

District Judge Afzal OBE



I am registered blind and was the first in my family to go to University. I therefore come from a non-traditional background for a career at the Bar and for appointment as a judge.

I was married whilst at University and now have five beautiful daughters.

I undertook the Bar Course without formal assistance from a Support Worker as the view at the time was that such a course did not qualify for such assistance to be provided. Thankfully this has now changed.

I secured and undertook pupillage at New Walk Chambers in Leicester and practised there until 2010 in crime (AG's List), civil, family and immigration. I was their Pupillage Coordinator and a Pupil Supervisor.

In 2010, I joined No 5 Chambers and practised in, almost exclusively, family law.

I have had an extensive professional regulatory practice. I have been a Legal Assessor to two Healthcare Regulators. I have been a Legal Adviser to a further Professions Regulator. I have also been appointed as a Legally Qualified Chair for two healthcare regulators. These were prestigious and important positions which were not generally held by someone of my age and background.

In terms of judicial appointments, in 2010 at the age of 33, I was appointed as a Deputy District Judge. In 2015, I was appointed as a Recorder (Family). I was appointed as a full time District Judge in 2017. I believe that I am the only blind District Judge out of a handful of blind judges in any event.

I have served on the Bar Council Young Barristers, Equality/Diversity and Professional Practice Committees. I have also served on the Advocacy Training Council from 2007 to 2016. I have been a member of the Lincoln's Inn Bar Representation Committee since 2002 and am currently involved with initiatives dealing with social mobility. I am a senior advocacy tutor (Course Director level).

I won the BBC Asia Award in 1999 in recognition of being Called to the Bar as a blind barrister. I won the Society of Asian Lawyers community Lawyer of the Year in 2007. I was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 2008 and was made an Honorary Doctor of Staffordshire University in 2010. I served as Junior to the Midland Circuit in 2011.

I joined the barrister profession at a time when there were about a handful of blind barristers, sadly that remains the position. I am now a member of the full time judiciary and hope to continue to fulfil my own career aspirations whilst continuing to inspire others. I am of the strong view that a career at the Bar is open to anyone regardless of background if they are talented, determined and committed.

Thomas Barrett



I was the first person in my family to have studied law, let alone qualify and practice as a Barrister. I grew up in Ealing in west London and went to state schools till I passed the 11+. In the sixth form I managed to secure an offer to read law at King's College London and through hard work I obtained the necessary grades to secure that place.

Though privileged in many ways I did not come from a wealthy background and so in addition to means tested local government assistance I also had to work a number of jobs before and during my time at university. When I went on to take the postgraduate Bar course, even despite deliberately choosing one of the cheaper out of London providers, I struggled but managed eventually to successfully obtain a commercial loan to fund the fees and living expenses of that year.

I have a minor developmental disorder that impedes things such as note taking and legible writing that require fine motor control and coordination. So I found managing my work, time and finances whilst studying law challenging. But the more I did and the more mini-pupillages I undertook, it was clear to me that this was a profession I was desperate to be a part of and which fitted my interests and skills like nothing else I had ever come across.

I graduated from Bar school and returned to live at home whilst I looked for work during the brutal search to obtain a pupillage. It took the full 5 years for me to secure an offer, and in that time I worked in a variety of roles to build experience from Statutes Database sub-editor through to Magistrates Court Clerk/Legal Adviser. Unable to take on further debt I was lucky enough to find a Masters programme that was almost entirely funded by the EU. All of which helped year on year to improve my pupillage prospects. My determination and perseverance paid off and in my last eligible application round I won my dream pupillage at Doughty Street and was supported by winning a scholarship award from my Inn at the same time.

The Bar is a truly unique and amazingly intellectually stimulating place to work. Although it is not something that is easy to drop into, it is far from being a club only the rich and well connected can be a part of. The Bar's foundational core is based on merit, therefore whatever your position in life the path is open to hard working high achievers so please ignore anyone who suggests otherwise. But bear in mind, though open, the path can be an incredibly challenging and demanding one. It is rare to find a completely satisfied Barrister but you will struggle to find one that wishes they did any other career.

