

# Jury of peers

May 5, 2010

My jury summons arrived not long ago, and I was expecting it.

For some civic reason, I seem to be a member of Dallas County's every-six-month juror program. The last time the county called me up, I went down to the courthouse and begged off. Early February is a busy season on the Baptist calendar, and I told the bailiff my schedule would be a wreck if I had to serve on a jury for a trial that lasted more than a couple of days. He was extremely nice and told me I'd hear from them in three months.

Sure enough I got my summons right on time. And that's why I found myself sitting in the Central Jury Room of the Frank Crowley Courts Building bright an early one morning. By the time I get to be really old, I'll probably show up two days early for big events. I just hate to be late and don't trust traffic.

## **Slice of life**

So, when I walked into the Central Jury Room, only a handful of my fellow citizens had arrived. But by the time a judge showed up to swear us in, the place was packed with what appeared to be a precise cross-section of our county's population. Men and women. Visibly rich and obviously poor. Myriad races and ethnicities, plus every conceivable shape and size. Since practically no one knew anybody else, the prospective jurors didn't say much, but I'm guessing if they had the opportunity to express themselves, they would have demonstrated that both the intelligent and the ignorant both were represented generously.

A jury pool surely must reflect the truest representation of a community. Think about the other places where large groups gather: Practically everybody goes to the grocery store, but each store only pulls from its

neighborhood. Thousands of people attend sporting events, music concerts and plays, but they're people with enough cash to spend with discretion. Churches, mosques and synagogues draw crowds, but we all know how segregated they are.

About the only adults who don't show up for jury duty are undocumented aliens and the very old. The former are officially off the grid, and the latter are exempt from service.

So, if you want to know what your community really looks like, do your civic duty and appear in court the next time your number comes up.

### **Time, wheels, cogs and truth**

This time, my trip to the courthouse reminded me of a few truths.

First, free time is delicious. Since I couldn't count on wireless access, not to mention an electrical outlet, I left my laptop in the trunk of my car. That meant I couldn't work. So I read a book. Ahhhh. What a delight. Reading for pleasure. Reading for hours. Reading with few interruptions. Suddenly, I thought being called up for jury duty isn't so bad, after all.

Second, the wheels of justice really do grind slowly. We had to be there first thing in the morning. By the time the court officers divided everyone into separate pools for all the courts that meet in that massive building, the morning was well-spent. And then, by the time the judge and the lawyers and the plaintiffs and defendants finished talking, bargaining and whatever else they do behind closed doors, my particular jury pool wasn't called into the courtroom until almost noon.

Third, the cogs on the wheel of justice are unpredictable. Once we all found our seats, the judge smiled broadly, told us the people involved in our case had agreed to settle, and told us we were free to go. That's it. We waited all morning, and we spent less than a minute in the courtroom. "You have done

your civic duty, and Dallas County thanks you for your service," the judge said.

Oh, and fourth, one of the great treats of life is receiving an unexpected gift of time. When I awoke that morning, I expected to spend all day—and maybe even several days—at the courthouse. Then I got to put in a half day in the office—a half day I never expected. All the work I accomplished that afternoon was like a bonus. What a terrific surprise.