



Legal aid's 'Oscars'® – the Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year (LALY) awards – were presented, as ever, by Cherie Booth QC at a ceremony held last month in central London. The event's compère was former BBC radio presenter John Howard, and it was attended by around 200 lawyers and invited guests.

The LALYs 2008: hope, alarm and inspiration ...

And the winners are ...

There was the usual mix of hope and alarm expressed by the winners at the sixth annual LALY awards ceremony. This year's LALYs, which were organised by the Legal Aid Practitioners Group (LAPG), attracted a record number of entries. The finalists were selected by a judging panel

that was chaired by Cherie Booth QC, and included Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee and Doreen Lawrence of the Stephen Lawrence Charitable Trust (see December 2008 *Legal Action* 7). Roy Morgan, LAPG's chairperson, who opened the event, said that the nominations for the LALYs were of the highest-ever

standard and quantity: 90 nominations were received on the closing day alone. Commenting after the awards, Carol Storer, LAPG's director said, 'At ... [the] ceremony we heard about dedicated and enthusiastic lawyers giving their expertise and commitment to their clients. It was a very inspiring evening.'



**Young legal aid solicitor LALY winner
Jo Hickman** (Fisher Meredith, London)

Jo was described by a barrister who had nominated her as 'the best solicitor I have ever worked with'. She specialises in public and human rights law. Her work in representing immigration detainees was described as 'exceptional'.



**Young legal aid barrister LALY winner
Felicity Williams** (6 King's Bench Walk, London)

In accepting the award, Felicity spoke of her work with Young Legal Aid Lawyers (YLAL), and referred to 'the battle going on at the moment over legal aid reform'. She is a founding member of YLAL, a group that has grown to over 500 members.



Family LALY winner

Samantha Little (Russell-Cooke Solicitors, Surrey)

Samantha left a City firm to specialise in publicly funded family law work. Her nomination was supported by, among others, the family law judge in her local court who wrote of her 'meticulous work'.



Mental health LALY winner

Julie Burton (Julie Burton Law, Gwynedd)

In accepting the award, Julie said: 'It is amazing that people in hospitals do not know what is available in the community. My job is to bridge that gap.'



Social and welfare LALY winner

Yogi Amin (Irwin Mitchell, Sheffield)

Yogi has represented clients in a number of high-profile cases in which life prolonging drugs have been denied to patients by the NHS. In particular, he represented a breast cancer sufferer fighting for the right to receive the drug Herceptin. In accepting the award, he said: 'While the doctors have supported the cases, the last thing they want to do is to advocate on behalf of clients; this is what a lawyer is needed for.' He added that his job was made easier by 'the responsiveness and support from the Legal Services Commission in the cases we have represented'.



Legal aid barrister LALY winner

Robert Latham (Doughty Street Chambers, London)

Robert is a housing law specialist, who has represented in many leading cases, and 'an inspiration to a generation of housing barristers after three decades at the Bar,' said John Howard. He was damning of government policy in his acceptance speech: 'The obsession with home ownership in recent years has meant we do not have enough affordable rented accommodation for people who need it.' He was nominated by Shelter, among others, and pointed out that its funding was being withdrawn by the building societies that used to support them. 'I just wish that the Legal Services Commission would provide more funding so Shelter will not have to shed more staff. The tragedy of legal aid reform is the impact on the not-for-profit sector. They ought to be thriving.'



Immigration LALY winner

Kalvir Kaur (Immigration Advisory Service)

Kalvir was recognised for undertaking exceptional work with victims of trafficking and unaccompanied minors. She said that one of the hardest aspects of her job was to persuade children who had often undergone horrendous experiences in their countries of origin to trust the UK's courts and other authorities.



Legal aid firm/not-for-profit agency LALY winner

Jackson & Canter (Liverpool)

The firm's nomination was well supported by the community and clients it serves, and by the barristers it instructs. Christopher Topping (second left) and Adewuyi Olorunfemi accepted the award on the firm's behalf.



Criminal defence LALY winner

Zarina Gani (Gani and Co Solicitors)

Over the past 19 years, Zarina has demonstrated an unprecedented level of dedication and commitment to her clients. In one nomination, a client described her as 'righteous, kind, polite, gracious and respectful'.



Outstanding achievement LALY winner

Tony Edwards (TV Edwards LLP Solicitors, London)

A popular choice for this award, the judges decided on an individual who has contributed most to legal aid over the last year and beyond. In accepting the award, Tony spoke of his continuing enthusiasm for the job of defending clients accused of a crime, describing it as 'wonderful work, deeply satisfying'. See also page 9 of this issue.

For the first time, the Law Society acted as overall sponsor of the LALYs.
Legal Action was the awards' media partner.
See back cover of this issue for the sponsors of individual LALY awards.
Photographs: Robert Aberman