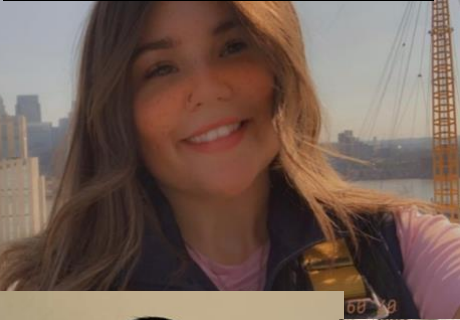




Innocence  
Project  
London

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**2023/24**

This publication is a collection of autobiographical reflections from students working on the Innocence Project London (IPL), which is based at the University of Greenwich, London.

The IPL was established in 2010, and it became a registered charity in 2020. Law and criminology students work in small groups to deconstruct cases of convicted individuals who are maintaining their innocence and have exhausted the criminal appeals process. Students learn through the innocence project model of clinical legal education that developed in the United States of America where the first innocence project was founded in 1992. They analyse the evidence that led to conviction, develop legal theories that could reopen the case, and search for factual evidence of innocence.

The majority of clients that apply to the IPL will have already appealed their conviction, so the aim of our work is to submit an application to the Criminal Cases Review Commission (CCRC). The CCRC is an independent body that reviews possible miscarriages of justice in England and Wales. It determines whether a conviction or sentence should be referred back to the Court of Appeal. The CCRC will only refer a case back to the Court of Appeal if it finds a new piece of evidence or a new legal argument that was not put forward at the time of the trial or on appeal which would render the conviction unsafe in the context that it would have changed the decision of the jury had they had been aware of it.

The IPL is a member of the global Innocence Network, based in the United States of America, which is an affiliation innocence organisations from around the world, all of which offer pro-bono legal and investigative services to convicted individuals who have maintained their innocence.

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## **Foreword**

**Dr Louise Hewitt | Director IPL | Associate Professor  
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This collection of short auto/biographies is based on the students' experiences of working on the IPL either voluntarily or as part of a credit bearing module (in Criminology only). Students deconstruct claims of innocence, carrying out a review of all of the evidence and documentation available to them in an attempt to identify a new piece of evidence or a new legal argument that was not put forward at the initial trial or on appeal. These students are advocates for innocence work, they speak at conferences nationally and internationally, and share their casework with both University of Greenwich students and academics as well as on a global platform. Without them, the work of the IPL would not be possible, and it is their drive and passion that keeps me going. Every year I am inspired by their determination to improve the criminal justice system, and I hope, when you read this collection, you will be inspired too.

This book is an innovative way for students to tell their stories about their experience working for the IPL and engage them in a new way of reflecting on their learning. The process of writing these auto/biographies gives each student a voice and reading their stories helps us to understand who they are through their personal experiences.

I am honoured to run the Innocence Project London and to provide a student experience that not only improves student outcomes, but also provides access to justice for convicted individuals maintaining their innocence. The students have been brave and bold in sharing their personal stories. I am immensely proud of them for their effort and their hard work and dedication to what we do.

Find out more about the IPL at [www.IPLondon.org](http://www.IPLondon.org)

On X and Facebook @innocencelondon

On Instagram @innocenceprojectlondon

## **Asya Mitisheva, 3<sup>rd</sup> year BSc Hons Criminology and Criminal Psychology**

I am studying Criminology. This is something that I have always wanted to do. However, when I started University, I did not expect this to be a life-changing experience. I definitely did not have any idea about the additional opportunities that would surround my Criminology degree. I was very surprised by everything that has followed.

It all started on my first day at University in my very first seminar. The room was quite full. We were talking about crime in general. Until that day, I had never thought that I would be able to stand in front of so many people and tell them my opinion. I have always been shy and not very good at communicating with people, especially people I do not know. We discussed different types of crimes, we suffered with our imaginary victims, and we punished our imaginary offenders. But while the discussion continued, I just could not stop myself from thinking that my peers sounded excessively punitive and harsh. I had the feeling that if our class was a trial jury, no one could possibly get something less than life. One thought kept coming to mind. I raised my hand and almost shouted, "What if they were innocent!?" At the end of the day, we are all humans, and mistakes happen all the time. What if the fictitious person who my peers were so willing to put in prison was not actually the monster they thought they were?



This is how I first heard about the Innocence Project London (IPL). The seminar tutor suggested I should join the IPL, which is based at the University of Greenwich. I come from a country where the 'if you are sentenced, then you are guilty' is a truth everyone accepts, and organisations such as the IPL do not exist. I knew a little about innocence campaigns in general and from television programmes and shows. I had heard the stories of innocent people who spent the best years of their lives behind brick walls and metal bars, paying for someone else's crimes. I knew that in some cases, people die in prison and never get the chance to have their innocence recognised. This is what I knew back then. It was not much, but it was enough to draw my attention to the suggestion that my tutor made. I started reading about the accomplishments of the Innocence Project and the stories of the people they supported in getting their freedom back. The more stories I read, the more I became eager to join the IPL. I know how injustice feels; I think we all do. It is all those small moments when your friends disbelieve what you say or when people you trust betray that trust. Those moments are painful and even more so when you must suffer them alone. People's stories are what motivated me to join the IPL, and this is what has kept me working for the IPL for two years.

