Jury duty a chance to see impact of rule work

By Lilia G. Judson

Judson

When my notice to report for jury duty arrived, I was very pleased but also excited. I had worked extensively with the Indiana Supreme Court Rules Committee and the Supreme Court itself on the drafting and promulgation of Indiana Jury Rules, which in 2003 instituted significant jury service reform in Indiana. As executive director of the Indiana Supreme Court's Division of State Court Administration, I would get a chance to see the front-line impact of our work on the rule changes that, among other things, were intended to increase jury pool diversity.

But I also had "unfinished business." I had served on a jury several years ago, but after attentively sitting through all of the testimony, my fellow jurors and I never had the chance to deliberate because the judge ordered a directed verdict.

When I arrived at the Marion County public assembly room at 8 a.m. I was pleasantly surprised to see the room was full at such an early hour. I was equally pleased to see the crowd was very diverse. There were a significant number of African-Americans and Hispanics. There were people of all ages, dress, and ethnic backgrounds. It was gratifying to see students and seniors, and I also learned the group included two physicians. And, to my surprise, there was also a sign-language interpreter in the room translating for a deaf citizen who had been called and declined to get an exemption.

The Indiana Supreme Court worked diligently to increase the inclusiveness and diversity of the state's jury pools. In the past, only 60 to 80 percent of eligible Hoosiers were called, but that number is more than 99 percent today as a result of the court's nationally recognized program. I've seen those statistics on reports, but it was very rewarding to see the results in person.

Later, as I sat in a courtroom waiting to see if I would be questioned, I listened to the voir dire examinations. Very few of the prospective jurors had ever been called for jury service before, further showing that we are pulling from a wider pool of citizens.

It was interesting to see how forthcoming jurors were in their answers to questions. When asked about previous convictions, a middle-age man gave the full details of a public-intoxication incident during college. When asked about gun ownership, an older woman volunteered that she had a .357 Magnum and knew how to use it.

In the bigger picture, I got to see how people view our legal system – especially when much of their information comes from courtroom dramas on television. Most people said they would not hold it against a defendant if the defendant did not testify, but the same people responded they would take the stand and tell their stories if they were on trial. It would have been interesting to talk to them about the principles of our judicial system – the presumption of innocence, the state's burden of proof, and the concept of beyond a reasonable doubt.

As the morning went on and the noon-hour arrived, I realized how long we had been sitting there, but that actually gave me more faith in the judicial system. We are making sure people chosen to serve on a jury would be ones we would want if we were on trial.

When the third set of prospective jurors in the courtroom was called to sit in the jury box my number finally came up. The slot being filled was for an alternate, and maybe it's just as well that I was struck.

I will be very happy to serve on a jury, but it would have been frustrating to serve a second time and not be able to deliberate.•

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