

THE WHOLE TRUTH AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

By Marie Coady

The road sign at the crossroads closest to my home in Woburn, Massachusetts reads: Lowell-15 miles. That's fifteen miles as the crow flies straight up Route 3, through every town and hitting every traffic light. But it might as well have been a million miles away as far as I was concerned that day back in early September of 1995. I'd been called to jury duty at Lowell District Court and would have to trek through early morning commuter traffic to do my patriotic duty at a courthouse whose location remained a mystery even after my husband and I made a dry run there.

Being called for jury duty wasn't a new experience. My odyssey with the jury system began in 1985. That was the year the jury system decided that the Coady family were the only jurors in all of Massachusetts' Middlesex County who could be counted on to show up and serve. In essence, the system must have decided we could carry the burden for the whole population.

That year my husband, Bill, Fr. Dan and my oldest son, Mark, were called for jury duty. Now Bill and Fr. Dan did their patriotic duty, but Mark presented a small problem. As a senior in high school, he would be otherwise occupied the day he was scheduled to go, taking final exams. In fact, he wasn't even eighteen yet.

As luck would have it, that was just the beginning. Bill and Fr. Dan were called twice more, and Bill had to be excused once again shortly after he'd served on a jury.

The next targets for the jury system were my daughter and myself. She was called twice in a row, and I hit the jackpot by being called every year between and including 1990 and 1993, serving on a jury in 1992, and twice in 1994.

It was at this point I wrote the courts to inquire regarding their obsession with the Coady Family. What was it, I asked, that compelled them to continue to call members of our household over and over again?

I have to assume the courts do not have a sense of humor, as shortly after the stamp was dry on that letter, I received another call to jury duty. This time I wasn't even given the option of changing my venue to the more familiar Middlesex Court where I was fast becoming a fixture. Maybe they thought I needed a change of scenery.

Now, here I was, fresh from watching eight months of the O. J. trial, heading off to Lowell to do my patriotic duty---again. I found the jury room with great difficulty after I accidentally discovered an obscure door with a piece of faded, yellow paper taped to it that read: Jury Entrance. I made several wrong turns down ancient corridors till I came to an empty room with a large, rectangular table in the center and some worn out chairs lining the wall.

I sat along the wall reading my morning newspaper. Soon others joined me, sitting stoically until the bailiff arrived and introduced himself. He handed out jury questionnaires. I filled mine in, explaining I'd already served on a jury in Middlesex Court, had been called six times in five years and was not a happy camper.

One frazzled woman asked where she could get coffee. The bailiff apologized and said in essence, nowhere. Another woman asked the bailiff if the court was going to validate their parking tickets. She explained she was unemployed and the fifteen-dollar fee for parking was a burden for her.

The bailiff looked sympathetic, but said there was no provision for that. The woman was visibly upset. She asked why she hadn't been allowed to park in the small lot that lay in front of that obscure jury entrance.

The bailiff then told of a recent trial where the juror and the defendant, who had been found guilty of assault, were leaving at the same time. Without warning, the defendant decided to prove the juror right by assaulting her. According to the bailiff, he had her spread eagle across her car before the deputies were able to get him under control. A loud groan was heard from the perspective jurors.

When lunchtime arrived, we were given specific instructions as to where to have lunch. We'd have to walk to a small deli, and the bailiff was careful to explain that this was a dangerous area, and we should not stray off course. He added that the food there was quite good.

I declined lunch. Not only because of the potential danger, but also because I realized it would cost fifteen dollars for the garage. That's all the money I had with me. I made do with a cup of water and the banana I'd stuffed in my bag in case of emergency.

Since 1995, they've decided to lay off of me but have discovered my twin sons, Sean and Philip. Philip took a day off recently from his new job to serve. But Sean had a problem last summer trying to convince the jury system that since he was leaving for China with the Peace Corps he may have a slight problem commuting from Yibin, Sichuan to Cambridge. They settled it by moving his date to a few days before he left.

Now I read in the papers that new jury scofflaws have been instituted to fine jury shirkers \$2,000. I'll vote for that. But how about an award for the most faithful juror who has served above and beyond the call. A little positive reinforcement can go a long way.

Please, please. No applause. I graciously accept this award on the behalf....

Whoops, just practicing

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