

Jury duty: stepping up to the plate

By Rick Maier

From the moment I received the summons in the mail, I racked my brain thinking of ways to get out of jury duty. I'm too busy. I wouldn't be fair. Why me? But the week I was assigned was as good a time as any to be gone from work, and a sense of civic obligation tugged at my soul. Plus, you never know, it could be a worthwhile adventure.

I reported to the jury assembly room in the Bibb County Courthouse that Monday along with about a hundred other dutiful citizens. The place was about as cheerful as the waiting area at a dentist's office. I was lucky to find a friend and we sat together and compared notes on how to get out of there as quickly as possible.

"Jury duty is a lot to ask of someone, but if a member of my family were a victim of a crime, I'd sure want a solid jury," says Assistant District Attorney Graham Thorpe. "I wouldn't want jurors who had nothing better to do or who weren't resourceful enough to get out of serving."

The Bibb County jury duty deal is simple – if you agree to serve, the judges agree to not keep you past Friday. In the rare instances when they sequester juries or hold them longer than a week, they warn everyone ahead of time. Federal court and grand juries have different rules.

"It's not something you enjoy doing, but you sure would appreciate it if someone did a good job for you," said Dianne Brannen, Clerk of the Superior Court, as she opened our Monday morning orientation.

Brannen and her partner Jerry Schwarzenberger run the jury staging process like two schoolteachers – lots of instruction sprinkled with a few jokes and a couple drills thrown in to keep you alert. I was a little put out by being treated like a 5th grader, but then I realized that 5th grade was the highest common denominator of the attention span of the crowd.

I had trouble hearing Dianne's opening comments because some guy behind me was talking on his cell phone. He was managing his construction job remotely from his jury assembly room chair. Stares from many of us failed to derail his conversation, but Dianne shamed the guy into putting the thing away with a story about a judge who fined a juror \$100 when his cell phone went off during a trial.

Only about 40 percent of the 270 people summoned for duty each week show up. Most of the no-shows no longer live in Bibb County or call in to postpone their duty. Those who ignore the summons get a call from the Sheriff's Department. Those present who

were elderly, sick, students, new moms or had a serious scheduling conflict were excused.

They say that if you wear a tie and hold a management job, you will almost certainly be excused. Dianne explained later that while that generally was true in certain types of cases, the same profile might be exactly what the attorneys seek in other cases.

The need for jurors varies greatly during each of the 40 weeks per year that juries are called. The week I was there we were dismissed by 11am Monday and all but 30 of us were sent packing soon after we reported back on Tuesday morning. As it turned out, only one jury of twelve plus two alternates was needed for that week – a tiny portion of the 270 originally summoned. Some weeks as many as five juries are needed.

My first reaction to the \$40 check they gave us for two days service was that the County should keep half of it and build a new assembly room and parking lot for jurors.

Even though I did not see a courtroom this trip, I was proud to have served. Like Brannen said, our very readiness to serve as jurors causes many cases to be settled on the courthouse steps.

So jury duty wasn't bad at all. The real heroes of the system are all the employers that encourage and pay employees to serve, and the self-employed or fully commissioned individuals (like the guy on the cell phone) who risk personal earnings.

If they call me again after my two-year reprieve, I'll gladly serve.

Rick Maier is the CFO at Wesleyan College

Reply to rmaier@wesleyancollege.edu