

Opinion: Being on a jury is a duty we should embrace

By Kathryn Reed

If I were accused of a crime, I would want to be tried by a jury of my peers. I would want people to carefully consider the evidence presented and decide if there were a reasonable doubt that would preclude them from rendering a guilty verdict.

While at times our system seems to be guilty until proven innocent, the Founding Fathers had it correct in their premise that everyone is innocent until proven guilty.



This is not a concept the world embraces. And it's a concept we often take for granted. It's also a process that involves all of us of voting age. It's a responsibility we should not shirk.

For the second time in my life (the other was college) I actually had to go to the courthouse for jury duty. On Monday night when I called the number to see if I needed to show up, I was filled with self-pity when the recording told me to be there at 8:30am.

Until I became self-employed, I had always wanted to serve on a jury. I've always had a fascination with the law and criminal justice system. The self-employed thing was going to make it difficult to serve on what was likely to be an eight-day trial.

I had to be reminded why it was an honor to be called.

"Civic duty" is what my mom called it when I was emailing her

from court whining about being stuck inside on a beautiful Tuesday in Tahoe. At least from my office I have a window.

Judge Suzanne Kingsbury told the assembled group our willingness to serve as jurors is one thing that makes this country so great.

These two smart women made me reconsider my reluctance to spend the better part of the day at the El Dorado County courthouse in South Lake Tahoe.

Thirty-seven names were called to fill the first two rows. A few dozen of us remained in the back rows. We were all sworn to tell the truth.

During a break in the jury selection process I looked at the accused sitting alone at the table and wondered what he must be thinking as he looked at this diverse group that could have a profound affect on his life.

(Both sides face the "audience" during this process instead of the judge, as is the case when the trial is under way.)

He was certainly dressed better than everyone in the room except for his attorney who also had a tie on. His dress shirt was nicely pressed.

(Some prospective jurors had to be told to take their hats off, many were in T-shirts, most had nothing on that resembled being professionally dressed.)

Undue financial hardships, a pre-paid vacation and being a sole caregiver were likely reasons to be excused.

Two men with medical issues were told to get a written excuse from their doctor. A woman with young children was told to see if her husband could get time off from work to care for them. Firefighters were told if they were called to a wildland fire, the judge would adjust the schedule.

Then the charges were read. The defendant was accused of committing sexual penetration with a foreign object, child molestation and sexual battery.

Two women approached the bench and were subsequently dismissed. They looked shaken.

Kingsbury reminded the group that she was not asking them to put aside their beliefs, but to have an open mind.

We all would want that. We all owe that to the accused.

More questions for the first two rows. As answers were given the attorneys took notes.

At 10:50am we are dismissed for lunch; told to return at 1:30pm.

The case had been settled in that time. We were free to go.

Kingsbury couldn't tell me the settlement agreement at that time, but said to check the transcripts today if I really wanted to know.

What I know is that it felt good to be part of the process. Jury duty never arrives at a good time. Nor is serving likely to be a good time. But sometimes it's about doing my little part to make the system work. I would want that if I were the accused.