



Innocence Project London

Autobiographical reflections of
students undertaking innocence
work



This publication is a collection of autobiographical reflections from students working on the Innocence Project London (IPL), which is based at the School of Law and Criminology 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 alongside a practising lawyer, to review and investigate cases of convicted individuals who have maintained their innocence but have exhausted the criminal appeals process. In January 2016, the IPL became a member of the Innocence Network, based in the United States of America, which is an affiliation of 69 innocence organisations from several different countries, all of which offer pro-bono legal and investigative services to convicted individuals who have maintained their innocence.

The majority of clients that apply to the IPL will have already appealed their conviction or sentence, 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 the United Kingdom. It has the ability to decide 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, 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.

Students working on the IPL learn through the “innocence project model” of clinical legal education that developed in the United States of America (USA), 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.

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Foreword

Dr Louise Hewitt, Director Innocence Project London (IPL), Lecturer in Law University of Greenwich

This collection of autobiographical reflections 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 working on the IPL deconstruct a claim of innocence carrying out a review of all of the evidence and documentation available to them in an attempt to identify that new piece of evidence or a new legal argument that was not put forward at the initial trial or 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.

I wanted to provide an innovative way for these students to tell their stories about their IPL

experience and engage them in a new way of reflecting on their learning. I adapted an existing model of autobiography used by my colleague Associate Professor Dr. Louise Owusu-Kwarteng on the Sociology module entitled *Self in Society* (at the University of Greenwich). The process of writing these reflections has given each student a voice and reading their stories helps us to understand who they are through their personal experiences.

I am proud to run the Innocence Project London and I am proud to provide a student experience that also has a practical benefit. These student reflections show you a window to their lives. They have been brave and bold in sharing their personal stories. I am immensely proud of them for their effort.

Find out more about the IPL at www.IPLondon.org
On Twitter and Facebook @innocencelondon
On Instagram @innocenceprojectlondon

Agartha Asamoah, 2nd-year LLB student

Ever since I was young, I've struggled to understand the concept of innocent people going to prison. It's worth noting that I grew up in a very protected environment: I was shielded from a lot of things that occurred in the neighbourhood I lived in. Because of this, I had what could be described as a 'rose-tinted glasses' perception of crime. I never understood the full extent that the legal system affected the lives of people around me.

After years of being unexposed I became a victim of grooming and sexual assault. This was the moment that the rose-tinted glasses I had on shattered. I was suddenly aware of the awful, traumatic side of crime that I had never experienced before. Because of this I had a lot of dealings with the police. This led me onto a path of wanting to become a lawyer, so I could protect young women like me from having to experience what I went through (in terms of not having justice served), or by ensuring that someone would believe their story – which was something I didn't have.

When applying for the Innocence Project London (IPL), I wanted to find out about the stories of the

people I was trying to help and understand the failures of the legal system. Being a part of the IPL has truly been an amazing experience and has given me the opportunity to further understand legal paperwork and develop other skills that will benefit me on my path to becoming a solicitor.

The case I am working on concerns a sexual offence. Now the question that is most likely on your mind is why I would agree to work on a case concerning sexual violence of any sort. Well, the reason for this was mainly due to my own curiosity. I wanted to understand how these events happen and see it from the side of the accused.

At the beginning I struggled to understand how the incident occurred, due to the number of holes within the case that needed to be cleared up. I found it hard to have empathy for the client as I personally felt they should not have taken it upon themselves to act in the way they did. However, this all changed as I took the chance to remove my own preconceived notions and biases. I took the time to read more deeply into the case files and become more knowledgeable about the character of my client. Once I started doing this, I was able to have empathy for them, and began to understand the wide-ranging circumstances that had led to a case like this.

Bias is an inclination we all have, whether it was formed from previous experiences or developed over time. However, it's these biases and preconceived notions that affect our ability to see the full picture, and mean that we only take in what we experience at face value.

In this situation my biases included not believing the client, and thinking they were guilty. This led to my lack of empathy, stemming from the fact that the case concerned a sexual offence. I believe we have all had moments where we've judged a person based on perceptions of who they are, or watched them more closely because they did not fit the norm we are used to. Or walked faster when we thought they were following, even though they only happened to be going in the same direction. If I continued to fail by sticking to my own biases, I believe I would have been no help in the case, and it would also have prevented me from seeking out the full picture in future situations. This is an important skill that a solicitor – or any person that is in the legal system – should have.

The case itself is unique and has led me to be more open-minded and to think twice before I make snap judgments or decisions about a person simply

because they have been charged with a crime. I now question everything. I genuinely believe that working on the IPL has made me a less judgmental person, and – in a way – has helped me come to terms with my own traumatic experience. I wish it was something everyone had the opportunity to do.

Working for the past eight months with some of the most amazing people – who have come from all walks of life, all striving to help individuals who at this moment need the IPL to help change their lives – is something I am very fortunate to be able to do. My own experience alongside the additional things I have learnt while working with the IPL has completely changed my outlook on the criminal justice system. It has made me more passionate to be a solicitor one day.

Our legal system as a whole is flawed, but I believe it is our responsibility to hold those in the system accountable, to prevent potential miscarriages of justice occurring in the future.

Barsha Nakarmi, 2nd-year BSc Criminology and Criminal Psychology student

It was at the impressionable age of 14 that I was first introduced to the ideas of wrongful convictions and miscarriages of justice. The highly publicised 2007 Meredith Kercher case that was covered on mainstream news channels, even in a small country like Nepal where I'm from, not only sparked an interest in learning about the criminal justice system but also laid the foundation that I would build on as a career path more than a decade later. I've had a fair share of struggles with my education as a high school and two-time university drop-out, but when I was accepted into the University of Greenwich for the BSc Criminology and Criminal Psychology course, I remember feeling like everything I'd been through had led me to this. The romanticised idea of 'meant to be' that I had only seen happen to others or in movies began to resonate even more when I learned about the possibility of being a part of the Innocence Project London (IPL). When the applications for IPL volunteers opened in March 2020, there was no need to think about whether to apply or not. It was instinct.

I understand, however, that this might not be the case for everyone. My intentions and reasons for wanting to work with the IPL might be completely different from everyone else. As a second-year criminology student, the majority of what I've studied or researched so far has been about investigating, identifying and sanctioning those who commit crimes and are imprisoned for punishment. In this sense, IPL is the antithesis of what I'm studying, as we try to identify and represent the incarcerated people who should not be in prison, with the ultimate aim of getting them out. What fascinates me about the IPL as part of an international network is that it works to recognise and remedy the failures of the justice system. In this sense, trying to get people out of prison with the IPL work feels like going against the system that I am studying to be a part of. My life has been a constant struggle between wanting to follow the law and the rules because they exist for a reason, versus fighting against the rules because they are restrictive, and at times just do not make sense. Studying BSc Criminology and Criminal Psychology and working with IPL at the same time is a very accurate example of that paradox.

Before I started real casework on IPL, I was sure – naively, as it turns out – that I knew what to expect: difficult paperwork, discussing the law, group work,

many hours of reading, and making a difference in people's lives. At the end of this academic year, I now realise that I have experienced all of that and so much more. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, all meetings moved online, and initially I wasn't sure if it would be as impactful as in-person sessions. What has happened instead is that I've managed to figure out a system that helps me organise and manage time for both my course studies and IPL work. Of course, this achievement came with challenges of its own.

I am an empath, or so I've been told. I feel for everyone and everything and get too involved. Therefore, I tried my very best to be objective and treat this work as a job where I could professionally give 100% while keeping my emotions out of it. I felt like the odd one out for trying to reduce empathy when I heard most of my colleagues mention that developing empathy was one of their top priorities. For the first few weeks I think I was quite successful, but when we had the first meeting with our client's parents, all of that went out the window. After that meeting, I started investing a lot more time each week into this casework, which meant it took time away from my course modules. Yet again, I got too involved. At the same time, in my other course modules, I was being introduced to topics and issues

that were causing me to reconsider the choices I had made for my future.