It is easy to forget how fragile we are. We think that if we are law-abiding citizens and do not do anything criminal, we are protected and our freedom is guaranteed. However, I am sure many innocent people have had the same thoughts before their lives were turned upside

down in the blink of an eye. People need someone to believe in and support them at such moments. The ordinary person, like you or me, often does not have either the resources or the legal knowledge to fight against the state. It is their word against that of the authorities. This is precisely what makes innocence organisations so vital. Without the dedicated support of innocence workers, many people would not stand a chance in fighting against the giant justice machines. Pro bono organisations, such as the IPL, support people who have exhausted all other legal avenues and are maintaining their innocence. For these people, such organisations are their last resort.

During my two years with the IPL, I had the privilege to work on two very different cases. Both cases contributed different perspectives to my overall experience as a caseworker for the IPL. Throughout my journey, I had my ups and downs. I had lost faith and confidence in my abilities so many times. The first year was the most challenging. I worked on a case that I could not see having a positive outcome, i.e. an application to the Criminal Cases Review Commission, and I did not feel part of that team. As a Criminology student, I found working with legal documents very hard at the beginning. I still remember my first task and the confusion, lack of understanding, and absolute panic I experienced when asked to do a prosecution timeline. Although I needed to work in a team on that task, this did not give me confidence because I felt we did not actually work well as a team. It was a devastating experience if I am being

honest. Looking back on it, I am not even sure why I stayed and continued the following year. I think it was still my desire to help someone, but at the same time, it might well be my stubbornness. I just do not give up easily. I am proud to say, however, that staying on was one of the best decisions I have ever made.

In the second year of my work with the IPL, I joined a new group. We worked on a highly complex case involving many people, a big police operation, gangs, complicated relationships, and questionable evidence. My new co-workers had worked on this case the previous year and knew a lot about it. However, they welcomed me and helped me get up to speed with everything. We all worked as a team with one goal; probably because of that, we did not lose hope. When working with an organisation that gives people hope, you are not allowed to lose your own because it is not you and your personal success at stake but someone else's life and freedom. I had the absolute privilege to work with people who expressed the same opinions as me and who also took the case very seriously and never gave up. As a result, we were able to find a new legal argument that could possibly be used for an application to the CCRC. Unfortunately, the academic year has ended before we have been able to witness the outcome of our work. New students will take over next year. I am sure their fresh eyes and motivation to support innocent people will keep the case going in the same positive direction.

Apart from the casework, many aspects of working for the IPL left an unerasable mark on me. At the IPL

Symposium, which takes place every year, I heard many sad but, at the same time, deeply inspiring stories from people who successfully proved their innocence. In turn, these people dedicated their lives to helping and supporting others in similar situations. I attended all the symposiums over the three years of my studies. If I have the chance, I will continue attending them in the future, even after I graduate and leave the IPL. Every guest speaker we had the privilege to hear, not only at the symposium but on other occasions, was unique. Each person brought a world of experience, faith, and power. They did not let their experience get them down and turned the negativity of their encounter with the criminal justice system into something positive and constructive.

Being part of the IPL was not only casework. It is an experience that enriches you and, to some extent, changes your whole personality. I learned many things about myself as a student and as a person. It helped me grow both academically and individually. As a Criminology student, I could view the legal side of the criminal justice process and the drawbacks of the criminal justice system. The knowledge I acquired of the English legal system has many potential applications in my future work as a Criminologist. We tend to think fairness is inherently rooted in the criminal justice system. Being part of the IPL, however, has taught me that it is necessary to be critical regarding this notion. Intentionally or not, miscarriages of justice occur, and the criminal justice process is not always fair. The idea of being innocent until proven guilty beyond reasonable doubt ends with the

jury's verdict. Innocent people are left with only two options: to accept their sentence and learn how to live their lives with this injustice or to fight and do their best to prove that the system was wrong. The latter need someone to believe in them and help them prove their innocence. Being part of the IPL made me feel proud because I was one of those people who dedicated their efforts to help and support others.

## **Chinnelle White, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Law LLB Hons**

I probably did not have the most traditional route into law and innocence work. Growing up on a small council estate in Deptford, South London in the late 1990s, where everyone knew everyone, had its positives and, at times, questionable qualities. On the one hand, there was a strong sense of community where you could always rely on your neighbours to help when your household often fell short of essentials. On the other hand, you were not really expected to achieve much outside of the box. University was for the 'rich people' and that simply was not us. Being an only child, with a mother that had mental health issues and a stepdad who did the best job that he knew of raising me, I didn't really have many people to answer any questions that I may have had about life. But what I did have was an inquisitive mind and a stepdad that fiercely encouraged me to believe that I could achieve anything I set my mind to. Coming from such upbringings, I often witnessed arrests, house raids in the early hours of the morning, and people going to prison for crimes that even I, having been a childhood friend to some of them, could not imagine them being capable of committing. But I never really questioned the authority or actions of the police or indeed any part of the criminal justice system. My youthful mind associated them as being the good guys, the ones you go to when you need help. If you had been arrested and sent to prison, then surely you were guilty of whatever you had been prosecuted for, and that was that.

