

Reflections on participation in the Birmingham Law School Pro Bono Group

by **Gurpreet Ballagun, Emerald Hutton,
Jasmine Lalli and Catherine Ruta**

Pro Bono Group members, Birmingham Law School

This paper collates presentations made by four student volunteer members of the Birmingham Law School Pro Bono Group during National Pro Bono Week 2017.

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Student volunteers with the Birmingham Law School Pro Bono Group.

The Birmingham Law School Pro Bono Group is an extra-curricular programme through which our students give free, practitioner-supervised, legal advice and deliver public legal education workshops to individuals and groups in the local community. Our activities are predominantly aimed at those who would not otherwise have access to legal assistance. The Group was founded in 2008 by Dr Bharat Malkani with the assistance of three student volunteers. The Group now has over two hundred student volunteer members, participating in fourteen discrete projects which include: numerous 'Streetlaw' initiatives; in-house legal advice clinics; and the provision of support to a number of non-profit community organisations.

In November 2017, during the 16th annual National Pro Bono Week - a nationwide campaign of events to celebrate the breadth and impact of free legal advice undertaken by the legal profession throughout the year - Birmingham Law School was honoured to welcome the Attorney General, Jeremy Wright QC MP.

The Centre for Professional Legal Education and Research (CEPLER) hosted a special event, during which four of our student volunteers presented their personal perspectives on participating in some of the Group's projects. Their accounts are set out below:

Gurpreet Ballagun: Birmingham Free Legal Advice Group

Since it was established in 2010 the Birmingham Free Legal Advice Group (FLAG) has become the largest pro bono project at the University of Birmingham and has advised over 240 clients. It is operated by students at the University of Birmingham working under the supervision of qualified legal professionals from our partner law firms and chambers: No5 Chambers; Mills & Reeve LLP; and Shakespeare Martineau LLP.

As a FLAG Coordinator I assisted with the management of the FLAG clinic and was responsible for managing our client case management system, and liaising with our student and professional volunteers to arrange client appointments and interviews. I also had the opportunity to participate in the volunteering process, which involved interviewing a member of the community, researching the law relating to their case, and writing a letter of legal advice.

What is great about Birmingham FLAG is that it enables law students to gain hands on legal experience while studying a purely academic degree. It gives students the opportunity to work on real cases in areas as diverse as family, employment, probate, property and general commercial law. Students benefit from the help and guidance of experienced solicitors and barristers as they develop their interviewing, client care, research and drafting skills. FLAG also gives our volunteers

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an active role in responding to legal aid cuts and helping to resolve pressing legal problems. This is further rewarded by the genuine ability to make a difference in our community and sheer sense of appreciation by members of the community after assisting on a case, where we are able to see how our small contribution to society accumulates.

I would strongly encourage all law students interested in pro-bono work, making a genuine difference, and developing a range of practical legal skills to apply, this is an experience you will not forget!

Emerald Hutton: Streetlaw

Streetlaw is a voluntary, student-led pro bono project. We facilitate informative and interactive presentations and talks on legal topics in the community. We deliver these presentations in schools and to community groups and other organisations

Our aim is to raise public legal literacy and awareness of legal rights. We hope to empower individuals by helping them to understand their legal rights and responsibilities.

We present Streetlaw sessions to secondary school pupils and students can volunteer to get involved with these on an ad hoc basis. These include a 'Justice Day' with year seven pupils, which features a range of interactive discussions to stimulate their thinking about areas of law such as human rights, crime and the justice system. We also deliver a Crime and Punishment Masterclass to older secondary school students. which is held within the Law School on an annual basis.

In 2016, we delivered a series of 'Law and Life' sessions, which I myself was involved with. These sessions were delivered to year 13 students with an aim of preparing them for life beyond sixth form. We covered areas of law which may be considered of practical importance to students once they have moved away from home, such as land law and employment law.

Our SIFA Fireside project is an example of Streetlaw operating in the community. SIFA Fireside is a Birmingham-based charity that supports the homeless and drug and alcohol dependent. Our student volunteers have delivered Streetlaw presentations in a range of areas appropriate to their service users, including: squatters' rights, stop and search, rights for EU migrants and disability rights.

The Birmingham Employment Tribunal is another Streetlaw project. It aims to help those without legal representation to navigate the Tribunal process. Groups of student volunteers provide weekly presentations focusing on an overview of the process and then what to expect at a Final Hearing. We strive to identify the needs of the local community and apply practical legal education to make positive change.

I enjoy Streetlaw because it enables me to provide a benefit to the community, which might not otherwise be available.

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The mere fact that I can give up some of my free time to be part of a team making a difference to the community is the reason I do Streetlaw – I want to impart my legal knowledge and skills to the wider community to have a positive impact.

Streetlaw has provided me with a unique professional development opportunity – I have enjoyed developing my skillset through Streetlaw, and I have found that prospective employers are always interested in my involvement in the project.

It has taught me the impact of laws on various sectors of the community, and as a result I find that I can think about how legal issues might affect the wider community in my academic studies.

Furthermore, it has taught me the importance of providing the community with an insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the legal system, to enable them to develop a critical perspective on the operation of law in this country.

The ability to empower others, whilst developing a critical mindset and the skills sought by employers, is the reason I do Streetlaw.

