

Small details painted picture of corruption

April 18, 2006 | By James Janega and Tom Rybarczyk, Tribune staff reporters. Tribune staff reporters Bob Sexter, Mary Fergus, Tonya Maxwell and David Heinzmann contributed to this report.



In the evidence and transcripts amassed during more than six months of trial, there was no smoking gun, said jurors who decided George Ryan's fate.

Their decision to convict Ryan and his co-defendant, Lawrence Warner, on all counts turned not on star witnesses such as former Chief of Staff Scott Fawell, former presidential candidate Phil Gramm or death-penalty foe Sister Helen Prejean, but on rank-and-file secretary of state's office employees and Ryan's own financial records.

Among the issues that troubled jurors: the explanations offered for Ryan's annual trip to Jamaica, the memo about disbanding the inspector general's office to scuttle investigations, and how he made it through a year with only \$77 in cash.

Jurors described a grueling, sometimes contentious deliberation around a table filled with water bottles, fashion magazines and muffins. They spent weeks separating evidence from opinion and their memories of every charge in the 22-count indictment against the former governor and Warner.

When they weren't deliberating, they put together a 4-foot-tall, three-dimensional puzzle of Sears Tower. They climbed stairs to relieve stress. They drew pictures and listened to music on their iPods.

The jury of six women and six men found Ryan, 72, guilty on 18 counts of racketeering, mail fraud, false statements and tax violations. Warner, 67, a lobbyist and close friend of Ryan, was convicted on 12 counts of racketeering, mail fraud, extortion, money laundering and evading cash-reporting requirements.

Ex-juror disagrees

But one of the jurors who was dismissed during deliberations last month called the verdicts "a miscarriage of justice" and said Ryan would not have been convicted of all counts had she remained on the jury.

Evelyn Ezell said she did not believe Ryan or Warner was guilty of making false statements to investigators and acknowledged that "things got pretty heated" during early deliberations.

She said she was the lone supporter of some of Ryan's defense, so she was not surprised by the verdict.

Two jurors, postal workers Karen James and Bernice Gomilla, described Ezell as a disruptive force who clashed frequently with others on the panel. "She was looking for a fight all the time," said James, who lives in Oak Lawn.

Gomilla said jurors repeatedly stalked out of the room after butting heads with Ezell, who earned the nickname "Church Lady" from others on the panel. Things got so bogged down that jurors never got past discussion of the complex jury instructions until Ezell was dismissed eight days into deliberations, James said.

With Ezell's departure, things went more smoothly, James said. She said the overhauled jury re-created a courtroom setting as they debated, with some arguing evidence for the prosecution and others representing the defense case. James said she was among those who spoke up for Ryan and Warner.

But she said the defense's attempt to paint Ryan as a compassionate leader failed in her mind. "None of us liked the character witnesses the defense put up. We all thought they were meaningless."

Juror Kevin Rein, a carpenter from Glen Ellyn, said he went into deliberations "with a feeling something was probably not on the up-and-up--and after 5 1/2 months you have an idea. Our deliberations just solidified them.... It was pretty good evidence the government put together."

Another juror said he felt he'd been given a damning look at how state government worked for insiders during the Ryan administration.

"I feel a little wiser now," said juror James Cwick, of Glen Ellyn. "The way I see things, I think I saw an up-close view of real life, how government works, how politics works."

The deliberation was marked both by the complexity of the charges and by the removal of Ezell and another juror eight days into deliberations, when Chicago Tribune reporters found they gave false answers on their jury questionnaires.

U.S. District Judge Rebecca Pallmeyer rejected defense calls for a mistrial, seated two alternates on March 29 and ordered the deliberations to start over. Monday was the 11th day of deliberation for the reconstituted jury.

The alternate jurors said they were handed the reins as soon as they returned to the jury so the original jurors "would not try to sway us, or give us an opinion," said Jill DiMartino, one of the alternates. "We went over each count and went over everything step by step. There was so much evidence to look at."

The 10 original jurors who remained on the panel were supposed to have been kept in the dark about the problems that led to DiMartino and Charles Svymbersky's late addition to the panel. But Gomilla said the jury heard rumors that the two evictees had been dropped because they had falsified information on their jury forms.

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There was never a holdout juror, forewoman Sonja Chambers told a roomful of reporters Monday in the Dirksen U.S. Courthouse. The jury was close to a final judgment in the case Thursday, Svymbersky said, but the ultimate details were agreed early Monday morning.

"This is a long process," said juror Denise Peterson. "Everybody had something that was taken from us during this time, so it was very stressful."

Reams of details

Though elements of drama played in and around the Ryan courtroom, the jury's decision came down to reams of details that weighed against the former governor.