After becoming a single parent to four young children by my early thirties and having by then lost my stepdad to a long-standing illness, I realised that I had also lost a sense of my own identity and personal career ambitions while taking care of everyone around me for many years. I began to question myself about what it was that I, as an individual, truly wanted to achieve and came to realise that my passion lay in pursuing a career within the criminal justice system. I had always wanted to go to university to study law and knew I had the determination it would take to achieve what I wanted to academically, but I lacked the qualifications to access it. Undeterred, I enrolled at college to study for my English GCSE alongside training to volunteer in the youth justice sector, which really helped me to understand some of the hidden generational and sociological causes of crime. I also became aware of the complexity and challenges that both sides of the spectrum face. I went on to complete an Access to Law course which gave me the grades I needed to get me into university studying for the LLB. Going to the University of Greenwich was no coincidence for me. While researching which university I wanted to attend, I came across the Innocence Project for London, and instinctively knew that this is where I wanted to study. I attended the annual symposium and was captivated not only by the testimonies of those that had been wrongfully convicted of crimes, but also by my own unawareness that this even happens at all, let alone as often as it does. It occurred to me then that we often associate the word 'justice' with the act of retribution, but we very rarely relate it to the notion of innocence and vindication. I was

extremely inspired by the symposium and joined the IPL as a second-year law undergraduate. The fantastic training offered by Dr Louise Hewitt, alongside the brilliant and thought-provoking guest speakers throughout, really confirmed to me that I belong in the criminal justice sector. One of the many positive things that I have personally gained from the project is the privilege of being able to develop my own awareness of the many grey areas that must be addressed to successfully challenge the systemic issues that create opportunity for miscarriages of justice to continue. Being a part of the IPL offers you the invaluable opportunity to challenge your own preconceptions and embedded biases, which has truly helped me to grow as an individual. It has been an eye-opening experience to become so informed about 'the machine', which is how I now refer to the criminal procedural process that people suspected of a crime can find themselves in. The barriers that people face when attempting to access legal support can seem impossible for them to obtain for a multitude of reasons.

Being a law student is not exactly how I thought it would be. I have found that knowledge of the law is useful to all of us, but that quite often it is black and white, even rigid and cold in its approach. To me, organisations such as the IPL work to humanise the people behind the paperwork and to give them a voice, which I believe is so important. One thing I admire about organisations such as the IPL is the fact that at their very core, they offer hope to others and act as a reminder that they are not simply a case of 'out of sight-out of mind'. We all need



someone at some point in our lives to believe in us and to care enough to help us when we need it the most.

So, if you are contemplating starting this journey, I would say don't hesitate. For me, it was my curiosity sparked by witnessing numerous crimes while growing up in a disadvantaged area of London that prompted me to seek a deeper understanding. You do not have to come from a specific background or have amazing qualifications to be a part of innocence work. You just have to have an open mind, be passionate about helping others, and be determined to use the power of knowledge to create much needed positive change in the world.

**Liida-Lotta Suonenlahti, 3<sup>rd</sup> year BSc Hons  
Criminology and Criminal Psychology**

How can you be sure your client is innocent is a question I have heard often since I started working for the Innocence Project London (IPL). To me, the answer is simple: when a person tells you they are innocent, you owe them a responsibility to listen. I think many people do not realise how invaluable innocence work truly is and the truth is that people – innocent people – go to prison far too often. As a person who comes from a rather sheltered background, the concepts of an imperfect criminal justice system, miscarriages of justice, and wrongful convictions were foreign phenomena to me. I lived through my childhood quite innocently, and it did not dawn on me that there are real people who suffer from miscarriages of justice more often than you could imagine. As I got older, the reality of racism, discrimination, and the faults in our criminal justice system became clearer to me, and I wanted to see if there was something I could do to help individuals who are mistreated in the system. Funnily enough, I ended up on the Innocence Network website and saw that there were possibilities to volunteer. As I lived in Finland, I ended up not applying. It is crazy to think that four years later I would be working for the Innocence Project London as a casework volunteer. After moving to the United Kingdom to pursue a degree in Criminology, I began seeing the obvious shortcomings of the criminal justice system in this country, and after attending the IPL's miscarriages of justice symposium, I was inspired to apply.

I joined the IPL in a unique set of circumstances as I had to leave the University at the very beginning of the second year of my studies. My father who had been battling cancer for two years and nine months was in a hospice, and I had to fly back to Finland very quickly as his condition was worsening and no one knew how much time he had left. I did not have a lot of time with my dad, but he managed to tell me he was proud of me. I love my father dearly, and he is the reason I am in University. He is the reason I am able to sit here and talk about my experience in working for the Innocence Project London. He inspired me, encouraged me, and taught me how to be kind and empathetic. I believe those parts of me make me a better friend, colleague, and student, and it is all thanks to him.

I considered interrupting my studies and taking a year off, as I felt very overwhelmed after my father's passing, but after Dr Louise Hewitt gave me our client's case, I changed my mind immediately. Focusing on the case gave me a sense of purpose, and I felt responsible to give my best to the case for the sake of our client. I was not familiar with all of the legal terminology I faced, and I felt very confused with the paperwork. I could not believe that with the lack of evidence, our client was still convicted. I often wondered how an individual could be convicted with no evidence, but I quickly realised that is a reality. Working for the IPL has helped me identify my own personal biases alongside the faults in the criminal justice system, and it has made me even more passionate to join

the fight against racism and unequal treatment of people who end up in the criminal justice process.

It was a relief to see that other caseworkers felt as confused as I did when we discussed the case in one of our very first meetings. Reflecting on these two years, working for the IPL has challenged me emotionally and academically, and it has pushed me to my limits (in a good way). I have found an interest in studying law, and after meeting our client in prison, I realised the importance of what I was doing; the centre of our work is the clients and their stories. I believe it is an incredible privilege to acknowledge the person behind the paperwork and legal jargon, and the clients are the reason I love working for the Innocence Project London. Innocence work is invaluable, and we need more people to help individuals gain access to justice.

