

OPINION

Jury duty is an opportunity, not a sentence

By **Richard L. McOmber**
For *The Southside Times*

You have been summoned for jury duty next week. Now that's just great, isn't it? You have a busy week ahead of you at work. If the last day of your service extends into the late evening hours, you will miss your favorite television program. You are not too crazy about giving up several days out of your schedule to listen to a bunch of know it all lawyers arguing over technicalities in a case in which you don't know any of the parties. You have better things to do.

Before you try to figure out whether there is some safe way out of jury duty (which there isn't), let me give you a little to think about. In 1776, when the American colonists determined that it was time for "these united colonies . . . to be free and independent states," one

of the many grievances aired against King George was, "for depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury."

In 225 years of American history since then, millions of American men and women have died in distant places, far from friends and family, to preserve for us the right to air our grievances in front of a group of our peers. It has always seemed to me that for so many to have sacrificed so much to preserve this right, it must be pretty important. The tyrants and despots of history would never allow citizens to air their grievances against each other, or the government, by a jury trial.

Trial by jury in America today is under attack. Examples like the case of the fellow who won money from a jury because he injured himself when he fell through the skylight of a home

that he was attempting to burglarize. Results like this make the news only because they are bizarre and unusual. The fact of the matter is that most juries render fair and sensible verdicts.

In my experience as a lawyer, I have found that people called to serve as jurors take the job very seriously. They try hard to understand the evidence and the instructions given to them by the judge. Most important, they bend over backwards to try to be fair. When lawyers are given the opportunity to speak to jurors after a trial (a common practice in most state courts), we find that almost always they report the same thoughts. They tell us that when they realized they were selected, their first thought was, "Why me?" By the time their service is concluded, they tell us that they are glad – and proud – to have served.

They tell us that although they think service on one jury in a lifetime is enough, they are glad to have been through the experience and report that they have a newfound respect for the legal system after having been a part of that system for a few days.

If that summons for jury duty arrives, look forward to it as an opportunity to render the ultimate civic service. If you are selected to hear a case, there is no need to feel disappointment. When jurors take lunch breaks in the middle of a trial, they are frequently given badges to wear to identify themselves as jurors. Wear that badge with pride. You have earned the right to do so.

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