

## LEGAL AID LAWYER OF THE YEAR AWARDS

# One community power of legal.



**Tessa Lieven Wright reports on the inspirational and poignant 2023 Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year awards, which took place in a packed and buzzing London venue on 12 July.**



'This is the one evening of the year that we can put aside the utterly maddening shortcomings of the legal aid scheme ... when we can forget about the crazy, soul-sapping, justice-denying bureaucracy, the baffling refusals of legal aid, and even the self-serving, misguided attacks on us and sometimes on our clients by politicians and the media. This is the evening when we come together as one legal aid community and celebrate the power of legal aid to transform lives and to defend the rights of ordinary people.'

These powerful words were how Jenny Beck KC (Hon), co-chair of Legal Aid Practitioners Group, opened the 2023 Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year awards. The message was clear: give yourselves a night off from the issues that plague the legal aid profession and have fun! From the cheering,

celebrating and smiles around the room, it was clear that people were taking Jenny's advice. Symeon Brown, broadcaster and journalist, was compère for the second year in a row and joked that 'like a BBC scandal, I just can't stop returning'. He was joined by Baroness Helena Kennedy KC, and together they ensured that every nominee and winner was given the celebration they deserved. Helena echoed Jenny's opening address, saying: 'It [can] seem that everywhere you look it seems so gloomy, but that's why tonight is such a great night, because we are celebrating the good stuff and the good stuff is in this room.'

This was my first LALYs and leading up to the event I had been unsure whether it would live up to the hype. The idea of an 'Oscars for legal

aid lawyers' seemed strange. I was completely wrong. Not only was it a fun, feel-good evening, it was also incredibly inspiring and poignant. It's clear that legal aid lawyers and support staff never celebrate themselves, and so it felt like a real privilege to watch them being honoured in front of family and peers. There were winners from Birmingham, Wales and Manchester, and yet it very much felt like everyone in the room was part of the same community.

Everyone was so proud - rightly - to be a legal aid lawyer and to work in this sector, which is offering such vital, life-changing support to clients across the country. Yes, there were individual winners, but the night also felt like a win for legal aid generally, in a time of incredible adversity.



### Legal aid newcomer sponsored by Friends of LALY23

**Christian Weaver**  
Garden Court North Chambers

After his commendable work representing Awaab Ishak's family in the inquest into their two-year-old son's death, it was no surprise that barrister Christian Weaver won the night's first award. He 'gave the family a voice and directly challenged the parent-blaming and racism that defined Awaab's death'. Christian also set up the YouTube video series, 'The Law in 60 Seconds', which aims to make the law more accessible to young people. Christian said: 'I was living here in London, my friends were getting stopped and searched, and I thought that it would be useful for there to be a resource to educate people on their rights.'

# ... celebrating the aid



## Legal aid support staffer sponsored by Accesspoint Technologies

**Katayoon Zare**  
TRP Solicitors

Introducing this award, Symeon said that it 'recognises people working behind the scenes who are vital for keeping their organisations going and able to deliver justice'. Katayoon Zare, the winner, is an office manager at TRP Solicitors, a specialist immigration firm. As a refugee herself, she uses her own experience to inform the quality care and support she offers the firm's clients. After accepting the award, Katayoon said: 'The people who come to us, they need to be taken care of ... I do my best to help them in any way that I can. I'm really happy that they are happy with what I do.'



## Legal aid barrister sponsored by The Bar Council

**Kathryn Cronin**  
Garden Court Chambers

Kathryn Cronin's career, which spans over 40 years, more than warrants her winning this coveted award. Symeon described her as being committed 'to access to justice and equality before the law for all vulnerable children and adults in our society'. Kathryn praised Garden Court Chambers for supporting her throughout her career and drew attention to the 'comradery' that is created by the legal aid community. She urged young lawyers to 'seek the assistance [that is available] around you' in this tightly bonded sector.



## Criminal defence sponsored by DG Legal

**Catherine Bond**  
SL5 Legal

'She is a shining light in the darkest part of society.' These were the words of one of Catherine Bond's clients, who continued: 'She is a wonderful human being and I feel privileged to have had her in my corner.' With such glowing praise, it was no surprise that Catherine won the criminal defence award. 'It's rewarding work and I feel privileged to do it,' she told the crowd. 'I will continue to fight for every client that I represent, to give them hope for the future.'



## Immigration and asylum law sponsored by Garden Court Chambers

**Alison Stanley**  
Bindmans LLP

Described as being 'at the forefront for promoting legal protections for all,' Alison Stanley has specialised in immigration law since 1984. 'This award celebrates lawyers whose work has never been more needed,' Symeon gravely remarked, and it seemed only fair that Alison was recognised for her tireless, long-standing commitment to the field. Alison was unable to attend the ceremony and her colleague Roberta Haslam collected the award on her behalf. 'She's really sorry not to be here,' Roberta told the crowd. 'She didn't know she was being nominated!'



**Children's rights sponsored by Leigh Day**

**Alia Lewis**  
Duncan Lewis Solicitors

Alia Lewis is known for her 'astonishing methods to raise awareness of autism and other forms of neurodiversity in the family courts'. Her passionate and dedicated work earned her the children's rights award. 'There is such little understanding in relation to neurodiversity,' Alia said. 'That's why I'm pushing for mandatory training ... which will hopefully ensure that the best results will be achieved for these very, very vulnerable children.' She highlighted how important it is that everyone working with these children has a proper, fair understanding of neurodiversity.