The reality of working for the IPL dawned on me quickly: it is much harder to prove a person is innocent once they are in prison. I had not considered the hours of work and effort it would take to make progress, and I felt a bit naïve as the ideal image of walking our client out of prison in a short amount of time subsided after about a month into our casework. The truth is that this job is difficult. But it is also extremely rewarding and inspiring, and I will carry these two years with me with pride. Although the work was time consuming, I have felt incredibly proud to be part of something meaningful. Not only are we fighting for change in the system, we are also advocating passionately for our clients.

I have found great friends throughout my work for the project, and I am so grateful for their support and guidance. I feel honoured to share this experience with them, and I can only hope our efforts are enough to make a successful application to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. Looking back on my journey with the IPL, I am not only proud of how far we have come as a casework team, but I am also impressed with my own journey. The grief that came with losing my dad turned me into a whole new person, but I believe the old and new versions of myself have made me stronger and more resilient in the end. I believe he would be proud to see how far I've come, and it makes me even prouder to feel like I am a part of real and meaningful change.

## **Jake Giltinane, 2<sup>nd</sup> year Law LLB Hons**

So, a little background about me, as long as I can remember I wanted to study law, but I was never the best student academically. The issue at school was never that I wasn't smart enough to keep up, I just never felt stimulated which often led to me acting up. I attempted to go to sixth form, but I also started work at the same time. This led to me falling into the same trap many young adults from working class backgrounds fall into, which is living at home, earning money and, everything seeming great. Eventually, I dropped out of sixth form to focus on work. I was successful and got promoted easily and won awards in my field within retail.

I eventually gave up working to become a stay-at-home father. I'd had twins that were born with autism which provided a completely different set of challenges in life. As with all challenges, this also provided opportunity, opportunity to develop new skills and advance previous skills in a different way. Once the kids were old enough to attend full time school, I returned to work, quickly progressing to assistant manager.

Things were going well when disaster/fate struck. Following an awful incident, I found myself on the wrong side of the law and remanded to prison. Whilst in prison, I lost my job, my freedom, and lacked the emotional and familial support that I needed to get through the upheaval and to process what was happening. It was here I decided to chase that dream I once had.

In hindsight, I now recognise that my period on remand gave me insight into the justice system and the conditions which my future clients may find themselves in.

I'm a normal, relatively smart, law-abiding person yet I still found myself in prison which shows how easy one decision/mistake can turn your world on its head.

It cannot be understated how much you rely on your solicitor and your barrister to explain each step of the process to you. At bail hearings and pre-trial hearings, you almost feel like a spectator, listening to these professionals talk about you as though you are not in the room. Though you have every right to speak at these things and direct your defence in the moment, for the most part you feel like a spare part with legal terms being thrown back and forth while the professionals argue about decisions that affect your life. At times you feel like you cannot speak, that you'll say something wrong, or that you are so out of place that if you open your mouth, everyone will just look at you exasperated that you would dare speak. It's very hard to express the feeling of these people gathering to discuss your life, your actions, your consequences and yet also feeling like you do not belong there.

Naively, I did my police interview with no legal representation, believing if I simply told the truth, if I cooperated, and if I answered the questions I would go home. I imagine this is a feeling a lot of first-time offenders have. I wouldn't advise this as something

anyone should do, as you never really know what you are saying or agreeing to in that environment.

I realised how much I relied on my lawyer, hopeful that they believed me. During my time on bail, I had a conversation with my solicitor in which he said upon taking my case he hadn't believed part of my story until he met me face to face and tracked down the CCTV. For me, that spoke volumes. You rely on people to believe you, especially your lawyers because you trust them with your freedom, with your life.

After my trial, I attended College and then University. I knew I wanted to study criminal law, however, in the first year, there wasn't much offered to grow knowledge or experience in that area. I had spent a few months wrestling with whether I wanted to be prosecution or defence as a lawyer, although based on my experience I was already leaning toward defence. Then someone asked me a question: would I rather convict an innocent man to prison, or would I rather defend a guilty man and keep him from prison? At this point, having experienced prison and the detrimental impact it had on my mental health I decided that for me, I just couldn't convict an innocent man to those conditions.

I attended the annual Innocence Project London (IPL) symposium and had my mind blown by the work it was doing, the clients they were working with, the process they had to undertake, and the fact that it was students getting to work on real life cases. I'd heard of the innocence project in the USA but had no idea it existed



here, but once I did, I knew I wanted to be a part of it. When I joined the IPL, we were challenged on our perception of innocence. Then you are faced with the reality of people being put in prison with little to no evidence against them, or people that have been convicted having had inadequate defence or incorrect directions given to the jury, and you see how people are convicted using joint enterprise liability and hear about those serving IPP (Imprisoned for Public Protection) sentences. All these things only solidified my choice in wanting to become a defence barrister.

My experience, my passion for law, and coming upon the IPL the way I did makes me believe that I did not choose the IPL, but the IPL chose me. The IPL offers me insight into the law I would not otherwise have had. It allows me to build on my own experience whilst learning about the experience of others. The IPL allows me to do good and hear people out and give them something to focus on beyond being in prison. Prison can have such a negative impact on your mental health; being surrounded by murderers, career criminals, and drugs it becomes very easy to drown in your own circumstances. Hopefully the work I go on to do can allow people to keep their heads above water.

## **Scarlett Newman, 3<sup>rd</sup> year Law LLB Hons**

Growing up, I had no knowledge or experience of the criminal justice system. I didn't know anybody who went to prison, and I certainly would have questioned the idea that innocent people go to prison.

I was born in Sidcup and lived in Bexleyheath (Kent/London border, South-east England) until I was 6, then moved and subsequently grew up in a little corner of Kent called Romney Marsh. Having divorced parents, I spent every other weekend in South London. I became aware of the social differences between the two places and started to wonder why they both felt so polarised.

