

# Inside The Ryan Jury Room

**Cooped up for weeks, strangers became a team**

April 19, 2006 | By Susan Kuczka, Tom Rybarczyk and Ted Gregory, Tribune staff reporters. Tribune staff reporter Rudolph Bush contributed to this report, which was written by staff reporter Bob Selter.



Like a movie set at the end of shooting, Room 2170 of the Dirksen U.S. Courthouse was quiet and empty Tuesday. An extraordinary legal drama had just concluded there, and the cleaning crew had yet to sweep away remnants from the jury deliberations that led to the convictions of former Gov. George Ryan and lobbyist Lawrence Warner on corruption charges.

A deck of cards sat on the large, oval conference table surrounded by 12 black leather chairs. Empty cardboard cartons of coffee supplied by the court rested beside a trash can. A dish of candy sat on a side table. A dry, erasable-marker board, wiped clean, and an easel faced the head of the table.

Equipped with bathrooms, a refrigerator, a microwave, a water fountain and a picture-postcard view of Lake Michigan, Room 2170 just outside U.S. District Judge Rebecca Pallmeyer's courtroom was where jurors deliberated Ryan's fate over 19 days in two phases.

They had first walked into the courthouse in September, strangers with diverse backgrounds and little in common. One was an antiques buff with a 1951 Buick and a collection of 25,000 vinyl records, a woman who never read newspapers or watched TV. Another was an artist who admired Clint Eastwood and didn't own a computer. Still another was a grocery manager who considered Elvis among his heroes.

Cooped up suddenly in close quarters, the group developed likes, dislikes, cliques, resentments and routines over the months of trial and weeks of deliberations. Several earned nicknames: the Californian, the church lady, the Home Depot man, the Cubs fan.

The atmosphere was hardly something out of the movie "12 Angry Men." It was more like one angry woman (more on that later) and a bunch of other jurors who said they worked pretty well, despite occasional lapses into name-calling, in a window-filled room that got stiflingly hot on sunny days.

A group of fitness buffs raced each other up 21 flights of stairs, some doing the climb at least three times a day. Jurors chowed down on burritos from Chipotle and sandwiches from the courthouse cafeteria. Some looked forward to Wednesdays, when the cafeteria featured sizzling salad; others vowed to steer clear of the brand of muffins that were dropped off gratis for them every day.

### A methodical approach

By design, there aren't any professional jurors in the U.S. justice system, but the consensus among most of the Ryan jurors is that they went about their difficult task in a methodical and disciplined way that speaks volumes about the way the jury system is supposed to work.

Several jurors, including 22-year-old James Cwick of Glen Ellyn, said they concluded that Ryan and Warner were guilty on at least some of the 22 counts before deliberations began. Even so, they said deliberations dragged on so long in large measure because most in the room were determined to weigh the arguments of both sides carefully.

Denise Peterson, 44, a substitute teacher from Hawthorn Woods in Lake County, said she took copious notes during the trial and filled both sides of pages in four 90-page books. The notes were categorized by day and by witness, and she referred to them often during deliberations.

Postal worker Karen James of Oak Lawn was even more organized. The 43-year-old filled 18 notebooks with trial notes and annotated them with sketches she drew to keep track of witnesses, lawyers and other key players. Among the pictures: a very disgruntled-looking Ryan. The jurors also pieced together a timeline of major events in the case to help them keep track.

The social dynamic in the room developed a clear leader and clear goat. The goat was Evelyn Ezell, a Southwest Side postal worker who repeatedly butted heads with others on the panel. Ezell said many jurors seemed set on railroading Ryan. Others said she was repeatedly argumentative and tried to dominate deliberations. Ezell, along with another juror, was replaced on the panel in mid-deliberations after the Tribune revealed the two had withheld information about past legal problems on the jury forms they filled out before trial.

### A natural leader

The leader was Sonja Chambers, 38, of Bolingbrook, easily elected forewoman the first day of deliberations. "Sonja was very good about keeping us on track," recalled Peterson. "She'd go around the room and ask people, 'Do you understand?' 'Are you happy with this?' and 'What do you have to contribute?'"

Peterson said Chambers repeatedly asked other jurors to stand up for the prosecution and defense arguments, turning the deliberations at times into a re-creation of the trial. "I think we'd play devil's advocate maybe 25 times a day," Peterson recalled. The jurors occasionally took

informal voice votes on some counts as they deliberated, but no formal tally was taken on any count until Monday, shortly before the verdict was announced.

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Jurors also credited Chambers with keeping their work space from becoming a pigsty. As long as deliberations continued, janitors were forbidden by court rules from entering the room and cleaning up. The room became littered with crumpled paper, old coffee cups, water bottles and untouched food. At the end of each day, Chambers put her fellow jurors to work on a cleanup patrol.

Insulated from saturation news coverage of the trial, the jurors drew very different conclusions from the media about what was and wasn't important in the case. The media crowned several pivotal witnesses, including celebrities who testified for Ryan and former Ryan Chief of Staff Scott Fawell, convicted in a related corruption case and testifying for the prosecution.

But several jurors said they found Ryan's character witnesses irrelevant. What they found especially compelling was testimony from lower-level officials in Ryan's former secretary of state's office who complained of pressure from Ryan operatives to steer lucrative state leases to Ryan cronies and bury internal corruption investigations.

Jurors said there was no slam dunk charge they collectively seized on as a clear-cut case of guilt. The clinchers for many, however, were charges that Ryan filed false tax returns, lied to FBI agents and engaged in an elaborate scheme to pretend he was paying for annual Jamaican vacations. The tab was actually picked up by a Ryan crony to whom Ryan steered state business.

"Each box, each piece of evidence was a brick," said Cwick, a supervisor for United Parcel Service. "And if you put all the evidence together, it was a house."

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The trial by the numbers

6 Days to pick a jury

11 Days to reach a verdict

76 Total days of trial

117 Number of witnesses to testify

\$6,703 Amount of cash withdrawn by Ryan from bank over a decade

\$144,000 Amount of cash withdrawn by Warner in 1997 alone

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