



JURY DUTY TIPS

Courtroom advice

By Paul Pakusch

Having been through the whole jury system, the first thing I can say is, "relax!" In my case, fear of the unknown hurt me more than the actual experience.

Here's what you can expect and how you can deal with it:

1) Reporting for jury selection: You'll be in a large room that has a loud PA system. You can get there early to guarantee getting a seat near the main desk. That's where they do the announcements from. Sitting near the main desk will enable you to see the person speaking.

The main desk is also where you can get a neck loop if you want one. I borrowed one for the first day but found that my hearing aids worked better than the neck loop did for me. Some of the court rooms themselves also have an infrared system, but there's no guarantee you'd get one of those courtrooms.

The day of jury selection involves a lot of sitting around. Bring a book or something to do. The announcements and instructions are good. You can let the speaker know you're hard of hearing to make sure you don't miss anything important.

What they will do is randomly divide the jurors up by the number of cases starting that day. All you have to do is listen for the name of the judge that you're assigned to.

When it's time to go to the courtroom, they will call everyone assigned to that particular judge. They will also tell you the courtroom number in case you get separated from the deputy leading you to the court room.

2) When you get to the courtroom, try to get a seat as close to the judge's bench as possible. At this point, you can tell the deputy or the court reporter that you're hard of hearing.

Next they will begin drawing names out of a box. Those people will sit in the jury box for the first round of questioning. (This is where I "won" the lottery!) There will be lawyers there asking a bunch of questions as they try to decide who to pick. If you get picked for the jury box, here's where you can try to get excused if you really don't want to do it. In my case, I was interested enough to want to see if I would get picked for the case.

Fortunately, the lawyers had big enough mouths that I could hear them fine. During questioning, I told them I had trouble hearing across distances. They said they would move me closest to the witness stand and let the judge know. If you find you're having trouble hearing during jury selection and don't want to be picked, just tell the lawyers you can't hear and don't want to burden the case. I'm sure they'll let you off.

3) If you make it through jury selection and get picked for the case, you can expect to get the best seat in the house. I sat about six feet away from the witness stand. The judge and the lawyers both asked the witnesses to speak up. You can probably work out a signal to give the judge if a witness is too soft-spoken. Or let the deputy know. He or she will be sitting near you for most of the trial.

Out of approximately ten witnesses in my case, I only had trouble hearing one of them. But I was able to get the gist of what he was saying.

Regardless of the witnesses, what I most wanted to hear was the lawyer's summations. It's during that time that they are able to summarize everything the witnesses said while they try to persuade you to vote in their favor. As long as you can hear the lawyers, you should be able to make an intelligent decision.

Although you can't talk about the case while it's going on, you can ask the other jurors during deliberations about anything that was said. You can look at any piece of evidence that was brought into the case, and you can have any piece of testimony read back to you.

Finally, if all else fails and you sat there through the whole case in misery at not knowing what's being said, you can ask to be excused as one of the alternate jurors. They don't specifically say who the alternate jurors are until the very end. This gives the judge the option of excusing any juror if he or she feels the need to.

4) In deliberations, you'll be stuck in a small room. Just ask your fellow jurors to speak up. Let someone else be the foreman!

Good luck and relax. I enjoyed the experience and hope to do it again some day.