I studied Sociology at A level, and it was only then that I started understanding why life in London felt so different to life on the Marsh. Sociology led me to explore the notion of Crime, and I was faced with the concept that the criminal justice system was not fit for purpose and was flawed in many ways. I always knew I wanted to move off the Marsh, meet new people, and understand the world and my place in it.

The idea that your experiences in life translate to your beliefs about the world and your identity has always been fascinating to me. Sociology made me understand myself better. I began to realise that it takes one person, one story, one experience to change everything. The phrase 'be the change you want to see in the world' always stays with me.

On the 2 March 2019, I attended the university open day and listened to Dr Louise Hewitt talk about the Innocence Project London. Everything fell into place that day. I wanted to study the law, but I didn't want just the degree. I wanted to make a difference, use my education for good, make an impact, and be a part of something bigger. I wanted to be a part of and influence a legal community that reflects the diverse and complex realities of modern-day individuals and life. The Innocence Project London is the reason that I came to the University of Greenwich.

At the age of 4, I was diagnosed with Best Disease, a fluctuating visual impairment that causes the macula (part of the retina at the back of the eye) to degrade. It has no treatment or cure. My diagnosis is something I am always hesitant to talk about, but truthfully, I wouldn't have the connection I do to innocence work without it. Throughout my education, I have had to tell my story to many teachers and academics, advocate for my needs, and ensure that my voice was listened to. If I didn't, the consequence was that I would not have reached my full potential, and I would have fulfilled the label and stereotype that comes from being visually impaired.

Listening to the stories of those who have been wrongfully convicted has always felt personal to me. These individuals have been let down by a system that is supposed to protect them. This has always resonated with me, as there were times when my voice and my story

was not listened to, which had a huge impact on my self-esteem and sense of identity in the past.

However, along the road, there have been people who have listened... really listened to my story, and have enabled me to reach my full potential, be the woman I have always wanted to be, and not be confined to a label.

When a person is convicted, they are labelled as a criminal, labelled as guilty. But, if it is found that they have been wrongfully convicted, they won't be relabelled as innocent. Innocence is not a feature of our criminal justice system.

I went into prison to meet my client for the first time in May 2023. We spent two hours talking to him about his case and his story. He is a human, who, with the knowledge and experience he possesses of this world has ended up in prison but is maintaining his innocence. He could have pleaded guilty, he could still plead guilty and serve half of his sentence, but he isn't. The ability to maintain your innocence in a system that makes it so easy to be guilty should be commended. He has a story, his own set of circumstances which has led him to where he is, and he deserves to be listened to.

Innocence work has taught me the value of listening to people's stories. The world is full of us humans, trying to make sense of what we are here for, and human connection is the one thing that makes us feel less alone in this world. Someone who is proclaiming their

innocence will often feel like they haven't been listened to. The Horizon-Post Office scandal is a clear example of this, sub-postmasters despite maintaining their innocence and persistent claims of the faulty computer system, were manipulated into pleading guilty and believing it was their own shortfalls.

Innocence work feeds into my why. I aspire to become a barrister and to make a substantial impact on society by listening to and advocating for individuals who have their own story and their own set of circumstances which has led them to where they are now.

You have everything you need in you to be the change you want to see in the world. You don't have to change the entire world, just the bit around you.

If someone proclaims they are innocent, I will listen, and you should too.

## **Chelsea Copping, 3<sup>rd</sup> year Criminology**

*'Parents are the ultimate role models for children. Every word, every movement, and action effects. No other person or outside force has a greater influence on a child than a parent.'* – Bob Keeshan

My parents have always been my number one supporter's regardless of what I have been doing; from entering sporting competitions to learning to drive and most recently finishing my degree at Greenwich University. Before coming to university, I clearly was naïve to the fact of how lucky I was to have parents who supported me with my choices. My choice to study criminology came as somewhat of a surprise to my family. After losing my dad in 2015, I declined my first university offer to study Sports Therapy in Birmingham with the idea of wanting to stay closer to home for my family. However, years later, I then decided to research a new career path, something that would be challenging and that I could feel like I could progress in. I had a rough idea of wanting to join the Metropolitan Police after graduating, despite all my friends and family constantly saying, 'are you not too short to be a police officer', but I decided to go for it and push myself to achieve it.

The University of Greenwich offered so many opportunities for students as well as the opportunity to volunteer on the Innocence Project London, which I knew was something that I would love to do. Despite deciding to not apply to volunteer in my second year because I was too nervous for the interview procedure, I decided to push

myself and apply in my final year (I can only thank some of my lecturers for their support and optimism) . I still find it surreal that I get to take part in the amazing work that an innocence project does. The opportunity to fight for fairness and equality in the justice system is something to be proud of.

One aspect of my client's case that stuck with me was the fact that they never got to meet their new-born baby before they were convicted. This resonated with me, and I thought back to my younger self who enjoyed playing and spending time with both my parents so even losing my dad at 17 was hard. I always think back to how he missed seeing me pass my driving test, my 18<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays, and just finally passing adult milestones that are celebrated between parents and their children. It is sad to think how my client's child will be growing up losing all these precious memories due to a wrongful conviction. The whole experience of volunteering on the IPL has highlighted the empathy I feel for those incarcerated in general as academically I have learnt the negatives of imprisonment which is only exacerbated when the individual is fighting to prove their innocence. The saddest thing I have realised is that innocence is linked with privilege and race, which only makes me want to fight for justice and equality even more.

