

The Sun

Press, curious line up for glimpse of Lewinsky; Tripp fails to appear at Ellicott City hearing

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Celebrity watchers who snared seats inside the courthouse in Ellicott City yesterday left with bragging rights -- they'd seen Monica Lewinsky in person -- but not much else as her much awaited confrontation with Linda R. Tripp fizzled.

Tripp was a no-show, though the Columbia resident's son unexpectedly appeared in the back of the courtroom, infusing some drama into an event that the lawyers seemed determined to make dull.

"I hope it goes to trial so my Mom can be completely vindicated," Ryan Tripp, 24, said outside the courtroom where a judge was weighing the validity of wiretapping evidence against his mother.

Apparently fighting a cold, often saying "sorry" to questions she couldn't answer, Lewinsky exhibited no anger -- although she did say she was "terrified" when her taped telephone conversations with Linda Tripp appeared in a magazine.

"I was concerned about the privacy of my relationship being revealed," Lewinsky added, referring to but never naming President Clinton.

Lewinsky had small circles under her eyes and a cold that made her voice more low and scratchy during her testimony than it sounded during her interview with Barbara Walters earlier this year.

One of the first things she did on the stand was cough several times and say, "Sorry, I'm sick."

Her affair with Clinton led to his impeachment after Tripp gave federal prosecutors her secretive recordings with the former White House intern. Although Tripp was given federal immunity for her testimony, she was indicted in Howard County on charges of violating Maryland law that prohibits taping without the consent of the person being recorded.

The hearing that began Monday in Howard County Circuit Court and will continue today without Lewinsky is to determine whether the state prosecutor's office improperly used Tripp's immunized testimony or independently gleaned evidence to support the charge -- a felony that could put Tripp in jail for 10 years.

But it wasn't the legal issues that drew many of the several dozen journalists or the much smaller number of spectators yesterday. 'Where's Monica?'

Like Joan Friedman, 59, an Ellicott City housewife, they wanted to brush up against a history-making scandal and perhaps see Lewinsky take revenge against her betrayer.

"Where's Monica?" asked Friedman as she struggled for a view among the camera crews that had begun assembling as early as 5: 30 a.m.

"This is really neat," said Friedman. "It's not every day that we get celebrities to come into Ellicott City. In fact, I bet Monica Lewinsky never heard of our town before all of this happened."

But getting a picture of Lewinsky before she entered the building -- no cameras were allowed in the courtroom -- was nearly impossible. She arrived at a side entrance in a van with tinted windows. Getting inside the courtroom was almost as difficult.

The competition for seats was won mainly by journalists such as Bianca Martinez, whose jobs depended on getting inside. The night before, the 22-year-old Martinez woke up every hour on the hour, afraid she would oversleep.

A production assistant for Channel 4 in Washington, Martinez had strict orders: Get to the courthouse at 4: 30 a.m. and hold a place in line for one of the station's reporters.

Martinez, who said she dressed up as Lewinsky two Halloweens ago, ended up being first in line. Charles O'Sullivan of Baltimore, who described himself as an "ordinary" citizen, didn't make the cut.

"It was pretty upsetting," said O'Sullivan, 39. "I was hoping to get a chance to hear her [Lewinsky's] version of what happened." Different faces

What O'Sullivan would have seen was a woman who seemed like several different witnesses rolled into one. She appeared poised at times, bantering with defense attorneys and answering their questions with confidence. A few questions later, she seemed tired, her voice low and scratchy.

During one pause, a conference between attorneys and Circuit Judge Diane O. Leasure, Lewinsky stepped down from the witness stand, turned away and fiddled nervously with her fingernails. She rolled her eyes at her two attorneys after she was finished.

Lewinsky is a critical witness because of her testimony that Tripp taped her without her consent. But she is also a risky witness for the prosecution because she was so heavily involved in independent counsel Kenneth W. Starr's investigation.

If any of the state's evidence is based on material gathered by Starr, it may be excluded, dooming the prosecution of Tripp.

Defense attorneys contend that Lewinsky's memories of her conversations with Tripp might in fact be tainted by the help she gave Starr during his investigation of Clinton. The legal debate centers on Tripp's taping of Lewinsky on Dec. 22, 1997, which is at the

heart of the indictment.

But Lewinsky disputed Tripp's attorneys' contention, saying she clearly remembered the day that Tripp taped her and didn't need any help from Starr's investigation.

"It was etched in my mind," said Lewinsky. "It was a pretty frightening time for me."

Tripp attorney Joseph Murtha wasn't convinced by Lewinsky's recollection.

"We still believe their investigation is tainted," he said.

He questioned Lewinsky extensively about a letter that her lawyer, Plato Cacheris, sent to state prosecutors in August 1998 that said Lewinsky knew she was taped in late 1997.

Murtha queried how Lewinsky now remembered that Tripp taped her specifically on Dec. 22, when that information wasn't included in her attorney's letter.

Lewinsky denied using Starr's materials and answered a dozen of Murtha's questions with: "I don't recall."

Murtha also asked whether Lewinsky supplied state prosecutors with a potential witness' name because she learned about the witness from Starr's investigation. Lewinsky conceded she might have learned the woman's name during her lengthy questioning by federal prosecutors.

Affair and Christmas tree

That witness would later tell Maryland investigators that Tripp played an audiotape that contained Lewinsky's voice. That tape also contained a diatribe that Tripp launched at her daughter for leaving the Christmas tree on the ground, state prosecutors say.

If that lead was developed through Starr's probe, the judge could eliminate the woman as a witness.

Murtha asked Lewinsky whether she read Newsweek reporter Michael Isikoff's book, "Uncovering Clinton," and knew where Isikoff got his information.

Lewinsky responded: "Didn't he get it from Ms. Tripp?"

Lewinsky left the courthouse about 9: 45 a.m. through the same side door she entered. As she left, a throng of reporters and photographers awaited. Lewinsky didn't answer any questions as she stepped into a minivan.

Though another witness was called yesterday -- a former law clerk in the state prosecutor's office -- the show was all but over for journalists and spectators such as Alfred Boehly of Clarksville, a retired employee of Bell Atlantic.

He got a seat because he arrived at the courthouse at 7: 30 and was number 23 in line. He was amazed at all the media lined up outside.

"In the evening, if I'm lucky, I might see one little blip on the TV about this," he said before entering the courthouse. "And for one little piece of news, you see all these people."

Sun staff writer Jamal E. Watson contributed to this article.

Graphics:

PHOTO(S)

JOHN MAKELY: SUN STAFF

Caption:

Celebrity watch: Monica Lewinsky leaves the Howard County District Court after testifying at a pretrial hearing in the wiretapping case against Linda R. Tripp.

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