Your Civic Duty

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For a lot of people, putting their life on hold for a couple of days was a hassle. But jury duty was something that I was genuinely excited for. The timing was less than ideal with midterms just around the corner, but the way I saw it, it was a chance that I might not have for a long time and that’s if I’m lucky. The letter I received informed me that I would have to report to the Milwaukee county courthouse for two days. The fine print that’s easy to overlook is the potential for your stay to be extended. The Law and Order: SVU fan in me was hoping for me to get assigned some mega-blockbuster case that would be so compelling and dramatic that Dick Wolf wouldn’t be able to pass up basing an episode around it.

The first day had all potential jurors report to a small holding room lined with hundreds of seats. Each of the auditorium style chairs looked as though they were made using leftover scraps from the equally dull carpeting. It was the off-white wallpaper that really tied the whole “nothing in this room has been changed in decades” vibe together, though, giving this hallowed hall enough dullness without overtly crushing the souls of those seated within. Despite arriving at least fifteen minutes ahead of time, I found the room was well over half full by this point, forcing me to take the nearest open seat I could find. After sinking in to the surprisingly comfy seat and rubbing any remaining tiredness from my eyes, it was clear I had won the seating lottery. I had the pleasure of being awkwardly positioned behind one of a handful of 4 ft. x 4 ft. concrete pillars, effectively blocking my view of the podium up front as well any and all of TVs provided for our viewing pleasure. I was in some weird cross between an old DMV and a prison, stuck in there with every type of human being imaginable.

A random judge (who I couldn’t see) delivered a canned, rehearsed pep talk to the small crowd of 200 or so people, something he obviously had some experience doing. His passion for the legal process was clear and convincing enough to make you want to believe what you were doing really was going to make a difference. That we had all been summoned here to serve as a fair and balanced jury of peers, a service to our community like no other. But I didn’t really care about any of that and was only interested in getting a front row seat to see lawyers battle it out, throwing fancy legal terms back and forth. After he had done his best to inspire us, jurors started getting called to head up to potential trials. Slowly but surely, people were leaving the holding room in a steady trickle of uninterested and indifferent souls, each with a certain disdain for the legal process which required their attendance. And with each name called that wasn’t mine I slowly grew more anxious over something that I had been dreaming of since the day I turned 18. Just when I could no longer bear the wait, the crackling loud-speaker spoke to me: “Juror number 8- Samuel Draver.”

I put on my best poker face as I lined up at my spot, bursting at the seams with an amount of giddiness usually reserved for 12 year old girls waiting to get into a Justin Bieber concert. My years of arduous training in front of the TV had prepared me for this point. I could care less about having an opportunity to perform my “civic duty”, “protect justice” or “actively take part in our judicial system”; I just wanted a glimpse at what I would hopefully have the chance to do for a living. This anticipation erupted into pure bliss as I entered the confined yet impressive courtroom, a proverbial shrine in honor of truth, justice and wood. I could feel the prosecution and defense eyeing up myself as well as the others, looking for any sort of red flag that might keep us from remaining impartial. My heart sank a little when the judge informed us that the
defendant was being charged with driving under the influence. Despite it being only a drunken driving case, I figured it was better than nothing, not wanting to risk leaving jury duty empty handed. One by one we were asked to give our name, marital status, number of children (if any), occupation, and if we had the privilege of serving on a jury before (Sam Draver, single, no kids, student, no prior experience). As my turn grew closer, a lump grew in my throat while I thought out everything I was going to say, making sure not to mention anything that might keep me from being selected.

However, it was not meant to be. After a brief break for lunch, I returned to the ligneous courtroom only to find out I didn’t make the final cut. I had been betrayed by the thing I loved most. Fighting the urge to stage a tirade of biblical proportions, I revisited the holding room for a brief stay before being called back to another trial. This time, I was one of nearly fifty jurors called for what appeared to be a big case. Upon entering the court room it quickly became clear that this wasn’t your average case. As soon as the judge began speaking to us, two pairs of translators began signing her words to the defendant who happened to be hearing impaired, with two translators behind the defendant responsible for corresponding everything being said to two deaf translators located in front of the defendant who then signed directly to the defendant. From this point on everything would take twice as long, as everything that was said, no matter how insignificant or trivial, had to effectively be said three times. Not to mention the time it took to translate what said into sign language, a process that was anything but quick. One of the first questions that was posed to the jury by the prosecuting attorney was if anybody watched shows such as Law and Order and CSI. Despite her warnings that the trial to follow will be anything but your average police procedural, I was all but convinced that that wouldn’t be the case.

After both attorneys spent the entire afternoon searching for any indicators of impartiality, they had finally selected their jury of twelve, a group that would include none other than yours truly. The next morning we got down to business right away, first hearing the specific charges being brought against the defendant, Daniel—2nd degree sexual assault/use of force and 2nd degree sexual assault of a mentally ill victim. As we would learn over the course of the trial, Daniel met Laura through his girlfriend, Susan, after the two girls reignited an old friendship over Facebook. The prosecution implored us members of the jury to sympathize with Laura, who had the only real friendship she had ever had ruined by the selfish acts of the defendant. The victim’s mother would be the first to testify, providing an account of her daughter, Laura, as essentially an eight year old trapped inside the body of a twenty-one year old, both mentally and cognitively, something that three different doctors would testify to later in the trial.

Laura, who was also partially deaf, was next to testify, a process which would draw out through the rest of the day and spill into the next. Seeing her testimony made it clear that she lacked the capacity to not only understand the severity of what had occurred, but the repercussions that could follow. Not only was it disheartening to hear about such a vulnerable individual being taken advantage of, but that any warning signs were all but ignored by her parents and community, all of whom could have stopped such things from happening. At this point though, there was too little testimony to get a clear picture of the events that had transpired and who was at fault, saving me from losing any sleep over the situation. Four long days of testimony would follow before the state would finally rest, meaning it was time to hear the other side of the story. Susan, who had originally met Laura at a school for the deaf, was the defenses first witness, followed by the defendant himself, who was only sorry that he cheated on his
girlfriend, and not for the trust that he had violated. Their testimonies would erase any doubt I had harbored up until that point regarding Daniel’s innocence.

Up until this point, my experience in jury duty had its fair share of ups and downs, but now was when the real fun would begin. In my mind, the case was open and shut as the evidence stacked against the defendant by the prosecution was enough to erase any amount of reasonable that doubt I might have. After hearing each side’s closing argument (two words that once again brought out the giddy 12 year old girl in me), the most trying part of an already slow trial would begin. While I was sure of Daniel’s guilt on both counts (something that would eventually be reaffirmed by all 12 of us), it quickly appeared as though I would be in the minority in that regard once we began deliberations. I kept thinking to myself how shockingly uncommon common sense is.

But that didn’t matter. What mattered is that we twelve very different individuals had to come together and agree on whether or not this man was guilty of the charges being levied against him. Because at that particular moment, we had been entrusted with the crucial job of ensuring that justice was carried out rightly and doing so would require us to act as a community of peers. The facts had been laid out to us by both sides, and now it wasn’t just our job but our constitutional and ethical duty to find and discern the bits of truth from any fabrication. In the end, those two grueling weeks of jury duty proved to me that despite any ideological or philosophical differences people may have with one another, in order for them to accomplish any amount good, it is crucial for them to work together towards this shared goal of good, whatever that may be. In a way, we could all use some jury duty now more than ever.