Working on the Innocence Project London has been eye-opening, inspiring, and humbling to say the least. Having learnt about the struggles faced by incarcerated individuals' families in my studies, it has been heartbreaking to associate academic knowledge with

real-life situations. Although some of the experiences have been overwhelming, I have also learnt so much. The Innocence Project London allowed me as an individual to be more proactive on social media outlets, using my voice to finally highlight the injustices within the criminal justice system as well as find out about other innocence campaigns internationally. Most recently, global innocence networks worked together on social media to highlight the injustices faced by Melissa Lucio. Sentenced to the death penalty in Texas, USA for a crime that never happened, Melissa's case exemplified the idea of family support for her on the outside when they wrote a letter which begged the courts to stop her execution. This was also another case that affected me emotionally, but seeing how people around the world, including caseworkers for the IPL, mobilised their support through social media was empowering

My experience on the Innocence Project London would have not been the same without Dr Louise Hewitt, who is the most motivating, inspiring, and trusting person ever. Thank you, Louise for believing in me and giving me opportunities and allowing me to find the love for innocence work. Without you I would not be the person I am today.



## **Giulia Scattolin, 2<sup>nd</sup>-year BSc Criminology and Criminal Psychology (Extended)**

I am from Italy, and I moved to London seven years ago. Since I was young, I have always fought against anything unjust. In Italy, however, I was unable to find an opportunity to fight against wrongful convictions and, to be completely honest, I did not even know that I wanted to.

I worked in hospitality for many years, coming from a family who always worked in hospitality, and I thought that was my destiny. After a while, I realised that I was not happy and from that point onwards, everything changed for me. When I realised I could study Criminology and Criminal Psychology in London, I did not think twice. I did everything I needed to in order to study this subject.

From the foundation year, lecturers talked about the Innocence Project London (IPL), and at the earliest opportunity I applied. I was scared that my lack of experience in the justice system would be an obstacle for me. This was because I knew that if you do not have a minimum of experience in the work environment, employers are usually sceptical in hiring you; but when I received the email from the IPL Director Louise Hewitt in which she said that I was part of this new world, I literally cried from happiness.

When studying for my degree I understood that right and wrong can have grey areas in the criminal justice system, but I was not really aware of how this manifested until I started working for the IPL. This was my first lesson. The Criminal Justice System is vast. It starts from the point of investigation into a crime followed by a trial and ending with a potential conviction.

During my course, I learnt that everyone is subject to individual biases which can be conscious or unconscious. These individual biases can then be intensified during group discussion, for example during a trial or when juries deliberate or when every part of the system collaborates. More specifically, the investigation can be done in detail, but then during the trial, the jury interprets the evidence based on how it has been presented by the prosecution and defence. Furthermore, given that the system is huge, the collaboration often lacks communication, and not every part of the system is connected to one another. Therefore, the combination of biases and lack of communication can result in wrongful convictions. Do not get me wrong, I do not want to justify anyone, but the criminal justice system is made up of human beings, and in order to do a good job for our clients, I truly believe that we have to take into account every perspective. Moreover, being aware of these perspectives can be very helpful for us to understand where the system failed.

Nevertheless, for many, the concept of what innocence looks like is someone having no previous convictions and no complications in their life. For many convicted people, however, their lives are more complicated than we

realise; moreover, having previous convictions does not mean that the person is guilty of every crime. Imagine being sentenced to more than 20 years in prison for a crime you did not commit and, because of your past, no one listens to you. This is where the IPL comes in.

In England, innocence is a moral and not a legal value, thus it is not possible to construct a case around innocence, but only around the safety of the conviction. Thus, to overturn a conviction, we have to find new evidence or a new legal argument which was not presented at the time of the trial, which would make the conviction unsafe. Trust me, deconstructing a wrongful conviction is not easy. It is a slow and hard process, and it necessitates patience. This was my second lesson.

At the beginning, when I first read my case I was really excited. I had the summing up of the trial judge and other documents detailing the main points of the case including witness statements, police reports, jury bundles, CCTV images, and cell site data. I was confused and frustrated. I found myself overwhelmed with the workload of the IPL alongside attending lectures, seminars, assessments, and also working. The difficulty does not lie only on the fact that we have to investigate backwards or on the amount of material we have to go through or because of all the variables at play, but the difficulty lies also in the fact that not every part of the system is willing to help. For example, we never know if, in recovering evidence, the police will work with us or if we need an expert opinion and that expert would be willing to work pro bono. However, my experience in hospitality helped me a lot in

managing my time and these aspects. In the beginning, I was also conflicted as to whether my client was guilty of the crime for which he was convicted. In time, I now understand that this was because of my own bias. This was my third lesson.

The awareness about miscarriages of justice that the IPL raises is of vital importance. We always think that these things cannot happen to us, that it happens to other people, but let me tell you something, anyone can be a victim of a wrongful conviction, and I think that everyone would like to have their voices heard. The Criminal Justice System is complicated and having someone who believes you and works to help you is significant.

The IPL gives us as students a great opportunity to apply what we learn in class to real cases, which is a unique way of learning for us, not only professionally but also personally. I am very aware that I am just a student right now, but I am also aware that what we do, no matter how small or how long it takes, can change someone's life for the better.