I was becoming more aware of injustices, inequalities and the failures of the system, and so my focus was starting to shift. Reading, learning and writing about these issues while working on the IPL – where again I could see how the system was not working – overwhelmed me for a long time, and I had to actively learn how to compartmentalise every aspect of myself as a human being. I had to build a completely new belief system and adapt to demanding situations with balance, without getting too involved. By allowing myself to step back a little or take a break, I was able to find that balance and refresh my motivations for some time. Having said that, I experienced moments of doubt, and often questioned “have I done enough?” or “am I making a difference?”. It’s interesting to me that the answers to these questions eventually came from the positive response of our client’s father to the work our group had done. Although speaking to him for the first time had set me on a semi-self-destructive path, his words, in the end, were also the validation I needed to feel redeemed for my work over the months.

At the beginning of writing this, I believed it would be a fairly easy task, but I couldn’t have been more

wrong. When I sat down to write, I struggled with every sentence for weeks. How do I summarise in a few paragraphs all the exhilarating feelings experienced from scouring a large number of documents and finding small details that may be useful for presenting fresh evidence? How do I concisely express within a word limit all the stress and despair that come from not being able to give as much time as I would like for the IPL casework? To be honest, I've had to learn to accept that I probably can't convey all this – at least not in a way that I would like to – but I think it also comes with the job. For me, working on the IPL this year was not just challenging for academic or professional reasons, but for personal motivations as well. This work can change everything you know about yourself and others, even if it is just through reflecting on a few months' work.

Working at the IPL, you have to accept that – more often than not – things won't go according to plan, or that the information you have in front of you won't make sense. It might make sense in terms of the law, but it probably won't as a student or a human being. Now and then, however, something extraordinary happens that inspires and motivates you to keep going. It can be from a webinar, or hearing a colleague speak about their experience, or feedback

from Dr Louise Hewitt, Director of the IPL, or the words of your client's parents. At the end of this year, as I sit down to write about my work on the IPL, I now realise that I cannot articulate the profound experiences I've had with words that could do them justice. The IPL has changed me both as a person and as a student, in ways I never thought were possible. If there's one thing that I hope readers take away from this is that this kind of opportunity does not come often. What I am not able to express here in my writing, I hope you can experience yourself if you decide to be a part of the IPL – and maybe even write one of these yourself someday and do it better than I have done here.

Rebecca Leigh Barclay, 3rd-year BA Criminology student

I was brought up in Essex with minimal diversity and attended a Church of England primary school. Before learning about discrimination, racism and injustice I was very naive. Prior to studying criminology, I had very different interests and some quite disparate career choices. From a young age I trained as an elite gymnast competing for Great Britain. Gymnastics is now known for its lifestyle and culture, however, back then it wasn't so popular. The culture drove me away from everything I had ever known and loved. My parents and I were frequently told throughout my childhood that I could never succeed academically, and that I performed much better practically. Therefore, after leaving my career as a gymnast we trialled theatre auditions. It kept me grounded and motivated, as I had always been in high pressure and competitive environments.

I had been for one audition and not got the part. I began to feel a little deflated but continued to fight – which later on in life I have found to be a really good trait to have. My second audition was for the West End's version of *Les Misérables*, and I got the part of

Little Cosette. The audition took place at the Sondheim Theatre (formerly known as the Queen's Theatre): once I stood on that stage, I knew that I was comfortable and that I belonged there. I felt like this every single performance. I stood in the same place with my rag in my hand and sung to the toilet signs (as that is the only thing you could see!). The theatre could seat more than 1000 people per show, and it was petrifying to think this many would be watching. At 10 years old the pressure of constantly performing to the best of my ability was challenging: it was my primary focus, and while that was my choice, it later had a detrimental effect on my education.

At this time, I had started secondary school – but I couldn't actually spell my second name. I was placed in the bottom sets, and was frequently encouraged and challenged to work my way up. I had to learn from the beginning, and despite having many setbacks during my time there, I worked through and managed to leave with 11 GCSE A-C grades that got me into my A-levels at sixth form. I studied Health and Social Care, Drama and Theatre Studies and Photography. I found sixth form very challenging, however I received mental health support and was placed with my counsellor, Marc. Marc worked with me for years to help me find the courage to believe

in myself, and to continue to work hard – even though I was struggling so much. When it came to applying to university, I didn't think I could get into studying for something as challenging and diverse as law and criminology. I threw myself at it, and subsequently discovered my forever subject.

Once I started my degree, I put myself forward for every opportunity that I could, such as the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, the Innocence Project London (IPL), and my work placement with the National Probation Service. Each experience has been very different, but equally beneficial. I began volunteering for the IPL in May 2020 and, following training, was assigned my case in September that year. I was initially introduced to the IPL during the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, which primarily aims to bring together traditional university students and incarcerated students. Dr Louise Hewitt, the Director of the IPL, visited HMP Downview with us one week, and she relayed to us the work that the IPL does. I was instantly hooked.

That night I went home realising that my journey into law and injustice had begun. The IPL has changed my perspective on both life and crime. It is quite literally possible to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The prevalence of racism within the

criminal justice system is overwhelming and disheartening – however, the work that we do is so powerful, it actively fights and speaks out about these issues. I did not fully understand this before volunteering for the IPL. Together, we can – and do – do so much that speaks volumes within every community. The amazing thing about the IPL is that all of the volunteers have very different lives, we come from all over the world and yet we hold the same opinions and fight for the same things. It is so powerful and is by far my best and favourite achievement.

Caitlin Hamilton, 3rd-year BA Criminology student

I come from a predominantly white middle-class neighbourhood in Sussex and I feel that, in a way, this has led to me living quite a sheltered life. I have always been able to have what I needed, when I needed it. I went to a good school in a good neighbourhood and I always had access to extracurricular activities such as sailing and skiing. I had a plan but coming to the University of Greenwich was never part of this. I was meant to be at the University of Exeter, but my grades fell short. Looking back, in a way I'm happy I ended up at Greenwich – I feel Exeter would have kept me in my perfect little world.

Before coming to university, I feel I had the same opinion of those in prison as the vast majority of society: people in prison have committed a crime and therefore deserve what they get. Myself and those who I was around back in Sussex thought like this because we did not know anyone who had ever been arrested, let alone gone to prison. However, I am now embarrassed to even say that is how I used to think, especially after working on the Innocence

Project London (IPL). I never thought this opinion would change but studying at university has certainly made me understand the limitations of our justice system, which lead to significant flaws within our society and how we treat those who are incarcerated, innocent or not.

Up until the point of receiving the case, working for the IPL seemed like more of a continuation of university – as, at that time, we were only taking part in workshops where we would learn more about the IPL and its operational aspects. This might have been the situation for me because I have never had a job within this industry before, so in a way it seemed to relate to what I had already been doing in class. When we received our allocated case, it dawned on me that this was actually someone's life, someone who was putting their fate in our hands. I must admit that when I first read the case, I was not really sure how to go forward with it. Reading a case gives a very two-dimensional view, and it did not always put our client in the best light. Thankfully, I was not the only one in the group who felt unsure about how to go forward. But this feeling did not last long, because once we had all gone through the relevant case files and documents we had a better understanding, and knew what next steps needed to be taken.

No one quite prepares you for how much work it takes to be a part of the IPL. I assumed that we, as students, would not do as much work due to our lack of experience. But we were given full responsibility over our case, and it was up to us to establish new avenues to explore. Even though we were not legal experts, by the end we were experts on our given case, due to the amount of time we spent combing through the case files. At times I did find it challenging learning new aspects of the law, especially being a criminology student who was working with law students. I would often feel inadequate, as they seemed to understand more about different aspects of the case due to learning about certain topics in more depth on their programme of study. I would often go away after a meeting with words scribbled on a piece of paper in order for me to then Google said words to gain a better understanding. This not only helped me understand more about the case, it also made me grow in confidence within the group.

At times, it was mentally difficult. The pressure of working for the IPL can be huge. We already have to balance our other university work, essays and exams, as well as part-time jobs and our social lives. Sometimes it seemed too much. There were

occasions when I struggled with the fact that maybe I was not doing enough for the case, all while our client had to endure another day, another week, another month behind bars. I knew that I had a right to take a break if the work became overwhelming, but at times this did not seem fair on not only our client but the other members of the group working on the case. After a while I was able to turn this around and use our client as my biggest motivation to carry out the work. I think this moment came when we had a Zoom meeting with the client's partner to get more information on the case. The emotion they showed made me realise how important and valuable we were to them at that very moment. I do not think I'll ever forget the emotion I felt coming off that call.

