia when the officer popped back into the room.

This is it, I thought. I finally get to serve on a jury.

But the officer had something else planned entirely.

"Good news!" he exclaimed through a broad smile. "You are all free to go."

What? Go where? What's he talking about?

Before I could utter a word, the officer explained there would be no trials stemming from the day's cases. "They all settled before going to trial so your obligation for the day is done," he said to growing applause. With that, the officer thanked us for our time and wished us a great rest of the day.

And just like that, it was over. No grilling from attorneys, no instructions from a judge, no time spent in the jury box, no haggling over who would be foreman.

I never even made it out of the basement.

And it wasn't even noon.

My hopes dashed and my spirit crushed, I slowly ascended the stairs back up to the front desk to return my juror button. Someone behind the counter urged me to "have a nice day," not realizing my day - indeed, my week - had just been ruined by overly cooperative defendants and super-efficient prosecutors.

Hopefully, I won't have to wait another 30 years for that next summons to grace my mailbox.

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