## **Joana Caleca, 3<sup>rd</sup> year Criminology and Criminal Psychology**

*'I am nothing but a mosaic of all the people I've met and the things they've carried... all the good the bad the ugly and all the in-between.'* (Miller, 2018)

When I was younger, I did not notice how easily our lives are influenced by everyone we meet and everything we experience. It wasn't until the beginning of university that I realised something as small as a habit you had growing up can influence the trajectory of your life. I grew up watching crime movies and series with my grandma, I remember how they were exhilarating and did not need any empathetic emotions to be understood. That attracted me more and more to the criminal justice system. I was also always intrigued by psychology as it was a way of understanding people. However, at the end of my college years, I finally understood that following psychology would not be for me as I did not see myself as empathetic and sufficiently able to understand people's emotions to try to support them. That was when I came across Criminology and Criminal Psychology. After years of seeing it on screens, finally being so close to the scenes was mind blowing. However, in the first couple of lectures, we were told how the movies were all fiction. Everything was not as it seemed. But little did I know how much it differed from a small group of FBI officers always catching the bad guy on TV to cases where the bad guy was not the one convicted but an innocent person was.

I grew up with anxiety, I have had it since I can remember. It all started with repressing my feelings as a child and not speaking up, I was quiet all the time. This led me not to understand my own emotions and how to express them, which meant I felt I never developed the knowledge of how to express empathy for other people. Not that it is not there, I can still feel for people, but I can never project it. When I started going to events run by the Innocence Project London (IPL) in my second year of university, it all changed. I saw how these adults had been through so much and continued to be able to talk about their lives, without caring about if their emotions shined through or if they cried. This left me floored. It was after one event that I decided that one way or another I had to be a part of this amazing movement, not so much for myself but for all the families that didn't get to spend time with their loved ones, such as the time that I had with my grandma growing up.

In my third year, I started volunteering for the IPL as part of the work placement module. I went to the training, learning slowly how disorganised and intricate the criminal justice system can be and how the law is not as straightforward as I initially perceived it to be. This was further highlighted by the case I began working on: a young black man who was convicted by way of Joint Enterprise. It was through the case that I learnt how this common law principle was used to convict groups of people with very little evidence against them in terms of showing that every single person was involved in the crime. I started to learn more about law and the use of bad character evidence. I started to feel the reality of the

cases I had heard about at the events I attended. It was also the first time I felt I was able to express my empathetic side, even though I was still hiding some of my true emotions. This was progress in how I was developing personally in terms of finally learning to express empathy, but it was also the turning point for my future trajectory in life. I started with the idea that the criminal justice system works, and I wanted to be part of helping society, but now whilst I still want to help society, I want to be part of the criminal justice system to change it from the inside, to fight against the wrong being done.

The Innocence Project London has created a space where I feel accepted, it has created a sense of belonging, and a sense of good. It helps people that have been wrongfully convicted, but it also helps everyone that is a part of the work to find themselves, their strengths and understanding.

It took me some time to realise the impact that the Innocence Project London has had on my life, it's only evident just now when I reflect on what I have written. Going over everything that has happened throughout these couple of months made me realise the changes happening within myself in terms of being able to express to my friends and family what my work means to me. This work showed me how it is okay to feel all the highs and lows, to be professional but to also express emotion, to not know someone but to feel for them. I can comfortably say I have changed for the better.

The words written above show my personal progress in the last few months, but it doesn't show even a quarter of the appreciation I have for the Innocence Project London. It has truly changed my outlook on the criminal justice system and on people in prison, but overall it has changed my work ethic and my personal development. I could never thank anyone enough for this opportunity and express the gratitude I have, but I can thank Dr. Louise Hewitt for creating this amazing organisation in our university, and for all the work she puts in. And a special thank you to my case work group because they have supported me in many ways. To my client and every client of the Innocence Project London, we are trying our hardest.



## **Mihaela Ciobanu, 3<sup>rd</sup>-year BA H Criminology and Criminal Justice**

If someone had told me years ago that I would be studying for a degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice in London, I would have told them how absurd that sounded. I always imagined myself working for Interpol or the FBI, but that was out of reach because I was never good at sociology, history, geography, or English. In fact, during high school, my interest was always rooted in science and forensics rather than understanding the causes, consequences, and prevention of crime.

My family and partner played an important role in helping me decide to move to London to study. My parents in particular because they gave their whole lives to give me a better one, and my partner because he helped me through the whole process of choosing the course and university by giving me the courage to challenge myself.

During my degree, I have learnt that knowledge is power, and it is an important tool for making changes in the world. Looking back, it is embarrassing to think that I once believed not only that people in prison deserve to be there because they committed a crime, but also that innocent people could never end up in prison. Pursuing my degree has equally developed both my empathy for offenders and my frustration with the criminal justice system. It was only when I started volunteering with the Innocence Project London that I finally understood how many people are wrongfully convicted and how dependent they are on volunteers to help them.

Wrongful convictions occur for a variety of reasons - such as eyewitness misidentification, false confessions, circumstantial evidence, witness perjury, or police misconduct. When this happens, it leaves deep scars not only on the individuals, but also on their family, their friends, and society as a whole as if it can happen to them, it can happen to you and me. Hearing about the cases being worked on by the Innocence Project London has made me feel countless emotions and realise that as a society we must not only educate ourselves about wrongful convictions, but also learn to be more empathetic and non-judgemental, because we all walk a fine line when it comes to becoming part of the criminal justice system.

This incredible experience is how I found my why, my reason to keep trying and working so hard. During my second year at university, I became very interested in helping prisoners after I discovered the success of the Norwegian prison system. As a result of that discovery, my main aim became to implement similarly humane prisons in Portugal. However, it would never have been possible to dream so big if the Innocence Project London had not helped me find my voice, by giving a voice to those failed by the criminal justice system.

