

Special bond formed on grand jury duty

It all began with the discovery of a particular envelope in the mail – from the Federal District Court.

No doubt, receiving this notice is intimidating. It demands that I report to the imposing glass courthouse on Niagara Square at a specified date and time. If selected, this appointment to grand jury duty would last 18 months. Yes, that's a year and a half.

"Disruptive" is the word that goes through my mind. Exciting possibilities as well, but, really, 18 months?

I have been retired for some years and live freestyle, without many regular obligations. This job would be disruptive and structured.

Dutifully, I made my appearance at the courthouse on reporting day. I overheard many quiet,

As a group, we learned more about the responsibility that lay ahead for those who were finally selected to serve.

some not-so-quiet, protestations from others who had received the same summons. As a group, we learned more about the responsibility that lay ahead for those who were finally selected to serve.

Once the judge excused a few folks with compelling reasons why they could not participate, his clerk began to draw names from a hopper. Yes, a lottery hopper. One by one, names were drawn from the tumbling cage until our complement of 23 grand jurors, and five alternates, was full.

I am pretty sure that not everyone selected felt like they had "won," but I sort of did. And so began an 18-month-long journey with 22 strangers. I, and some others, approached the assignment with curiosity and a sense of adventure; some others, with trepidation.

Our group was diverse. We became co-workers, we became



Serving on a grand jury gave Deborah Abgott, of Clarence, new insights into the legal system.

friends. We got on-the-job training as to how our judicial system works, and what part we were to play. The grand jury is a vital piece of the criminal justice system. Our collective job is to investigate possible wrongdoing.

We are presented witnesses and evidence over many days, weeks or even months of court meetings. We are hearing evidence in multiple cases simultaneously.

Once the attorneys feel confident they have made their case, they present the indictment for us to consider. We then discuss and determine if there is probable cause to believe that a person committed a specific offense. If a majority believes there is probable cause, then the person can be indicted and arrested.

Our diverse group became cohesive – a true team with a mission. I found the experience enriching and educational.

In the course of our 18-month service, we learned far more than any of us understood beforehand about how the judicial system works. We learned much about our communities, urban and rural. I came away with "new eyes" with which to see more deeply into the communities around me, including my own.

Our assignment is now done. The specific work we did will forever remain secret. I am sure that none of us are unhappy about not having to plan our weeks based on the court schedule. I suspect, however, that I am not the only member of our group who misses the camaraderie we developed.

My advice to others is: Don't shy away when you get a jury duty notice. Participation in our democracy is each citizen's responsibility, and, you just might find that you enjoy the opportunity.