There have been lots of times during these past few months where I've thought to myself: "I am 20 years old, how is it fair on my client to have someone with no experience be a part of something so important that has no room for error?". However, through working on the case I quickly discovered that if I was willing to learn then it would all be okay, I would find it easier to manage, and collectively we did have the knowledge. One of my biggest takeaways from this experience was from the 2021 IPL Miscarriages of Justice Symposium, co-hosted by the IPL and Manchester Innocence Project where guest speaker

Dean Gillispie, who was formerly wrongfully incarcerated in the US, said that we were all helping to push the rock up the mountain a little bit more. This really stuck with me, because at times when working on our case, I did not think we were getting anywhere. Yet, when you take a step back, you realise that the case is further along than before.

Christa Paxford, 2nd-year LLB student

Education is the most powerful weapon that you can use to change the world, and the Innocence Project London (IPL) provides a very valuable insight into the criminal justice system in England and Wales. Working with the IPL has given me a rollercoaster of feelings, from excitement to deflation, however the effect of the work on our clients, caseworkers and the community is what makes this project so special.

I first moved to London in December 2016, to live with my boyfriend. This required me to move out of home, away from my family, and to leave my job and the place I had always known. This time in my life was exciting, but at 19 years old it was also overwhelming. Looking back this was the start of my journey to who I am today.

I began working full-time in January 2017: an office-based role managing employees and clients. I quickly realised that this was not where I wanted to stay, and that I needed to do something different. I wanted a new career, however at 21 years old I was aware that if I was going to retrain I should try and do it sooner rather than later. I applied to university through Clearing, quite quickly and without much thought. After completing a foundation year, I started

to look at other universities to complete my degree for the next three years, and this is when I first heard about the IPL.

At the University of Greenwich open day I spoke with the law team about my general interest in wrongful convictions, only drawn from what I knew in the media. It was at this point that I was introduced to the Director of the IPL, Dr Louise Hewitt. She explained the role and objectives of the innocence work, and the connection of the organisation to the Innocence Network, and invited me along to the Miscarriages of Justice Symposium that year at the university. This was the first time I'd had an opportunity to work in an organisation like this. I remember feeling that even as a student I could make some difference in the criminal justice system, however small that may be. Fast forward to April of my first year, and I had applied, been interviewed and accepted my role as a caseworker for the IPL, starting work in September 2020.

I have realised that it is impossible to understand the issues that are being faced by wrongfully convicted individuals within the justice system without knowing their stories. Reading through the case I am working on has been eye-opening in terms of just how much can go wrong: for example, professionals not

including vital information, key documentation and evidence going missing, and people not properly interrogating information. There is a lack of understanding in the UK about how innocent people can be – and are being – convicted of crimes they did not commit, and I believe this contributes to the lack of support and representation for innocent victims. The perception is that miscarriages of justice do not happen in our system, however I know that they do.

This lack of understanding about wrongful convictions leads to innocent individuals being incarcerated and becoming a forgotten part of society. They are automatically tarnished as being criminals who are potentially lying and trying to play the system. The problem with this is that we don't consider these people as victims of an overburdened criminal justice system. It is only when you become exposed to innocence work that you can stop and think that mistakes could have been made, these people are telling the truth, and they are in prison where they don't belong. After each story I hear, I am left feeling that the criminal justice system doesn't always work correctly. Anyone can become a victim of a wrongful conviction – and for me, that is worrying.

I have been guilty of making assumptions about criminals, prisoners and rehabilitation issues. As a law student it can be difficult sometimes to think about how the law affects the individual, as opposed to how the law should be correctly applied to the individual. However, this is why talking more widely about innocence work is important. It makes people become aware of and reconsider these issues. It has made me think.

When I started my work on the IPL, I thought I knew the extent of the issues concerning the criminal justice system, and the type of problems we would come across. I also presumed that it would not be as difficult to get someone out of prison. I was very much mistaken. My original reason for joining the IPL was because I wanted to help fix the issues faced in the criminal justice system: people not being helped or heard. I knew that I would develop new skills from the project, such as case investigation, legal writing, and an understanding of legal documents. I felt like the work would be good practical experience for me. The reality is that, in spite of having a virtual experience due to Covid-19, it has gone beyond what I expected. I have not only learnt the practical skills that I expected to gain, but the project has also helped me develop personally.

Thinking about how this work has affected my life since joining the project, the most noticeable change has been my ability to recognise my own bias. I now have the ability to question a situation, and although I may not agree with it, I make an effort to understand. Once you break down the barrier of being reluctant to accept others' views you can become a much more open-minded person. This has been my biggest personal achievement so far, and I have been able to apply this to my degree and personal life.

The project has lived up to my expectations and much more. Through this work, I have been able to take part in a podcast, listen to guest speakers, and take part in the Miscarriages of Justice Symposium 2021. Reflecting on my journey, I feel proud of myself for coming so far, I feel proud of the work we are doing on the IPL, and I am hopeful I will continue with my legal journey and innocence work while completing my degree.

Reflecting on how much I have grown and developed since I moved and restarted in education, I know I have been fortunate to be offered great opportunities and to meet great people. I feel incredibly lucky and proud. Although some of our work isn't a breakthrough all the time, it is a reminder that – no

matter how small – it is one step in the right direction towards improving the criminal justice system in the UK. All publicity is good publicity for this issue, and that is all we can hope for.

Alexandra-Denisse Bricioc, 3rd-year LLB student

Ever since I was a child, I was told that people who had been convicted were “bad people” who I should stay away from. I never questioned this until recently. In our day-to-day lives, we do not see good people being picked up on the streets by the police and put in jail, right? We are often too caught up in our own little worlds to stop and question the things that have been told to us. We foolishly believe certain things to be true, because we trust the news, and we trust what has been presented and reinforced to us by the media, and by our families and friends. But what happens when something comes along and makes you feel as though you have been lied to all of this time? Where do you go from there? This is my story about my journey as a volunteer caseworker for the Innocence Project London (IPL).

I grew up in a small town in Romania until the age of 18, when I moved to London to pursue my dream of starting a career in the legal sector. Growing up, I was always the type of person who tried to bring people together, even though we are all so different. I believe that as humans, we can learn and grow from different experiences and beliefs. But I paid my

price for it, because the people around me never understood this.

At the age of 14, I was walking home when I was hit by a car. As a result of the accident, not only did I spend almost half a year in hospitals, but I was also left with a horrendous scar. My parents started a criminal lawsuit against the driver, which took almost four years to conclude. Throughout this period, many people I came across told me that they wished the driver would end up between bars as a consequence of his actions. For me it was different. I did not want him to suffer or be convicted. I remember seeing him in the court, crying and greatly regretting what he had done to me.

During my first year of university, I attended the IPL Miscarriages of Justice Symposium, where volunteer caseworkers talked about their work to members of the public. They each spoke about their experience of working on the project, and I was listening to their achievements, thinking how amazing it would be to become part of the team one day. What really touched me during that event was when a special guest, an exoneree from the USA, started to talk about his journey with the innocence organisation that helped free him. He voiced his pain, after spending decades imprisoned for a crime

he did not commit. His story was so emotional, and it was at that moment I understood how a group of young and ambitious students might be an individual's last hope.