Laura Gould



As a teenager, I seemed to change my mind as to what job I wanted to do on an almost weekly basis. The idea of being a 'lawyer' crossed my mind, but I always dismissed it, thinking that I wasn't the sort of person from the right sort of family. My parents were from low income families. Dad went to Salford Polytechnic and my Mum left school with a couple of CSE's and a cycling proficiency badge. She worked as a bookkeeper at a local solicitors which attracted my interest in the law. They were inspiring role models who ensured I got into a good local state school, where I studied law at AS Level.

I started to research what a barrister was and the competitive and argumentative streak in me thought that it looked like a rather fun career. I achieved AAB in my A Levels at the local further education college and went to the University of Liverpool where I obtained a 2.1 LLB in Law. Whilst there, I took part in mooting and enjoyed this practical approach to law. I was also fortunate enough to attend a university open evening at Lincoln's Inn. I was absolutely terrified when I approached the daunting, Harry Potter-esque Great Hall, filled with negative ideas about how I would be greeted. I couldn't have been more wrong. The barristers, benchers and staff at the Inn could not have made me and my fellow students feel more welcome and comfortable in the grand surroundings. After interesting talks and a lovely dinner, I finally started to realise that there was a place for 'normal' people like me at the Bar.

I went on to study the Bar course. Lincoln's Inn was enormously helpful during that year; in particular, whilst on an education weekend at West Dean I was helped by the now Bencher, Karen Shuman, who gave me tips to improve my CV and pupillage application form which I credit to me obtaining interviews and eventually pupillage. As a pupil the Inn was again integral to my achievements. I obtained pupillage in London, with a healthy pupillage award but still significant living costs to pay; the Inn helped me by providing a flat as a scholarship, on a subsidised rate. This helped me not only financially, but also made moving to London less daunting and introduced me to great friends amongst the pupil cohort in London that year, as I lived with two other pupils. After moving back to Manchester for tenancy, I have continued to be involved with the Inn, progressing my training and teaching others.

For those from a 'normal' background like me who may be intimidated by the Bar or may not think that they are the 'right sort', I would encourage you to put away the stereotypical idea that the Bar is for the privileged few. With the help of the Inn to support and guide you, you will find out what a wonderful profession the Bar is and with determination and hard work, it is a career you can succeed in.

Simon Clarke



I'm telling this story the first time, but for a good cause; the Bar is not just for the monied, privileged or expensively-educated; anyone with a brain and a bit of determination can do it.

My father, a violent man who was addicted to drugs, was finally thrown out by Mum when I was 9. There were 4 kids – I was the second-eldest. Home was a small flat on a south London council estate. Mum worked long hours so we were 'latch-key' kids. School was Wandsworth Boys Comprehensive. Life with Dad was just violent; after Dad it was usually cold and with Mum often telling us she "wasn't hungry"; clothes came from jumble sales. But it was never lonely and we were a happy lot.

There being no money, I left school at 16 and found a job as a motorbike courier. Bedsit land. Job followed job: table-cleaner, factory-hand, shop worker; warehouse-assistant, builders labourer, chicken-catcher and truck driver. In 1984 I married and moved to Gibraltar (from where Mum had been evacuated in 1940, only to be interned in the UK).

Returning to the UK with two children I needed work. Having been brought up on a diet of 'Crown Court' and, later, Rumpole [*of the Bailey, television series*], the Bar was for me. The University of East London was advertising for 'mature-students' without formal qualifications (I was 32) and so, having passed an entrance exam, I took my LLB. Three years and a First later and my Bar Vocational Course [*now the Bar Professional Training Course*] at the Inns of Court School of Law [*now part of City University, London*]. Bar School fees came from Inn scholarships; money to live on was earned as a night mini-cab driver – one passenger, a Judge, told me that mini-cab driving was not a 'proper' occupation for a Bar-student. What did he know?!

Then the search for pupillage. Nothing from the online system, so me and a friend wrote to every set in London, well over 200 letters. We each got about 30 interviews; he is now a successful criminal practitioner. Pupillage interviews were fun, difficult or just plain unpleasant – too many panels allowed their prejudices (me; state schooled; apparently working class; 'older' entrant; wrong accent, *etc.*) to influence them, some more obviously than others. Finally, Patricia Scotland's set (Patricia Scotland, Baroness Scotland of Asthal PC QC) gave me a break – thank you Pat. Tenancy followed.

