

PRESS RELEASE - 9 JULY 2020

Legal Aid Practitioners Group hosts first-ever 'virtual' Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year awards to honour social justice champions.

LAPG's ground-breaking 'lockdown LALYs' were broadcast on social media, with the award winners joining the live event, via video link.

The Legal Aid Lawyer of the Year awards are into their 18th year, but Covid-19 restrictions meant the 2020 event had to be re-thought from scratch.

LAPG CEO Chris Minnoch says:

'We decided soon after lockdown to make it a virtual event, and stick with the original 7 July date for the ceremony. We knew staging an online ceremony would take us well out of our comfort zone, but Team LALY is always up for a challenge - and we could not be more delighted with the end result.'

The LALY awards are usually staged at a central London venue, attended by over 500 guests, including finalists and their supporters, plus other leading legal figures.

More than 800 people registered to watch the live YouTube broadcast, and two days after the ceremony, it had been viewed more than 2300 times.

Chris Minnoch says:

'We saw this as an opportunity to create our most inclusive ceremony yet, while still retaining the essence of the LALYs, which is to be a wholehearted, unabashed, celebration of the work of social justice lawyers. The pandemic has been shattering for the legal aid sector

and their clients, so it felt more important than ever this year to recognise the value of their work.'

The 2020 awards were compered by broadcaster Anna Jones, for the 5th year running, who was joined on stage by domestic abuse campaigner David Challen. David led the successful campaign for the release from prison of his mother Sally Challen, after her murder conviction was overturned on appeal. The solicitor in the case, Harriet Wistrich, is a former LALY award winner, and David paid tribute to Harriet and all legal aid lawyers. He said: 'This work really does make a difference to the lives of people like me.'

The impact of the pandemic on legal aid lawyers and their clients was a recurring theme throughout the evening (see below, for full list of winners).

Speaking live on video link as she accepted her award for Mental Capacity law, Sheree Green, of Greenchurch Legal in Stoke on Trent, described the impact on her elderly clients.

'We had managed really well until mid-April, when sadly we lost our first client to Covid-19, and then regrettably, one a week for the next seven weeks. It's been very hard for families. It's been challenging trying to support people through that. We are hoping the worst is over, but it has been a very sad time.'

Belfast-based KRW Law won the inaugural Regional Legal Aid Firm/Not-for-profit award, in recognition of its work for people from all communities who have suffered loss or injustice as a result of Northern Ireland's long history of conflict.

Niall Murphy, who accepted the firm's award via video link, told compere Anna Jones he had spent 16 days in an induced coma after contracting the virus during a trip to New York.

'I'm delighted to be here,' he said, before paying tribute to his colleagues for their support for him and his family; and the 'Herculean' efforts of healthcare workers, who he credited with saving his life.

Speaking about KRW's clients, Niall Murphy said:

'It is one of life's privileges to represent people in their hour of need. It is something that I consider to be very precious and something of the utmost seriousness. It is a phenomenal profession to be able to work in.'

The Outstanding Achievement award went to Mike McIlvaney, partner and founder of Community Law Partnership in Birmingham.

Mike was honoured by the LALY judges for his 30-year career as a housing lawyer, and in particular for his long battle on behalf of his client Terryann Samuels, which culminated in a successful Supreme Court ruling in 2019.

Speaking on pre-recorded video, Mike McIlvaney described how for five years, the Legal Aid Agency had second-guessed the legal team and repeatedly blocked funding for what turned out to be a landmark case.

Mike McIlvaney said:

'Funding was refused on no less than seven occasions before finally being granted, and only then after permission had been granted in the Supreme Court, and only then under threat of judicial review.'

He added:

'As the Black Lives Matter movement comes to the fore, we as legal aid lawyers know full well that it is our black and ethnic minority

communities that are disproportionately affected by funding refusals and funding cuts.'

The barrister who worked alongside Mike McIlvaney in the Samuels case, James Stark from Garden Court North, was also honoured during the lockdown LALYs, taking the award for Legal Aid Barrister of the year.

The LALY20 ceremony was produced by Bounce Video:
<https://www.bouncevideo.co.uk>

A recording of the ceremony is available here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XluqzBlh-z0>

For photos and further information, contact LAPG CEO Chris Minnoch: chris.minnoch@lapg.co.uk ; or LALY co-organiser Fiona Bawdon: fiona.bawdon@gmail.com

LALY20 winners in full

1. Mental capacity - sponsored by Bidwell Henderson

Sheree Green – Greenchurch Legal

2. Immigration & asylum - sponsored by Doughty Street Chambers

Tori Sicher – Sutovic Hartigan

3. Legal aid newcomer - sponsored by Friends of LALY20

Siobhan Taylor-Ward – Merseyside Law Centre

4. Criminal defence - sponsored by DG Legal

Philippa Southwell – Birds Solicitors

5. Legal aid barrister - sponsored by the Bar Council

James Stark – Garden Court North

6. Family legal aid - sponsored by Resolution

Kate Hammond – Miles & Partners

7. Legal aid firm/Not-for-profit agency - sponsored by the Law Society

South West London Law Centres

8. Regional legal aid firm/Not-for-profit agency - sponsored by the Legal Education Foundation

KRW Law

9. Social welfare law - sponsored by Tikit

Simon Mullings – Edwards Duthie Shamash

10. Public law - sponsored by Irwin Mitchell

Dean Kingham – Swain & Co

11. Team - sponsored by Accesspoint

Joint Council Welfare for the Welfare of Immigrants

12. Outstanding achievement - sponsored by Matrix Chambers

Mike McIlvaney - Community Law Partnership