A year later, I decided that I was ready, and so I applied to be a volunteer caseworker for the IPL. I got accepted and met the members of my team, and we soon received the details of our case. After reading the documents and discussing them I truly felt that the man we were trying to help had been wrongfully convicted. However, I found it quite hard to sympathise with him as I never saw or met him, and so I tried to search his name on the internet. To my surprise, I discovered lots of news articles that presented our client as an awful individual who had committed something unforgivable. I started reading through a comments section, and for a moment I questioned myself as to whether I was doing the right thing by trying to help him. I thought: "what if I am doing an injustice to other people?". After taking some time to think about it, I remembered that day in court, seeing the driver and that experience changing the course of my life. I remember how, with every word and gesture, he showed remorse for his actions. I remember what I felt in that moment. There will always be at least two sides to every story, and it is for us to decide how we can find a balance

between right and wrong. I must admit, however, that there was something else that made me believe that our client deserved justice, even after seeing so many negative stories in the media. After my accident, news of it appeared on various online websites, where people could voice their opinion and thoughts. Many of them said that I was just a suicidal girl who was looking for attention. All of these comments were made by people who had no idea who I was, or what really happened. I went from being a victim to being a person to blame, the 'criminal' in the eyes of so many, just by the simple fact that people tend to believe what they read in the news. With this in mind, every minute that I spent working on our client case was with the belief that this man was in desperate need of our help, as the criminal justice system had not offered him the access to justice that he deserved.

Throughout my journey, my team has always been supportive, and I could not be more grateful for having the chance to play such a significant part in somebody's life. I must also acknowledge the IPL Director, Dr Louise Hewitt, who has been a great mentor and role model to all of us. She was the first person I saw when walking through the doors of my university. She made it look so easy, even though I was so scared. Moreover, she was the lecturer that

opened my eyes to new opportunities and taught me to always push further, for which I will be forever grateful.

The IPL taught me to reflect and learn from my past, live in the present, and work for my future. I have learnt a lot from other people's experiences and beliefs, even though we are all so different to each other. I have learnt to be more kind, understanding, and thoughtful. I learnt the importance of following your passion and believing in yourself. Lastly, I learnt to always question other opinions before creating my own.

Fatima Ahmed, 3rd-year BSc Criminology and Criminal Psychology student

I am from Globe Town, a small area in Tower Hamlets (which is ranked one of the most deprived boroughs in London, with one of the highest crime rates in the capital). Growing up here I have witnessed crimes of all types, ranging from theft to violence. Violence is normalised in the neighbourhood, so it is no surprise for members of the community to see a violent incident occurring every couple of weeks or months. As a child, I would find it intriguing to watch the violence between gangs from my window. Growing up and learning about gang violence, it became frightening. Most of the crime I was witnessing was occurring between young males of my ethnicity, Bangladeshi Asian. My ethnicity is a big part of my identity, and the reason for joining the Innocence Project London (IPL).

As a Bangladeshi Asian with heritage from a region of Bangladesh that is uncommon among the community that I have grown up in, I have felt different. I have felt different because of the differences between my culture and the other Bengali cultures. A difference could be something as small as the way that I dressed growing up, being

classed as delinquent and 'immodest'. In being non-judgmental, I have felt misunderstood. However, in many more ways, I was like the community. I am alike in my beliefs as a Muslim. I am alike in terms of being a member of an ethnic minority group that has limited opportunities to be successful. Being a member of my minority ethnic group has not only made me understanding in nature, but has increased my empathy towards individuals who are labelled criminal. I want to understand what led to them making the choices they did. Although they can become outcasts and labelled as delinquent, I believe most criminals are more like us than we think.

During my study of BSc Criminology and Criminal Psychology, both my empathy towards ethnic minorities and my anger towards the criminal justice system increased. The unfairness of the treatment of black, Asian and ethnic minority groups frustrates me. My research has taught me that the black community suffers the most unfairness in criminal proceedings: from the procedure of stop and search by police, where this group is targeted the most, to increased convictions – such as through joint enterprise, where many mistakes occur. The Asian community comes second. As an Asian myself, I have always wondered why people of colour are

targeted more than other groups. I would love crime to end, and I am all for justice. But I would first love to improve the treatment of ethnic minorities in the criminal justice system.

This is my reason for joining the IPL. The innocence organisations all over the world highlight the corrupt institutional racism and unequal treatment of people of colour in criminal justice systems globally. My priority during the time I have spent working on the IPL has been to help my client on the case I have been assigned to. Reading my case and learning about my client made me feel more determined to put my best efforts into making a change in the system. My client is a member of an ethnic minority group, and anyone reading the case would know that an incredible injustice has been done to them. It is another example of mistakes being ignored – mistakes that occurred under the joint enterprise doctrine, to a member of an ethnic minority group. It is frustrating to know that making an immediate change to reverse injustices takes time. But an organisation like the IPL even existing keeps the importance of equity for ethnic minority groups in the criminal justice system alive.

Being part of the IPL has sparked my passion in increasing the awareness of issues that need to

change in the criminal justice system. It has given me a critical perspective. To me, it is important that equality in treatment and general human rights is considered for there to truly be any justice served. I have recently started using social media to this effect, and I am actively participating in raising awareness on issues of injustice – such as encouraging the world powers to make a change in relation to the genocide and ethnic cleansing occurring against the innocent children and families of Palestine. Ethnicity is a huge part of identity, and the mistakes and mishandling that are occurring should be considered crimes too. Instead, it is common for the people who make the mistakes to be absolved from any responsibility of the injustice that has occurred to another human.

To end this autobiographical reflection, I would just like to say I am grateful and thankful I have had this opportunity during my time at the University of Greenwich. It has impacted my life positively and has helped me find my passion to help those who are most vulnerable to injustice, to contribute even in the smallest way to make changes in our system, and to be a voice for the most vulnerable and the voiceless.

Lai Yang Tang, 3rd-year LLB student

I never anticipated that I would study law. This statement may come as a shock to those reading, since it would not appear fitting for a student caseworker on the Innocence Project London (IPL) to be making. Growing up, I found myself easily able to adapt to the subjects that I chose, but I never once considered a legal career path. When it came to applying to university and the degree that I wanted to pursue, law ended up being the subject through a spontaneous decision. Personally, the concept of law had always just been a matter of existence to me: we as citizens abide by it, the law is enforced by the state and its public authorities, and those who break it shall face the consequences. In fact, I have a feeling that is probably how many people consider it to be – black and white, good and bad. Now that is not to say I never had an interest in this area. I simply did not expect that I would end up playing such an active role in helping an incarcerated individual fight for their innocence. This is my journey as a caseworker for the IPL.

If there had to be an area of law that I would choose over others, it would be criminal – which is why I recall how the advertised Miscarriages of Justice Symposium caught my attention during my first year

at the University of Greenwich. Having never heard of the IPL, I did not put any major expectations on the event and attended out of fascination. While watching the students present their volunteer casework, I found myself listening intently to each of the cases and became absorbed in learning more about the organisation. I believe what captured me the most was hearing the exoneree, Dean Gillispie, speak about his experience and his gratitude to the Ohio Innocence Project. Hearing the pain in his voice telling his story while learning of the injustices that he suffered was heart-wrenching. Yet, it became equally touching to know that he had the chance to live once again because of a few students from an organisation.

It was not until the following year, when I attended the symposium for the second time, that I finally got the courage to apply to be a caseworker. When I found out I was accepted onto the project for my last year at Greenwich, it was a relieving yet thrilling feeling. Everything moved so quickly: I went from taking training workshops, to meeting the group of students that I would be working with, to receiving the actual case. However, the case itself was a lot to take in. Our client had been convicted of murder for over a decade, based on various grounds that were connected to his gang affiliation. Having multiple

meetings with my group and discussing the evidence and events surrounding the case, I truly believed that he was wrongly convicted – or at least that there was insufficient evidence to have convicted him. Yet, I must admit that the more I read into the case, the more difficult it was for me to sympathise with some of our client’s actions. I believe that it has been made more difficult against the current situation of the Covid-19 pandemic, because we were only able to contact him once or twice with questions and could not meet him in person. It was out of curiosity that I decided to research online: needless to say, I was taken aback by the news coverage. Each article had our client’s picture printed on the front, and the headlines included words such as ‘ruthless’, ‘gangster’ and ‘murderer’. The media has always portrayed convicted individuals negatively, and we would often believe these representations – who could blame us for doing so when we instinctively put one and one together without much thought. Most of the time, we are too caught up in our own lives to even consider the possibility of someone being wrongfully convicted. These depictions of our client made me question my role and whether I was doing the right thing by helping this man.