I'm not starry-eyed about the Bar, nor overly critical. I would never be anywhere else. To get on you have to understand how it, and those in it, work; to take tradition for what it is – a framework within which we develop contemporary systems and mores; an unequalled education-for-life institution and a 'home' for those who want it. And a true meritocracy – what else could it be when it admits and allows the likes of me to succeed.

Barriers to entry are real, but not as real as they used to be. Very few at today's Bar think twice about regional accents, the 'wrong' school or which 'side-of-the-tracks' you came from. Money is more readily available than it was for those of determination and ability. My first scholarship interview (with 12 panelists) ended in an argument about whether 'mature students' should be funded. Not so now.

A journey to the Bar can start anywhere, all it requires is ability, application, hard work and more hard work. The best advice ever given me was "work hard, don't give up and be yourself." And now many a Barrister's journey was similar to mine. So if you're a mature student; from a 'working-class'

background; went to the wrong school and/or a 'new' university; or just aren't Oxbridge, then the Bar is for you.

David Scorey QC



Superficially, I fit the stereotype of a barrister: male, white and Oxford-educated. However, if one digs a little deeper, stereotypes at the other end of the social spectrum emerge. I was brought up by a single parent, struggling to raise a family whilst working as a teacher in Manchester. I attended the local comprehensive which, due to its academic prowess, closed down when I was 16. I then attended the local sixth form where I was advised not to apply to Oxford as I was (a) not clever enough and (b) certainly not posh enough. In light of that encouragement, I adjusted my expectations and applied ... to Oxford!

I was lucky enough to be offered a place at St John's College, Oxford. Oxbridge (like all UK universities) and the Bar share one important thing in common: they both operate upon merit. This is often not appreciated by those on the outside, looking in. In my experience, the real barriers to entry to Oxbridge and the Bar are misconceptions and ignorance: one does not need connections or a private education; instead, one needs determination, graft and hard work.

Lincoln's Inn similarly looks beyond background and regional accents and seeks out merit. Thanks to the generosity of the Inn's scholarships, I was able to fund the cost of Bar School and obtained pupillage in 1997 at Essex Court Chambers, a commercial set. I have never left.

In many respects, the road to the Bar was an extension of the path that led from Manchester to Oxford: it required ability, application – and more late nights that I care to remember or admit. What it did not require was conforming to any social stereotype or speaking with long vowels!

The best advice I ever received was to work hard and 'be myself.' In my experience, the Bar is a true meritocracy. If one has intellectual ability, a capacity for hard work and boundless determination, one will succeed at the Bar.

Kelly Ann Cronin



I have been registered blind all my life but have never let that stop me. All it means is that I have to do things slightly differently to others and that I am accompanied by a four-legged friend everywhere I go in the form of my Guide Dog. I was the first person in my family to go to university. I achieved a 1st class LLB Law degree at Leeds Beckett University in 2015.

I completed the BPTC in 2016 and began pupillage with Zenith Chambers in Leeds in the same year. I am now almost at the end of my pupillage and am hoping to gain tenancy with Zenith.

I am fortunate that funding for a support worker has been granted to me. It means that I am able to have an assistant to convert papers into an accessible format for me as well as attend at court to assist with reading any last-minute documents, finding errant clients and help me to navigate unfamiliar surroundings so that I can concentrate on doing my job efficiently and with complete professionalism.

I am a common-law pupil so my practice includes Civil, Family and Crime. I have found life as a pupil barrister to be challenging and exhausting but at the same time extremely rewarding. The job is never boring and as long as you can be completely comfortable with being uncomfortable and having to think on your feet all the time you will enjoy it.

For me, the highlight of being in practice is that other members of the legal profession, in particular fellow counsel and judges, do not treat me any differently to anybody else. As long as I can present a case competently nobody cares that there is a Labrador asleep under the bench. I think this is testament to the fact that the legal profession is becoming far more diverse and broad-minded and as such is open to those from a non-traditional background if they are prepared to put in the work.

Stuart Hornett



Both my parents came from working class East End families. Like so many of their generation, they left school at 16. Despite being intelligent and hard working, neither of them went to college or

university. I grew up in Romford, Essex and I attended state schools until I was 18. Through hard work and application, I managed to achieve 4 'A' grade A-levels and got a place at Leicester University to read law.

