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## **As I was Saying:** *Publisher Steve Penna (Published February 2013)*

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As we entered into our deadline week for this month's issue, I was reminded that I had been summoned to appear for jury duty. Can you imagine a more dreadful reminder in the world? My first feeling — after a minute of “oh noooooooooo!” — was that I did not have time for this. Why me? Well, it was because I had moved it off twice and now could not do so anymore without asking to be excused, for which I have no valid reason. So go I must.

I had to report to 400 County Center in the downtown area at 8:30 a.m., which is when I usually get out of bed. I am a night owl; I do most of my writing and computer work at night and usually hit the sack around 2 a.m. The night before had been no different and was actually even worse. I could not get to sleep because the very next day I was to have my annual cardio echo stress test, and of course I always work myself into a tizzy and, guess what, I stress over it. Major stress. Now I was tired on top of it all and got a total of four hours of sleep.

As requested, I arrived at the location 15 minutes before official starting time and was surprised to find parking plentiful and no line entering the County Center building. After emptying my pockets, taking off my belt and removing my cell phone, I and my property were scanned and approved to enter. Now down to the basement for my exciting day.

I have to say I have always felt it is each citizen's obligation to serve when asked, and I have often fantasized about serving on a major trial and then writing a book about it afterward. So my commitment is there, but my experiences when asked to report before have not been positive, so that is why I think I am so bummed about having to report. That, and I don't like sitting in a room full of random people I don't know while hearing them cough, sneeze and whatever else one does to be annoying.

As I found my way downstairs I was greeted by a friendly, professional and knowledgeable man named **Larry**. He welcomed me and advised me that if I did not have something to write with, I should just grab a pencil out of the basket and find a seat. Which he let everyone know as they arrived. For some reason, he also made me feel at ease, and I could feel that calmness when I entered the already packed room. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

Around 8:30, Larry advised us we would be starting in 10 minutes. That we did. He officially welcomed us and let us know that there was Wi-Fi Internet service and computers available for us to use. Also water and, thank goodness, hand sanitizer were provided. I was liking Larry more and more. As our jury orientation began, he let us know that the reasons that might disqualify us from service included: being under 18 years of age, not being a citizen of the United States, not being a resident of San Mateo County, being a peace officer and having been convicted of a felony. Guess I am staying.

Looking around the room, I saw a diverse group of prospective jurors made up of what seemed to be an equal amount of men and women and a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. We were definitely a reflection of our county's population. Now I don't want to be a traitor to my constituents, but most if not all were dressed very casually, and let's just say they should have all been glad there were no “fashion police” in the building. Not to mention that some looked as though they had not washed or combed their hair. I wore khaki pants and a dress shirt but no tie, and I felt overdressed.

Regardless we were all there to serve, and Larry let us know that being called might be viewed as an inconvenience (no argument from me) but “without us the justice system would come to a screeching halt.” That was important for all of us to hear and made me feel appreciated and also reminded me of why I was there.

We were also informed that we could not read any newspapers as they might include crime or trial information that pertains to cases we might be called to serve on. Sounds good to me because The Spectrum does not report on those types of items and can be read as other magazines can.

Some other tidbits from Larry: 1) The County has a one-day-one-trial process, which means that one cannot be called again for 12 months after reporting and getting a proof-of-service certificate.

2) We are compensated \$15 per day if chosen for a trial or have to serve more than one day. There is also a per-mile compensation, but I forgot to write down what it was because I was so thrilled at being paid to do my civic duty if chosen.

3) There are cases in which individuals can qualify to not serve under the label “hardship.” That can mean different things to different prospective jurors. It takes time, patience and good ol’ common sense to serve and, while doing so, it would not be fair “to be thinking of those hardships while serving and not concentrating on the case you might be serving on.” I never actually thought about it in that way, and it is an absolutely justifiable statement.

We were then shown a short and informative video about the jury system. The only real complaint about that was we all had to view it on a very small, very old-fashioned television. A new flat-screen would have been much better and I am sure appreciated by all. Although being tired, I did not even slightly fall asleep.

Then we were informed that there were two possible cases that might go to trial and that one was in fact ready to interview 90 of us in Judge **Mark Forcum**’s courtroom on the second floor. There were a total of 150 of us. As the names were chosen randomly, I was hoping my name would be called because Larry says California’s justice system cannot work “without me.”

As I waited and heard name after name, mine was not called. We were then informed that a “very special” guest would be joining us in a few minutes to speak to us. The anticipation started and I was game for just about anything at this point. Then presiding Judge **Robert D. Foiles** entered the room. He thanked us for our service and informed us that there would be no other trials starting today and that our jury service is now concluded. We were free to go. He and Larry passed out the proof-of-service certificates and thanked each person for coming and for our service. Nice touch to end the day!

As I was leaving at 10:30 a.m., I could not help but feel that I had just had a fantastic experience and truly felt great about answering the call to serve. I did not even rush out of the room. I also thought that it is the professionalism of government workers like Larry and Foiles that makes all the difference. I cannot say that has always been my experience, and many could learn by these fine examples of our system at its best. They represent our county and community very well. I am appreciative of how I was treated, educated and reminded that we are all important to the judicial system and need to be more appreciative of it.

I hope that the next time you are asked to serve, you will do so with the enthusiasm I felt for the system as I left the building. Sometimes it may fail to serve us, but it is still the best system in the world!

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Another reason to feel proud of our community!

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