**Family legal aid sponsored by Resolution**

**Victoria Jones**  
RLE Law

As Head of the Family Department at RLE Law, Victoria was described as a 'highly respected advocate who goes above and beyond to help clients navigate the complexities of the family justice system' by a barrister colleague. Accepting the award, Victoria highlighted the impact of the cost of living crisis on her clients. 'It's created a whole new level of pressure on clients in what is already a tremendously pressurising situation ... This award is really for my clients ... some of the most vulnerable people living down in the South Wales valleys.'



**Social welfare law sponsored by Doughty Street Chambers**

**Chris Johnson**  
Community Law Partnership

The next award was one of the most heart-warming of the evening. Chris Johnson received the fourth nomination of his career, during which he has been at the 'forefront of defending the rights of Gypsies and Travellers'. He is a founding partner of the highly respected Community Law Partnership in Birmingham. Despite a challenging career, he has remained 'entirely committed and entirely undeterred from his mission'. Chris's win attracted one of the biggest cheers of the night. Receiving his award, he joked with Helena that it was for 'oldest lawyer of the year', before going on to praise his clients' unwavering resilience.



**Legal aid firm/not-for-profit agency sponsored by The Law Society**

**Deighton Pierce Glynn**

The ninth prize of the night was awarded to Deighton Pierce Glynn (DPG), a specialist civil rights and judicial review firm. It was nominated for its work helping 'Afghan nationals who were refused relocation to the UK through official government schemes'. The whole team was on stage to accept the award, and Daniel Carey, one of DPG's partners, told the crowd of the intense highs and lows of these cases. 'There were a couple of sleepless nights,' he said, when clients who had been refused entry to the UK were imprisoned and tortured by the Taliban. However, the team agreed it was all worth it to ensure that people were brought to safety in the UK.



**Regional legal aid firm/not-for-profit agency sponsored by The Legal Education Foundation**

**Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit**

Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit (GMIAU) was awarded for its tireless and dedicated work to provide advice and support for asylum-seekers and immigrants. Helping almost 5,000 people per year, it has been described as 'an oasis of legal aid provision in the desert of the North West'. Denise McDowell, GMIAU's director, paid tribute to the team and their clients. 'They're the reason we're here and ... why we'll still be here in the future.'



### Public law sponsored by One Pump Court

**Nusrat Uddin**  
Wilson Solicitors LLP

The final nominated award of the evening was given to Nusrat Uddin of Wilson Solicitors for her work in public law and human rights. She specialises in acting for survivors of modern slavery and trafficking, and a recent case in the Supreme Court (*Basfar v Wong*) was a landmark ruling for establishing that 'diplomatic immunity does not offer protection from liability for treating domestic workers as modern slaves'. Nusrat said she was proud that this case would inspire 'hope' for many vulnerable people employed in such professions.

### Outstanding achievement sponsored by Matrix Chambers

**Molly Russell Inquest Team: Jessica Elliott and Oliver Sanders KC (1 Crown Office Row); Merry Varney, Caleb Bawdon and Pesh Hamza, and the Media Relations Team (Leigh Day)**

As usual, the winner of the outstanding achievement award was veiled in secrecy until Symeon announced it to the crowd. This prestigious award, won in the past by Imran Khan, Michael Mansfield KC, and our very own CEO Sue James, was awarded to Molly Russell's legal team for their work in proving to the North London Coroner's Court that her death was 'from an act of self-harm while suffering from depression and the negative effects of online content'.

'Thanks to legal aid, these [social media] executives, flanked by an army of highly paid lawyers and advisers, were subjected to rigorous and forensic questioning under oath for their actions and inactions,' Symeon told the crowd.

'None of this was inevitable,' Symeon said. 'Molly's inquest was initially listed for just one hour. The first legal aid application was refused. It was only due to the Herculean efforts of the family's legal team, in particular those of its barristers, that the Russells achieved the full and detailed inquest they wanted.'

This award was marked by several touching moments. Jessica Elliott and Oliver Sanders KC, from 1 Crown Office Row, were the barristers representing the Russell family and yet they were unable to attend the LALYs as they had welcomed their first baby just a few days prior. As Symeon remarked: 'They are the Michelle and Barack of legal aid.'

Leigh Day's team, consisting of solicitor Merry Varney, paralegal Caleb Bawdon, senior IT security analyst Pesh Hamza and its Media Relations Team, led by Caroline Ivison, were also awarded the outstanding achievement award. Merry, who led the team, said: 'It was an incredible privilege to act for Molly's family and have the trust put in us that was. As lawyers we take on the fights of our clients ... and to hear that our clients feel that we've delivered as they would have hoped ... means the world to me.'

Molly's father Ian Russell's tribute to the family's legal team was the most touching moment of the evening. He explained that, 'whilst swimming in a sea of pain and grief, bereaved families must too quickly also navigate the unsettling waters of an inquest process'.

'Without the expertise of the legal team who advised and supported us, we would not now know how deep the connection between online harms and Molly's death was. The team's knowledge and advice, and above all care and dedication, proved vital.'

While Ian spoke, the room was silent. He finished: 'The Russell family will be eternally grateful to you all and because of your exceptional work, hopefully the world will become a safer place, and its young and vulnerable people will grow up to owe you all a debt of gratitude.' The room rose to applaud Ian, his family and the powerful team of legal aid lawyers who helped to ensure that Molly's death will have a profound effect on society.



The Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year awards are organised by Legal Aid Practitioners Group. LAG is media partner to the awards.

LALY AWARDS PHOTOGRAPHS: Frederique Bellec Photography: frederiquebellecphotography.com.