My doubts did not wear off easily, but then I remember two exonerees’ stories each time I have

such doubts. Thirty-two and 27 years were the respective lengths of time the exonerees maintained their innocence throughout their incarceration. Undoubtedly, these are painful lengths of time to endure being convicted of a crime that you did not commit, and our client is in a similar position. One comes to realise that there must be a good reason why individuals like him and the exonerees reach out for help and still fight after so many years. I feel that the saying “there are always two sides to a story” is incredibly fitting in this line of work. You begin to appreciate the existence of these organisations, knowing how vital they are for these individuals. As questionable as some of the client’s actions may appear, the IPL provides individuals like him with a voice that will be heard, the hope that something more will be done, and the opportunity to fight against the injustice that they experienced – something that this society is lacking. This was ultimately what made me so determined to carry on with the casework.

When I tell people that I am studying law, the instant response many have is: "so you want to become a lawyer?". I hate hearing this, because the truth is that I do not know whether the legal path is for me. I struggled throughout my entire degree, questioning whether I was going in the right direction. Hearing all

my fellow students aspiring to be solicitors or barristers, I was envious that they had something to work towards. My journey may not have been as driven as my other co-caseworkers, who have touching backstories as to why they joined the IPL. Nevertheless, I would like to consider it an equally fulfilling journey, and one of the main reasons why I am glad that I ended up studying law. It has been an eye-opening experience – and, even more so, it has been a journey of personal growth. I am grateful to have had this opportunity to help someone in their fight for innocence, and it has allowed me to grow a greater appreciation for the dedication and work ethic put into this crucial, yet often neglected, side of the criminal justice system.

I could not have done this without meeting my wonderful and dedicated team members. Not forgetting our incredible Director, Dr Louise Hewitt, who has been supporting us from the beginning, and is the epitome of what the IPL stands for: hardworking, resilient, and dedicated to fighting for justice. I have nothing but respect for this organisation and wish Louise and all the caseworkers the very best. The IPL has enabled me to thoroughly challenge myself – from analysing piles of court documents and building on my teamwork, to questioning my own beliefs and seeing

incarcerated individuals in a new light. It is unfortunate that currently exonerees are part of the exception rather than the rule. I hope that the IPL can reach greater success and that its objectives are noticed by the wider general public. People such as myself, in their first year of university can then help to achieve justice for those that the system has overlooked.

Victoria Box, 2nd-year LLB student

Everything fell into place on my induction day. I was, at the time, a girl who had zero previous experience in studying law but had a pull towards the subject: it was like my calling in life. The Innocence Project London (IPL) was a driving factor to my chosen career path, as I knew immediately that I wanted to be a part of it and everything it stood for. The idea of being part of something bigger than me, and making a change, was something that the long-time history student in me knew was what I needed to do.

My family played a big part in why I decided to apply for the IPL. They have a long history of being selfless people and helping others. My biggest inspirations were probably two of my cousins: one who served in the army, and one who is a nurse and constantly takes care of others and puts them above herself. It is easy to look at them and feel like I am not doing enough but, in a way, it has pushed me to invest myself in the IPL, something I am so proud to be a part of.

Others in my family have served as inspiration to me. My nan, and how she gave her all in life to give her family a better one, has always made me determined

to take up all the opportunities she could not have, and make her proud. Although she is not here today to see my journey with the IPL, I imagine she is on my shoulder constantly, motivating me to be better and go further than I thought I could. Coming from such a hard-working family, it was easy to feel like I was not doing enough to help others, but I quickly realised the IPL can be my way of helping and giving my time. Even if the impact is small, I know I will be setting the ball rolling for bigger changes.

The first obstacle I needed to overcome to join the IPL was the application process, which had a big impact when I was writing it, because it sparked my drive; learning all about the different organisations linked to the IPL worldwide made me feel like I was making a step in the right direction towards justice. When I got accepted, I was beyond elated – it had been the main factor in why I chose to study law at Greenwich. The next stage was the induction sessions and workshops, which all had to be completed online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Working from behind a screen sometimes means you can dissociate yourself with the case and not feel the emotion you would normally, as the computer puts a barrier between you and reality. Nothing, however, can prepare you for the day you are sent that email containing the case you are

working on: it feels like the weight of the world is on your shoulders as essentially someone's life is in your hands.

That intense pressure and any worries fade away when you get to know the other case workers who are a delight to work with and help each other out so much. It is so empowering to be a woman and have these opportunities, and be part of such a supportive network of people. Not only were my fellow caseworkers amazing to talk to and work with, but the other passionate students on the project were also great. I would not normally have connected with them were it not for the opportunity to speak at the SHIFT Learning and Teaching Conference about the IPL. Hearing the stories of like-minded individuals touched me and eradicated any feelings of imposter syndrome, as I finally found people who were as determined as me to right some wrong in the world.

Working on the case reignited a flame I did not know had gone out in me. Throughout my life I have struggled with my mental health, from being an anxiety-ridden child and teen to battling the aftermath of losing family members quite rapidly. I suppose there isn't a real reason as to why I wanted to work on the IPL, as I have had little to no exposure to anything legal or related to the law growing up. I

have always looked up to individuals who have made a real change in the world, such as Marie Curie or Emmeline Pankhurst. My infatuation with law was a quick and strong one, guiding me to utilise this avenue to change the world in my own way.

The IPL, and Dr Louise Hewitt in particular, has provided us with such amazing opportunities – even in the midst of a pandemic. To be able to speak at the IPL conference with exonerees and academics about innocence work has both educated me and helped my public speaking skills. I have also been provided with a new perspective on life; I now see myself being more reluctant to accept things at face value. It has changed me as a person from being someone who thought she would never be good enough, to now being outspoken and headstrong, and pursuing my dreams. The IPL came to me at a time when the world seemed at odds with everything, and isolation dominated life as we knew it. Then it dawned on me how some people already felt this isolation from society prior to the pandemic – alone, cut off and forgotten, whether because of bias, discrimination or injustice.

I am now able to critically analyse many aspects of life. It has helped me succeed in my degree too, as well as being able to focus my energy on something

that brings me joy and satisfaction in unprecedented times. The IPL has strengthened my determination and made me realise that law and helping others through using the law is what I want to do for the rest of my life. It has 100% been the best decision I've ever made, and I am grateful to be where I am today. I am excited for what the future in innocence work holds.

Holly Miles, 2nd-year LLB student

I am a second-year LLB Law student and an aspiring barrister. The Innocence Project London (IPL) has been an amazing experience for me.

During my time on the IPL, I have felt that I am really making a difference to the life of an individual. Although it is a collaborative effort with a number of students, I know that the work I am doing could potentially result in the release of someone who has not committed the crime that they have been convicted of. As a young woman who is aspiring to be a lawyer, this feels really empowering. It has made me even more determined to become a barrister, as it has shown me that I can make a difference and that my voice is enough. Working on the IPL has made me feel useful in being able to apply the legal knowledge I have learnt to real-life situations.

My work on the IPL has also increased my empathy, and at the same time decreased my judgment of people. When I first read about the case I am working on, I couldn't understand why the individual had put themselves in that situation. However, the

more I have worked on it, the more I have come to understand that everyone lives such different lives, and their life experiences draw them into different situations.

Before I began working on the IPL, I had a preconceived idea of 'innocence'. I thought that innocence would mean someone was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. This links with the fact that I have since learnt the distinction between acts being legally and morally wrong. Initially when I started working on the case I was assigned to, I struggled with the offence: a sexual assault. The nature of the offence meant I instantly felt really sorry for the victim and I couldn't understand how the convicted individual had put himself in that situation. He was a medical professional conducting an examination with the consent of the victim. However, due to a number of miscommunications, he was convicted of sexual assault. We talked a lot about how an individual's actions aren't necessarily legally wrong, even if by our own standards they were morally wrong. This was a real turning point for me, and something I think will also help me a lot in my career. I have learnt to turn off the part of my brain that feels sorry for the victim, and instead primarily focus on my role, which is to look at the evidence in front of me to see if there is anything we can use.

The more I went through the case, the more the defendant's actions made sense in the context of his situation.

This work has made me realise how vast the problems with the criminal justice system are in this country. I feel angry that individuals have to suffer the consequences of an inadequate system. It is my work on the project that has led to my decision to do my third-year dissertation on miscarriages of justice.

