Lots of our students go on to work in corporate law. But they go there with a sense of social justice.”

Shiva Riahi (Law 2012), Centre Manager
The Centre for Access to Justice transforms the daily lives of ordinary Londoners – while giving UCL Law students an opportunity to gain invaluable experience and insight.

When I was studying law at UCL, I was one of those sappy people who wanted to make a difference,” laughs alumna Shiva Riahi (Law 2012). In her final year, Shiva was one of eight students to successfully apply for the Centre for Access to Justice’s pilot Access to Justice and Community Engagement course.

When she found out she was to be placed with charity Just for Kids Law, she remembers wondering if it was the right fit. “I thought I was more interested in broader ‘human rights’ than children specifically,” she says. “And it was on Harrow Road, which at the time was the furthest west I’d ever been in London!”

However, she quickly realised the very real impact the organisation had on people’s lives. “Somewhere between property law and visits to shiny corporate offices you tend to forget that law is a hugely important part of individual justice,” she says. “At Just for Kids Law, I saw how the state, in my view, was failing to fulfill its duty towards vulnerable children. I saw how hard parents of children with special educational needs had to struggle to have those needs met.”

She remembers one case that showed her what an impact she could have just by showing up. “I went to speak on behalf of two parents at their child’s school, and in the end I didn’t say a word! But afterwards they said how grateful they were that I had been willing to argue on their behalf, that someone had heard them – they were so used to being ignored.”

A holistic approach
Shiva applied to be a research assistant at the Centre for Access to Justice (CAJ) and is now the manager. “I always thought I’d be a lawyer,” she says. “But I love what I do here. There are a lot of different ways to use the law to help people.”

She explains the founding mission of the CAJ: “To enrich students’ education by adding the experience of working with real clients. The centre has a holistic approach – it was built on Professor Dame Hazel Genn’s research, which showed how people’s legal problems tended to cascade into other areas of life, such as health,” she says. “For instance, unfair dismissal or workplace bullying can lead to stress and mental health problems, which in turn has an impact on the NHS. I think that link between the academic and the practical is quite unique to UCL.”

The CAJ operates on a micro level, sending students to represent clients in tribunals to, for example, secure benefits or overturn a pending eviction. “The benefits system is difficult for people to navigate,” says Shiva. “We help clients understand the questions being asked of them. Our intervention can mean the difference between being able to pay rent and homelessness.”

But the centre also works on a macro level, both in terms of its impact on students and potential influence on government policy. “We have a lot of students who go on to work in corporate law,” says Shiva. “But they go there with a sense of social justice. One student was so inspired he went back to Hong Kong to try and set up similar pro bono programmes there. And the research we are doing at the Sir Ludwig Guttmann Health & Wellbeing Centre, for example, will, we hope, eventually inform policy.”

The centre in the borough of Newham was originally built for the 2012 London Olympics to treat athletes. It now houses a GP downtown and the UCL Legal Clinic, part of the CAJ, upstairs. This, in Shiva’s view, makes perfect sense. The centre, on the UCL East site, is one of the projects enabling UCL to support the integration and enrichment of the lives of local communities.

“For instance, if a woman goes to the GP for ant-depressants because she is going to be evicted, she doesn’t need anti-depressants – she needs to not be evicted. At the Guttmann Centre, the GP can refer the patient upstairs to the legal advice clinic, and we can help.”

Philanthropy has played, and will continue to play, a critical role in the success and impact of the Centre for Access to Justice in East London. Through UCL’s Global Philanthropic and Engagement Campaign, the UCL Legal Advice Clinic at the Sir Ludwig Guttmann Health & Wellbeing Centre will continue to provide disadvantaged communities with access to free legal advice within a local health setting. It will also shape and influence policy to better support communities around the UK and the world.

Philanthropy will ensure the centre, which has more than 8,000 patients, and the CAJ can grow its legal services and reach even more people in the borough of Newham, the third most deprived local authority in England. Donor support helps to maintain and expand activities of the UCL CAJ by providing funding to help run the advice sessions and provide students with specialist training for casework. It also helps enhance summer maintenance bursaries for students who could otherwise not afford to live in London and undertake unpaid social welfare law work experience. It is essential to help fund additional expert supervision to extend the range of UCL’s advice and case work services.

www.ucl.ac.uk/campaign

To support the work of the Health and Wellbeing Centre please contact Shiva Riahi, Manager, UCL Centre for Access to Justice.

The project is still in its first year, but Shiva says it aims to expand to receive referrals from other GPs in the Newham area. “The Citizens Advice Bureau sometimes has outposts in GP surgeries, but I think UCL is unique in having a student clinic,” she says.

With the clinic project, CAJ aims to do more than help individuals. “It’s also doing empirical research. We are developing a research project with Professor Genn, documenting the impact of our work.”

Philanthropy also helps enhance the working environment of the CAJ. A recent refurbishment of the CAJ in action Justin Low, social welfare student

“One of my clients was a 47-year-old single man diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, which badly affected his hands and wrists and caused pain in his joints.

He made a claim for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), which was initially rejected, so he was referred to CAJ.

We discussed how his medical condition impaired his ability to carry out basic activities relevant to his daily living. It became clear that we needed to clarify with the tribunal the inaccurate findings made during his medical examination.

I prepared submissions outlining the client’s medical condition and stating which welfare requirements of the claim were satisfied. This enabled the tribunal to ask relevant questions and obtain an accurate account of his physical abilities.

“The client responded succinctly to the questions and the appeal was successful.”

The client was awarded ESA, providing him with financial stability and peace of mind.”
Thank you for partnering with UCL to achieve great things. To talk more about how your philanthropic support can transform our shared ambitions into impact, contact Lori Houlihan Vice-Provost (Development) on 020 3108 3801 or lori.houlihan@ucl.ac.uk

www.ucl.ac.uk/campaign