Catherine Ruta: Personal Support Unit (PSU)

I am the chairperson of the Pro Bono Group. For those of you who are just learning about us, our mission is to provide free legal advice and education to the most vulnerable in our community, while creating opportunities for our students to get hands-on legal experience. Since 2009, our volunteers have donated over 4,000 hours of their time, and have facilitated over £173,000 worth of free legal advice to local residents who would not have been able to afford it otherwise.

Through my connections at Pro Bono, I secured a position volunteering at the Personal Support Unit at the Birmingham County Court. The PSU is charity focused on providing practical procedural and emotional support to those facing the court process alone.

The best illustration of the value of our work comes from one of my more memorable clients at the PSU. One day, a man entered our office, frantic and teary-eyed, looking for someone to attend court with him in 10 minutes. I volunteered, and helped him find the location of his hearing. In the brief time we had before, he told me he was applying for a residence order of his young daughter who lived with her mother. All he had with him were a few crumpled pieces of paper and a look of desperation on his face.

Like the rest of our clients who are litigants in person, he was expected to be as well-versed in the legal process as any professional would be. He was angry that he wasn't, especially as we entered the waiting room to a sea of other people in the same position, with their desperation and fear manifesting as anger, aggression and hopelessness. I walked him through the process, and tried my best to ease his nerves.

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Two hours later, we were called in to the courtroom. Inside, we were given a 30-page social services report that my client hadn't seen, so we stepped in to private room where he was to read and initial every paragraph. Soon after beginning, my client dropped his head to the table, tears streaming from his eyes. "I can't do this" he kept repeating louder until he was screaming. I held his hand, and offered to read it to him. About 10 words in I realized where his pain was coming from. His daughter was suffering through the most violent sexual abuse I've heard of in my nearly 6 years of studying law. I choked through my words, and with every paragraph that passed his hand squeezed mine harder. By the end of it, he was sobbing with his head on my shoulder. Finally, we initialled the last paragraph and started walking back in, when he stopped, reached out for my hand, and we entered the court room together.

Quite rightly, residence was granted. Outside the courtroom, he hugged me and said "thank you, I couldn't have done this without you." My response was "absolutely you could have, that ruling would have come down regardless," and he said, "you don't understand, I would not have survived this without you."

This case was just one of hundreds like it seen every day across PSUs in the UK. While the cuts to legal aid have left many of our most vulnerable without the tools they need to gain access to justice, there is so much good we can do, even as students. We don't need a law degree to give someone the strength to get through the hardest day of their life. These experiences can prepare us in a way that no LLB module can. Being able to regurgitate verbatim section 18 of the Offences against the Person Act, isn't enough to be the best advocate possible.

We owe it to our future clients to sharpen every arrow in our quiver, and emotional intelligence is just as important as any other. If we're to be solicitors, barristers, maybe even the Attorney General one day, we need to have the best picture of the work that needs to be done. There is no better way to understand our legal system than to experience first-hand what the most fragile among us need from it.

Jasmine Lalli: Birmingham Community Law Centre

I am a volunteer at the Birmingham Immigration Clinic. I work specifically at the drop-in centre on a Wednesday; this is the day where we open the doors on a first come, first serve basis. The aim is to either give free one-time advice, or to take on a case, if the individual in question has an issue the solicitor at hand can undertake.

My role is to meet with the individual before they see a solicitor, to gather all the vital information of their situation. This includes their immigration status, details of their family, where their income is sourced from and so on. The individuals we see range from British citizens to asylum seekers fleeing persecution in their native country.

The cases are usually emotionally charged and sometimes distressing. I have to make enquiries of a very sensitive nature, and this can be challenging. However these enquiries are necessary, for understanding the individual's situation, so that the information I relay back to the solicitor which will decide whether or not they take on a case, or the kind of advice they give, is accurate.

I have gained a lot from my short time at the clinic so far. The experience has greatly furthered my communicative skills. A lot of the work is contingent upon being able to build a rapport with individuals, which is imperative to getting all the information we need as efficiently as possible. Not to mention, there is in many cases a language barrier which requires me to be able to explain matters clearly to prevent miscommunication.

The experience has further tested my ability to remain calm under pressure. There is just one solicitor supervising all four volunteers; and clients and myself are often left waiting for extended periods of time for them to be available. The strain on the resource of professional time and expertise at the drop in clinic is the biggest challenge they face. It is very frustrating for the individuals to be left waiting for sometimes over two hours, before they can actually be advised by a qualified solicitor, and they usually let that frustration be known to the volunteers. It is therefore important that we remain calm under this pressure, and let individuals know that their issues are being heard.

It is gratifying to be able to help the Birmingham Community Law Centre clinic in this way, as it plays a part in making sure that the scarce legal aid granted to the clinic is benefiting as many individuals as possible. Being exposed to a number of clients from different walks of life has also been very interesting, and I have enjoyed the opportunity to give back to the local community.

I have learnt a lot. Although I do not study immigration law, I can now to a certain degree, assess whether an individual has a claim for asylum, what test to take to qualify for citizenship, and what kind of evidence the Home Office is most likely to deem credible. It has been a great way to extend my legal knowledge from the academic into the practical. I would strongly recommend volunteering at the Birmingham Immigration Legal Aid clinic, to anyone who is interested in pro bono work.

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Since the Pro Bono Group's launch our student volunteers have given 4,000 hours of their time to projects that benefit their local, national and international community. This is coupled with over 900 hours generously given by members of the legal profession acting as supervisors, without whom, we could not provide these opportunities.