There is a real sense of belonging when working with the IPL, as we are all determined to make a difference, and help raise awareness of miscarriages of justice and the issues with the criminal justice system. In addition to having a sense of belonging within the IPL, there is also a very real feeling of being part of a global innocence movement.

When I first started at the University of Greenwich, I had a preconceived idea of what a miscarriage of justice was. I naively didn't realise that the criminal justice system in England was under so much pressure. Along with this, I have come to realise that once individuals who have suffered a miscarriage of justice are released, it is difficult for them to reacclimatise to society, as they often don't receive

enough support. The IPL has made me really determined to raise awareness of these issues, so that more individuals can consider the criminal justice system with a critical perspective. Consequently, I am more aware of the pressing need for individuals who have been convicted of crimes that they did not commit to be given help with adjusting back into society. Overall, I would like to be part of the catalyst that results in a reform to the criminal justice system.

Working on the IPL has developed my understanding of prisoners and the different types of miscarriages of justice that can take place. Before this experience I didn't imagine that someone could be coerced into pleading guilty even if they were maintaining their innocence.

I have been able to improve my group working skills, which initially I thought may be difficult because of the remote working situation caused by Covid-19. However, using a document system we can all access has meant that we have been able to edit things together, which has been successful. Working in a group has been really useful to share ideas and talk about any problems with the case. Only being able to meet via Zoom is frustrating, but we have made the best of it. I am looking forward to

experiencing how working on the IPL will change when we are back together in person, and to being able to get to know members in the group better.

Kerrie Motton, 2nd-year LLB student

Every experience and opportunity in life comes with challenges and learning curves to make you who you are; the Innocence Project London (IPL) has enabled me to develop as a person and helped me see aspects of life I did not notice before. I have gained and developed numerous skills that will help me achieve my main goal in life: to help people and make them happy.

First and foremost, none of this would have been achievable without the people around me. Dr Louise Hewitt (the Director of the IPL) has made an incredible difference to my life: she is a selfless, caring and generous individual who always puts other people first. She is someone who I aspire to be like. Christa, a fellow IPL volunteer and a friend for life, has helped and pushed me further in every step working on the IPL, and I thank her for always being there. Finally, my family. My mum and dad are two hardworking, thoughtful and supportive people who I will always look up to; as for my brothers, I want to make them proud.

I grew up in south-east London, and originally wanted to be a counsellor. I failed some GCSEs and because of this I found that I couldn't study what I wanted in order to fulfil that role. I felt like I had let my parents down, and that I would never be good enough to help people; I'd tried my hardest but still failed. Although grades do not define you, this result hurt me – and I could not stop thinking about how I had disappointed everyone around me.

Fortunately, I was offered Law at A-level, which I accepted with the intention of getting through two years at sixth form and then deciding what career path to take. It was during this time that I knew law was the career path I not only wanted to go down, but that I needed. I never thought I would go to university: I applied not expecting to get in, but I did. One thing I will never forget is how I felt opening the email realising I had the required grades and was about to enter a new chapter of my life. I was ecstatic and could not wait to start.

Helping people is something I have wanted to do my whole life, so when I found out that the University of Greenwich was home to the IPL, I knew it was something that I had to do. I could not begin to imagine the thoughts, emotions and feelings someone goes through when they are innocent but

wrongfully convicted. I know how fortunate I am to be in a position to work on the IPL, and to use my abilities, connections and surroundings to make a difference.

When I got my case, I was overwhelmed, there was so much information to take in, and I immediately wondered how I was going to help the client at all. The thought of how, as a student, I could make any sort of impact on someone's life was intimidating. But through being a student I have this opportunity. It is an unbelievable feeling saying that I volunteer on the IPL, assisting a real person on a real-life case. Helping the client has been my number one priority, and always will be. I have realised that everyone deserves a chance, and that prisoners deserve support too. I always believed everyone could be helped, but the IPL has made me recognise how prisoners are pushed away from society, yet are likely to be the people who need help the most.

Research skills, actioning feedback, and contextualising vast amounts of information are just some of the transferable skills I have gained from volunteering. When I joined this project, I did not realise how many skills I would be achieving and benefiting from: not only am I helping someone, but they are helping me. The case is making me a better person.

The IPL has taught me to never judge a book by its cover. When you read a case and someone has been found guilty in criminal proceedings, negative connotations follow. It is harder to consider that this person's claim to innocence may be real, and that they could be a victim of a wrongful conviction.

Prisoners are often seen as outside of society, and that they deserve their punishment because they have been found guilty. I have learnt many things working on the IPL, in particular the prejudice towards prisoners, and how every little step is some help towards a person's innocence. I myself am so grateful to be making a difference to someone's life, and I don't think I would be the person I am today without the IPL. I went into the project expecting to get a better understanding of the criminal justice system and how innocent people are convicted, and to develop as an individual. The IPL has exceeded what I imagined this experience to be; I am now a very open-minded person, taking people's feelings and emotions into consideration a lot more, as well as realising how fortunate I am.

I never thought I would get an opportunity like this; as well as the casework, I have been involved in podcasts, a symposium, and meeting legal professionals. This is a once-in-a-lifetime

opportunity and has changed my outlook on life and the things I do. Before volunteering, I knew wrongful convictions happened, but I never took the time to understand how often they occurred, and the possible ways to help. I have furthered my knowledge on wrongful convictions from a global perspective, which has led me to realise how much this work means to me.

This is an incredible achievement for me. I am so fortunate to be involved in making a valuable change to someone's life and today's society. It is helping me to achieve my passion in ways that I never imagined were possible.

Lidia Stoica, MSc Criminology and Criminal Psychology student

Everyone has the right to live a free and fulfilling life. Or at least everyone who is innocent... right? I have been working as a volunteer on the Innocence Project London (IPL) for the past two and a half years. In total, I have worked on three different cases. And by 'cases', what I actually mean is people. People who were incarcerated years ago and who continue to maintain their innocence. People who, after analysing their cases and after meeting and talking to either them or their parents or partners, I believe are innocent. Speaking in legal terms, I believe their convictions are unsafe.

“How could someone who is not guilty end up in prison?” is a question I have asked myself multiple times throughout the years. In short, there are many reasons why this might happen. For the most part, I have learnt, it can be due to something that happens during the criminal justice process. I am not saying that people involved in this process have some sort of malicious intent, but ultimately the criminal justice process, from witnesses to judges, is made up of people. And people are naturally susceptible to

error, even the most well-intentioned ones. I do think that the majority of people working in the criminal justice system have good intentions, but the notion of what amounts to 'good' can vary. It can be different for everyone. It can have as many definitions as there are people on our planet. But for the sake of not getting too philosophical, I will not even account for other planets or universes and their potential take on the good/bad dichotomy. I will leave it here; I am sure you get the point. Errors can happen at any stage of the criminal justice process, from witness memory recollection to jury bias. The presumption of innocence should be at the core of the criminal justice system. Yet I know there are, sadly, too many innocent people behind bars. There is no way to know precisely how many, but regardless – one innocent person in prison is one too many.

My experience of working on the IPL has connected with multiple aspects of my life. One of those aspects is my resentment towards injustice. Ever since I can remember, whenever I witness any form of injustice, I feel tremendous sadness and disappointment. And I feel an intrinsic need to get up and do something about it. Miscarriages of justice cause immeasurable harm towards the victims, their families and loved ones, as well as society at large. They are a form of

injustice that I am hugely passionate about, and one that must be fought against. The world that we live in is far from perfect – different forms of injustice are prevalent in many (if not most) parts of society, and they happen beyond the legal sphere. Wrongful convictions, however, are a form of injustice that can too easily go undetected, without organisations like the IPL. In the hearts and minds of the wrongfully convicted and their families and loved ones, they are ever-present. When injustice occurs in the same rooms that were built to provide justice, it can truly distort one’s sense of truth. And people who suffer injustice need organisations in their corner. The IPL helped me find my place in this fight against miscarriages of justice.