"It was evidence," said Rein. "It wasn't a smoking gun."

Early on, the investigation was tied to a 1994 Milwaukee-area crash in which six children of Rev. Duane "Scott" Willis and his wife, Janet, burned to death. The accident was caused when a part fell off a truck driven by a man who had paid a bribe in Illinois for his license. The image of the Willis family's charred van defined the scandal.

Ryan was also known for a dramatic change of heart as governor, when he dropped his support for the death penalty and became a critic of capital punishment.

The Willis van and the death penalty were "two elephants in the room," said Rein, who added they weren't discussed in deliberations.

Instead, jurors wondered why from 1993 until 2002, Ryan and his wife spent weeks each winter at the Jamaican villa of currency-exchange magnate Harry Klein. Ryan paid him \$1,000 a week by check. Klein refunded Ryan the exact amount in cash.

"If it was one year, yeah," DiMartino explained Monday night outside her Itasca town home. "Two years? Three years? Four years? It just went on for too many years."

Jurors spent a long time discussing the propriety of Warner's business relationships with the secretary of state's office. And they looked closely at how Ryan declared income in his tax returns.

"There were a lot of things with tax issues and hiding taxes, diverting funds from his campaign funds to his family members, stopping investigations with the [secretary of state's internal investigations] department," Cwick said. "There's a whole lot of stuff out there. You could pretty much take your pick."

- - -

The jurors

RAUL CASINO, 65

PICTURE NOT AVAILABLE

Residence: Palos Hills

Occupation: Retired trucker

Prior knowledge of case: Heard Ryan might have been involved in the licenses-forbribes scandal

SONJA CHAMBERS, 38

Residence: Bolingbrook

Occupation: Senior program manager for Hewitt & Associates

Prior knowledge of case: No relevant knowledge or opinion

JAMES CWICK, 22*

Residence: Glen Ellyn

Occupation: Part-time supervisor for UPS in its package operations

Prior knowledge of case: Aware that Ryan was charged, but did not know the nature of the case

JESSE DAVIS, 70

PICTURE NOT AVAILABLE

Residence: Maywood

Occupation: Retired from jobs at AT&T and Wal-Mart

Prior knowledge of case: Aware that Ryan was governor, but didn't remember the nature of the charges against him

BERNICE GOMILLA, 58

Residence: Chicago

Occupation: U.S. Postal Service clerk

Prior knowledge of case: Not available

KAREN JAMES, 43

Residence: Oak Lawn

Occupation: U.S. Postal Service clerk

Prior knowledge of case: Said that a government agent's testimony bears much weight, but would hear both sides

LESLIE LOSACCO, 38

Residence: Deerfield

Occupation: Works at a computer reselling company

Prior knowledge of case: Aware that Ryan was indicted, but had no opinion of him

DENISE PETERSON, 44

Residence: Hawthorn Woods

Occupation: Substitute teacher for kindergarten through 5th grade

Prior knowledge of case: No relevant knowledge or opinion

KEVIN REIN, 48

Residence: Glen Ellyn

Occupation: Carpenter

Prior knowledge of case: Not available

ROSS TALBOT, 48*

PICTURE NOT AVAILABLE

Residence: Chicago

Occupation: Help center manager at Walgreens

Prior knowledge of case: Heard from co-workers that Ryan was being "persecuted" and that he was "crooked"

ALTERNATE

CHARLES SVYMBERSKY, 41*

Residence: Westmont

Occupation: Retail grocery manager

Prior knowledge of case: Aware of the licenses-for-bribes scandal, but not the details

ALTERNATE

JILL DiMARTINO, 55*

Residence: Itasca

Occupation: Account coordinator for a payroll company

Prior knowledge of case: Said of information about the case: "I just push it to the side"

Dismissed jurors

EVELYN EZELL, 44*

Residence: Chicago

Occupation: Office manager for a roofing company

Prior knowledge of case: No relevant opinion or knowledge, no opinion of Ryan

ROBERT PAVLICK, 55*

Residence: Buffalo Grove

Occupation: Safety coordinator and handled public relations for Home Depot

Prior knowledge of case: Said he knew "everything" about the case

Alternate jurors who were not in deliberations

CHRISTOPHER JONES, 37

Residence: Chicago

Occupation: Technician for SBC

Prior knowledge of case: Had not heard of the case, but understood it had to do with the licenses-for-bribes scandal

ARTURO MASRI, 24*

Residence: Highland Park

Occupation: Bartender

Prior knowledge of case: No opinion of Ryan

*Age at the time of jury selection in September

Source: Tribune reporting

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