There is nothing more fulfilling than knowing our work is part of a bigger picture and that we are not only making a difference in an individual's life, but teaching other people how they can make a difference too. Volunteering with the Innocence Project London opened my mind in a way I never imagined possible and taught me that in my future

career, for which I have been so brilliantly trained, I must remember that to always give a voice to those who do not have one.

## **Bethany Howell, LLM: International and Commercial Law**

Life is looking positive in 2022. I have undertaken a mini-pupillage with 2 Bedford Row and have travelled to Basildon Crown Court, Colchester Magistrates Court. I am learning more about individuals and their struggles as well as the law and why it is so important to uphold the rule of law as well as why we seek justice.

At present, I am party to two court cases which would never have been the case if I had gone through the same things five years ago. I was much more timid, naïve, and saw the world through rose tinted glasses, and I am now stronger, getting healthier, and feeling happier in my skin.

However, this hasn't always been the case. *\*Trigger warning\** Discussion of triggering incidents – mental health, sexual offence, eating disorders

A throwback moment to being at secondary school and experiencing the most horrendous bullying because I was a 'fat' girl. I started secondary school in September 2010, just three months after the worst thing in my life had happened. I felt that my life was falling apart into pieces like a cracked mirror, because even if it is put back together again, it will never truly be the same as it once was. I lost my Nanny Dunkley, my favourite person, and my world shattered. I lived in a blur for the first year of secondary school, and I just wanted to be at home with my mum supporting her through the loss of this glorious woman who had been through so much in her life. It was

exciting and daunting at the same time. I remember just feeling this icky feeling deep in the pit of my stomach where I just felt like the odd one out. I remember being in a PE class playing hockey, but hockey meant lots of bruises which in turn meant I was not bothered, I just yearned for my life to go back to normal. However, my normal was now being 11 years old having gone through the hardest bereavement to date and trying to adapt to a new school with new people.

Five years passed by in a flash, but the bullying was extensive. I was bullied for pretty much anything, people just didn't get me. I went from being extrovert to introvert quickly and kept myself away from drama as much as possible. The infamous 'well you look like a moose' comment still follows me around, but now I can laugh about it. There had been a verbal disagreement with a fellow student and in retaliation I said those six words, having not thought of a good come back to her comments and punch to my face during a French lesson. Food was thrown at me; I was attacked in corridors and name called more times than I can remember. The thing is, bullies don't realise the repercussions of their actions and words on individuals years down the line. I still have nightmares now.

### Anxiety, depression, and PTSD

I was excited to go back to 'school' at our sixth form, the horrible people had gone to college, and I was ready to be the best Beth I could be. I felt so confident, but it soon

was diminished. It has become a recurring theme in my life story.

In 2016, I applied to university which in itself was a massive achievement. I had lost faith in my ability and panicked that I was a disappointment to my parents. When I secured a place at the University of Greenwich, I nearly leapt onto my friend's lap, and I cried. I had never been so proud of myself. I had chosen to study at Greenwich because of the Innocence Project London which I learnt about through an open day in 2016. I had a hunger for helping people get the justice they so often deserve. It was the one thing in my whole legal educational career that I had 100% wanted, and I truly would have been gutted had I not secured a position as a pro-bono volunteer.

I started my law degree there in September 2017 and again I was in a state of falsehood. I was friends with a group of individuals who were nothing like myself. I pushed myself to be someone I wasn't. I would go out clubbing with the gang and then we would end up missing our 9am contract lectures on a Wednesday morning. I thought I had found friends for life, but it changed. The dynamic of our friendships that I tried so hard to keep changed one night. October 2017, after being at home for the weekend, I went back to my student accommodation for a flat party. It had been a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. I was excited as being invited to someone's birthday party was a rarity. I thought back to the time I was in year 5, 2008, and I was the only one in a group of friends who had not been invited to a meal for a then friend's birthday. I realised I

had come so far. I was making friends, memories, and enjoying uni life. Unfortunately, the happiness didn't stay around for long. Having had a drink or two later in the evening, I became a survivor of rape. I remained tight-lipped for a long time after and only found the courage to report the incident to the police in August 2020 during the lockdown period.

At the end of my first year of studies (my birthday to be exact), I received an email from Dr Louise Hewitt which truly changed the course of my educational and employment career for the better. I had been selected to be an Innocence Project Caseworker. I had wanted it so much and what made it even better was the fact a really good friend of mine had also been accepted. I felt like life was finally going the way I planned.

Whilst this reflection is about my life leading up to and including my Innocence Project work, it is a reflection of just how far I have come and the many obstacles I have faced head on which I am so proud of. My work with the Innocence Project London has allowed me to develop my social skills, work on two real-life cases investigating different avenues of enquiry including facial mapping and cell site analysis. I have been able to understand why crimes are committed as well as the issues that are faced by marginalised members of our society. I have been able to develop my confidence when presenting as well as when advocating for others.

What next?...

Hopefully after Bar School and some time travelling around the world a little bit more, as well as volunteering with an innocence project other than in England, I will gain pupillage with a diverse Chambers. I am really interested in working within the legal sector, particularly in miscarriages of justice, an area which I would like to research further and complete a PhD in – eek!

Life is a whirlwind and sometimes you will face a tree in the road and will need to work out how to move the tree without injuring yourself or damaging your car. Sometimes scratches are caused, but other times the whole front bonnet will be taken off and it will need reattaching. It is for us to fix the bonnet with the help of other people. What I am trying to say is lean on friends and family when you need support and don't be afraid to speak out and ask for help from professionals. You are never alone even if you feel like you are. Be brave, be fearless, be you.





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