I was the first in my family to go to University. I found it to be intellectually and socially intimidating. Over time, I grew in confidence and began to enjoy studying law. After I graduated, I was asked to stay on at Leicester and I completed a MPhil as well as teaching part time in the law faculty. Lecturing to students improved my confidence (although I must say felt like a bit of fraud addressing the Cypriot Bat Association in Nicosia and presenting a paper to the Council of Europe at the age of 19). With my improved self-assurance, I decided I wanted to be barrister.

My financial position at the time meant I had to live with my parents whilst at Bar School. I knew no one at the Bar and felt like an outsider. I found Bar School a social challenge and, despite my achievements, felt intimidated at times by the environment, although not the subject matter. I nevertheless managed (somehow) to come 3rd in my year with a grade of Outstanding in my Bar Final exams. I think this was one of my proudest achievements.

Obtaining pupillage was excruciatingly hard. I must have had 35 or 40 interviews. I had so many knock backs, I felt like giving up. In hindsight, I feel that my lack of interview training was the main problem. One day, it all fell into place and I got a pupillage in a good set and, later, a tenancy in different chambers. I am now an established commercial and chancery practitioner of 20 years' call.

The Bar (mostly) has an unjustified reputation as being the preserve of the privileged few. In fact, it is a true meritocracy. All sets of chambers I know select pupils and tenants on merit and evidence based achievement. The Inns and the profession offer a whole range of support and, if you are good enough and sufficiently motivated, you can succeed, no matter what your social background.

Mark McDonald



I am the only child of a single parent and grew up in a tower block with a mother who due to her disability spent her life on benefits. Growing up, I knew no one who had been to university, indeed, knew no one who stayed on at school to do their A-levels. I lived on an estate, which was the largest red-light district in the City and was crime ridden. Indeed, all of my friends from my early days sadly landed up in prison.

I left school at 16 with limited qualifications and immediately began working in a local factory. I spent a year working as a sheet metal worker before getting a job in a hospital as a porter. I spent a number of years working as a porter and then later moving to Casualty and then the Operating Theatre.

I went on to train as an Operating Department Assistant and worked in many of the major hospitals in central London. It was there, when I was 25, that I took two A-levels at night school over one year at the Working Men's College in Camden. I was able to get a place at my local polytechnic to study Law. I worked full time in the operating theatre all the way up to pupillage.

I was fortunate to get a bursary from Lincoln's Inn which covered the Bar Course fees. I had two interviews for pupillage: one first six and one second six. I got both pupillages. That was 20 years ago. I am now a successful criminal defence barrister, have a good practice and hope soon to apply for Silk.

Emily Culverhouse



When I left school at 18, I had just 6 'C' grade 'O' levels to my name and had spectacularly failed my 'A' levels. Not knowing quite what I wanted to do, I drifted around for a while and then, aged 21, did a secretarial course. I worked as a secretary for a few years but as I matured I realised I needed more of a challenge in life.

By the time I was 30, I plucked up the courage to study part time for a law 'A' level and by the end of the first term I realised that I'd found my calling. I got a place on a part-time law degree course at the University of the West of England. After attending extra contract lectures and teaching myself the rest, I took and, managed to pass, the entrance exam and went full time, graduating in 1996 aged 34.

The BVC was coming to Bristol the following year so I signed up for a Masters while I waited for the Bar Vocational Course (BVC) [*now the Bar Professional Training Course*] and, once that was passed, there I was, aged 36 with no pupillage despite having had a couple of interviews.

I decided getting this elusive pupillage was going to be my next full time job, so I moved to London. I temped as a Legal Secretary and hung around Lincoln's Inn trying to get to know as many people who could help me as possible. It worked! Several people (who have since become good friends) lent me their support and advice and experience. My CV was hacked about and eventually declared good enough, I was given 'mock interviews' and even got some 'devilling' work out of it too.

I was fortunate enough to get two 6-month pupillages in good sets and moved (relatively) seamlessly into tenancy and the rest is history. Getting to this stage hasn't been easy but I'm grateful to members of Lincoln's Inn for their help and so pleased that, partially from my experience, we have the Lincoln's Inn Pupillage Foundation Scheme which along with His Honour John Samuels QC and Paul Heim I helped to create. Achieving your aims is not impossible (even as a mature applicant from a red-brick university, at a BVC outside London) particularly with determination and the right support.