The entire experience of working on the IPL has been extremely rewarding and an enormous source of inspiration, in so many ways that I wish there were enough words to describe. I would like to highlight a story from when I met my first client. After our discussion with him and his partner about the case and his recollection of the events, something that I will never forget happened. He asked us: “after everything you’ve heard, I have a question: do you believe me?”. He was already quite emotional, so when we replied “yes, we do believe you!” he teared up and he said something along the lines of “you

have no idea how much this means to me. So many people did not believe me, including the jury, the judge, my own solicitors even, but you believe me, and that means the world to me! Thank you for believing me!”. This made me really emotional, and it stuck with me because it shows just how much our work matters to our clients. To this day, whenever I feel a bit down, disappointed or frustrated by how difficult it is to exonerate our clients and how it is not even guaranteed to happen, I go back to that moment and I feel inspired to move forward, because I remember how much what we do matters to our clients and their loved ones. Helping our clients is the most important aspect of IPL work to me. And in the process of trying to prove their convictions are unsafe, any positive impact we can have in their lives is more than worthwhile.

I am beyond grateful to be a small part of innocence work. And I will always be thankful to Dr Louise Hewitt, Director of the IPL, who is one of the most wonderful and inspiring people you could ever meet, for welcoming me to work alongside her. I never want to stop fighting this fight. Innocence work will always be a part of me, a part of me that will always be alive, and whose voice will guide me through my journey.

Louise Woods, 3rd-year LLB student

Like many other students, I was keen to volunteer on the Innocence Project London (IPL) and be part of the few people in England that have successfully managed to overturn an unsafe conviction. I wanted to change someone's life and I still do. However, I expected it to be a lot easier to meet the threshold for fresh evidence or a new legal argument. In fact, I thought that within the initial few months of my first case I would have achieved this. I was wrong to underestimate how unfit for purpose our justice system is.

Before joining the IPL, I was completely dissociated from prisons, prisoners and the astronomical impact miscarriages of justice have on the criminal justice system. Despite being a young, black female, I was able to be ignorantly blind to injustice while growing up. I was adopted into a white family and attended predominantly white schools, which meant that I had not actually heard of 'miscarriages of justice' until a lot later in life, and did not really understand racism and its effects. It was something I had to learn about myself. As soon as I realised the disproportionate impact of the justice system on ethnic minorities, people just like me, I knew I had to fight for justice.

My first case as a volunteer was a challenging one. A case of joint enterprise, a law that emerged and has ruined the lives of many. A black man, an ethnic minority. After going through pages and pages of documentation, a shred of new evidence became known to us. I felt hope and empowerment about the possibility that my client's conviction could be overturned and deemed unsafe. However, this hope was short-lived, as we simply did not have enough evidence to submit an application to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. I was naive, and once again disappointed and angry at the criminal justice system. This anger turned to empowerment, and I was able to present at the annual IPL Symposium in 2020 and raise awareness about an issue I am so passionate about.

My second case concerned another ethnic minority, an Asian man, but this time the case concerned the offence of rape, specifically performing sex acts via a webcam for money. Two cases, two innocent clients, two ethnic minorities, and one justice system that failed the pair of them. My heart sank once again. The dread began to set in again. Would the new evidence meet the threshold that the Criminal Cases Review Commission requires, or would it be another client that was unable to prove their innocence? This case challenged me to reflect on

my own views on sex work for a living, and how narrow-minded I had been about this type of employment. It enabled me to understand and work towards removing my own prejudices by educating myself through the client's case.

Our work has been completed remotely this year because of Covid-19, with hours spent crammed over my laptop desperately looking for new lines of argument or evidence. I have been riddled with self-doubt about whether my efforts have been enough. It was only after my team and I wrote a letter to our client, explaining what we had been working on, that I felt a sense of fulfilment and purpose. It was also a reminder that the IPL is part of a wider, global movement, the Innocence Network.

It was after I attended the Innocence Network Conference in Amsterdam in 2018 that the reality of this global problem really set in for me. I still had an idyllic and unrealistic view of many other countries. It was inspiring and created a sense of belonging for me. The exonerees that I was so fortunate to have met inspired me to continue with this type of work. They encouraged me to use my own freedom and voice to help those who have lost theirs.

I have learnt to have empathy for everyone in society, not just those who are free but also those who are stuck in prisons, not to mention their families who endure suffering every day. I have learnt to be bold enough to challenge the opinion of others. I have stopped being silent. I will forever be grateful for the IPL and all it does to help innocent people. I am proud to have volunteered for this organisation. I will continue to fight for justice, especially for those who have been silenced and left without a voice, for the rest of my life. It is what we as a society deserve, at the very least.

Lydia Burling-Smith, 2nd-year BA Criminology and Criminal Justice student

Imagine a good friend being murdered at the age of 15, then four years later you are working to exonerate an individual convicted of murder. This is me. I applied to volunteer for the Innocence Project London (IPL) to make a real difference in someone's life, while at the same time learning more about the criminal justice process. The work of the IPL is essential – as the Director of the IPL, Dr Louise Hewitt, once said: “it is not a fight of the system, it is a fight for the system.” Providing hope to those who have maintained their innocence is a small thing we can do as students, not only to help the individual convicted, but also to help their family by communicating the progress we have made with their case. Hearing how a daughter was wrongly convicted of murder at the age of 19 and was sentenced to 17 years to life in prison from the perspective of her parents is heartbreakingly painful. I am 19 years old, and I could not imagine going through the traumatic events our client did the night of the murder. The account from the client's parents on the details of the case I am working on has given me a different viewpoint of the life of someone convicted of a crime compared to what is usually heard about those inside prison. Media often

focuses on the crime rather than understanding the reasoning behind an individual's actions, such as their childhood experiences, family life, and the environment they were in at the time the crime was committed.

I understand the impacts of murder on those close to the victim. My friend was killed by her father in a double-murder and suicide. Mentally, I struggled immensely with this, partly due to there being no explanation for why it happened. Understanding why a violent act happened will not make it easier to cope with, but it would help in comprehending the actions of another. As a result, murder has always been a sensitive topic for me to learn about in my studies. The case I have been working on for the past nine months in the IPL involved the murder of our client's boyfriend. Another man and our client were found guilty of his murder. At first, I was apprehensive about working on this case because I did not know if I would be able to cope with the subject matter. I felt that it would be very challenging to work towards exonerating someone for a crime similar to the one that still affects me to this day. However, I am glad I persevered with the case because I have been heavily influenced by the work that we have carried out, and my perception of those who are charged with committing violent acts has changed.

IPL work has drastically increased the amount of empathy I have for individuals going through the criminal justice system. Previously, I lacked an understanding towards those who commit acts of violence, because I did not make the connection between the perpetrators as people with their own stories, mental health issues, friends and loved ones. My view was clouded with hatred towards a man who I never fully knew and will never fully understand even though he committed a crime that will affect me for the rest of my life. Interacting with the parents of our client and hearing the client's history of sexual abuse and drug use highlighted how everyone has a past, and how you should not judge someone's situation without knowing their full story. When you know a victim of a horrendous crime, it can be easy to forget the life experiences of those convicted of the offence, and difficult to accept that they may not be guilty. For the case I am working on, it will be challenging for the family of the man who was murdered to come to terms with the idea of a retrial for our client. However, no one deserves to serve time in prison when they are innocent.

Anyone can end up in prison, regardless of your life experiences. The IPL has taught me that society would benefit from no longer viewing those inside

prison as 'others'. Instead, these individuals are a part of our society and deserve to receive help if they need it. One day most of these people will re-enter society, and exclusion is not going to aid this reintegration. Before I worked in the IPL, if he were still alive, I would have wanted the man who killed my friend to be locked up and the key thrown away. But my interest in understanding the reasoning behind such violent acts has changed my perception of him. My IPL work has helped me come to terms with his actions, and if I could speak to him today I would want to help him through whatever struggles he had at the time, and aid him in finding a solution other than killing his family and then himself. I have chosen to forgive, not because he deserves it or because I have forgotten the pain caused, but because of my increased empathy towards others that the work with the IPL has brought out. Mentally, my growth has been considerable throughout my time in the IPL, and I am grateful for the way it has helped me to find the ability to come to terms with events in my life.

I can see how easy it is to look at the statistics for the numbers of people in prison in the UK and dissociate yourself from those going through some of the toughest times of their lives. Having the ability to connect a name and a story to at least one of

these people has helped me to individualise those inside prison. For my future career, the work with IPL has reinforced my interest in wanting to help others. It is important to remember that those inside prison are not numbers, they are people, and not every one of these people is guilty of the crime they have been convicted of.

Rebecca Steven, 3rd-year BSc Criminology and Criminal Psychology student

I have never been one to be forthright with my opinions – I often find that words don't come easily to me. Yet working on the Innocence Project London (IPL) has allowed me to find my voice, rooted within helping others. It has allowed me to work towards giving a voice to those individuals who need it the most – those who have been relentlessly let down by our tarnished criminal justice system. In tandem with this, innocence work has allowed me to better myself as a person, by honing my focus on what matters the most. Coming from a background of privilege and ample opportunities, I would be doing a disservice to myself and others if I was not helping those who have seemingly been forgotten by society.

Innocence work has also allowed me to reflect upon myself. The person I was during my initial days on the project is a stark contrast to who I am now. One of the most fundamental attributes I have harnessed is my empathy; where I once thought I was an extremely empathetic person, I wasn't aware that I was unconsciously passing judgment on many occasions when I couldn't fully resonate with an individual or a situation. And that's what innocence

work is about. Although one may not be able to relate to any/all of the stories shared by our clients, it is our prerogative to acquire empathy and to put ourselves into the positions of others. It is no good dismissing someone because they are unlike you, and it's this subtle hierarchy of power present between the general public and these 'deviant' individuals that makes this task difficult for many. In order to help someone, it is of paramount importance that you understand them on a deeper level, and in doing so you shed any cynicism you may have and start to blossom into a softer and more understanding version of yourself. Our clients are in a vulnerable position, they are opening themselves up to us and we mustn't proceed with reckless abandon. We must nurture their confidence in our work and reassure them that there is someone out there believing in what they have to say.

Coming from a small town in the North-East of England, talk of crime was extremely scarce. Feelings of insecurity and lack of safety were rare, and despite the infamous 1989 Monkseaton shootings happening a mere few hundred metres from the house I grew up in, I never felt like I could be a target of criminal activity, even when walking home late at night unaccompanied and seemingly vulnerable. In Monkseaton it was the norm to be

respectful – and almost fearful – of the police. However, for me that narrative was rewritten. Moving to London at the age of 11, I was aware of the immediate shift in attitudes towards the police and criminal justice system in general. I was also suddenly exposed to crime at an alarming rate. Moving into the city one year before the 2011 Brixton riots was a wake-up call for me and my family that we weren't ready for. I felt worried and scared, as though I had been dropped into chaos that I wasn't prepared for in the slightest. Despite this, I knew that at the end of the day I would make it home safe – however, this is not the case for many. Unbeknownst to me at this time, an alarming rate of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds face the fear of not returning home on a regular basis, simply because they are stopped by the police.

Seeing robberies occur at my school gates and almost becoming a victim myself, seeing violent arrests first-hand, and living in a neighbourhood notorious for gang activity and violence was a stark contrast that woke up a part of me that wanted to do something to help others, but also protect myself. I knew that I couldn't be compliant and allow for injustices to be perpetuated without getting involved, and so when I was presented with the opportunity of volunteering for the IPL I knew this was an offer I

could not refuse. Being a part of the IPL has impacted my life in many ways, and I'm confident it will continue to do so for many years to come. What started as a spark of curiosity has now evolved into a passion, and I feel privileged to have found a home within an environment filled with so much care and compassion for those in need.

Now I look on with a more objective eye. Where once I wouldn't dare to glance at cohorts of youths moving down the street stealthily, I now wonder why and how they got there. I proceed with caution and take more time to reflect on my own upbringing as well as my knowledge of criminological thinking. It has taken almost 21 years for me to recognise my privilege within my place in society, and although as a young woman I am still fearful of becoming just another victim, I spend more time pondering the lives of those who face racial, cultural and socioeconomic barriers that prevent them from living their lives as they constitutionally deserve to. I may never understand to its fullest extent the injustices felt on a daily basis by those facing oppression, but through my work on the IPL I can let my voice be heard. I can speak up for those who no longer have a voice or who aren't listened to, and I can do my part in trying to erase the damage done by our failing criminal justice system. I can be a part of a bigger movement

to aid the increasing number of innocent individuals who meet their fate in front of juries who deem them guilty based on the colour of their skin or the god they pray to at night. A jury who will sentence them to imprisonment that will not only incarcerate them physically but lead to the psychological entrapment of the stigma that has been imposed upon them.

Venus Behzadnia, 2nd-year LLB student

When I first applied to volunteer for the Innocence Project London (IPL), I admit that I had done so primarily because I thought I would gain legal experience that would help me in my future career. I was far from realising that this journey would not only help me grow as a person on an individual level, but also help me understand and be involved with the issues surrounding miscarriages of justice.

Growing up as an introverted person, I have always been surrounded by people telling me that I come across as rather cold. Although this was usually said in a jokey manner, it was not until my late teens that I realised I could not remember the last time I had cried. This eventually led to another realisation: I had rarely ever felt genuine empathy for other people. I have always struggled with expressing my feelings and emotions, not because I haven't wanted to, but because I haven't known how to. I didn't know how to actually feel empathy for another person until I volunteered for this project. When I first read about the case I am working on, I began thinking what it would be like to be in the client's place. As weeks went by, the empathy I felt for him began developing into my everyday life. I caught myself feeling things I had never felt before: from crying for the first time

over a movie, to feeling overwhelmed by certain situations because I wanted to help. I noticed that something in me was changing. Months on, I can now say that this experience unlocked something within me and has made me more of an empathetic person than I have ever been before.

The IPL has also helped me change the way I look at convicted people. I admit that before this experience, I was one of those people that thought that if a person is in prison, it is most likely because they deserve to be there. Although I am a curious person in general, I was not inquisitive enough to ask myself: "why is this person there?". Working on the case opened my eyes to the fact that not everything is as black or white as I may have thought, but more importantly that the justice system is not as flawless as it claims to be. I wish I had come to this realisation sooner, but I am grateful that the IPL helped me get there. Now, when I hear about a convicted person, I subconsciously question the story behind the individual. I also don't look at this individual simply as a prisoner anymore, but as a person with a story to tell. This reminded me of a story my father once told me. After graduating with a Bachelors degree in engineering, he decided to accept a job offer at a local prison. The job consisted of working with a group of prisoners who would help him build and

restore parts of the prison. When I first heard this story, I remember thinking to myself: “why would he accept such a job?”. I found it odd that a new graduate would choose to work with convicted people. When I asked him about it, his answer was that being an inmate does not mean you cease to be a person with feelings. If they got the job done, he did not see why they should be treated differently to any other employee. I never truly understood what that meant until now. This story combined with the experience I have received from working on this project has forever changed my perspective.

To feed my curiosity I began doing more research about convicted people and realised how poorly they are treated – especially when released back into society. In my opinion, the issue lies with the way they are treated while incarcerated. Countries such as Sweden adopt a strategy of rehabilitation rather than incarceration. I believe that is the correct way – prison should be a centre of rehabilitation rather than a place where people are treated as subhuman. This would ensure a smoother and easier reintroduction to society. Hearing stories such as John Kamara’s (at the IPL Miscarriages of Justice Symposium) – where he only received a few pounds after being released from 19 years in prison for a crime he did not commit – came as a shock to me. The fact that

the justice system claimed 19 years from this man's life but did not help him become part of society again, shows how much reform is needed. Another sad reality I discovered was that the justice system is clearly biased, especially towards black men. I find it incomprehensible how, in this day and age, people are still treated differently because of their race or ethnic background. It is my hope that movements such as Black Lives Matter will at least make people aware that, more often than not, convicted people have been judged based on how they look.

Wanting to volunteer for the IPL stemmed from a desire to know more about the justice system, but it eventually led to a valuable lesson that will probably stick with me all my life – to question my surroundings and feel for others. This journey not only made me feel like I've made a difference (however small that difference might be), but it also permanently changed the way I look at things in life. And for that, I am eternally grateful.

Innocence Project London

