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On 12 August, YLAL committee members Siobhan Taylor-Ward and Megan Millar hosted ‘When the Law Runs Out: Campaigning for Social Justice’ featuring inspiring talks from Matthew Leidecker of Detention Action, Ngaryan Li of Vauxhall Law Centre and Natasha Thompson of INQUEST.

Siobhan kicked off the event with a summary of her career as a housing and social welfare solicitor at Merseyside Law Centre and her experience as a [Justice First Fellow](https://jff.thelegaleducationfoundation.org/). She explained the application process for applying for the Justice First Fellowship (JFF) and outlined the history of YLAL.

The first speaker was Matthew Leidecker, campaign manager at [Detention Action](https://detentionaction.org.uk/) (DA), a campaigning charity which offers advice and support to people held in immigration detention centres. Matthew has been heavily involved in DA’s campaign to introduce a 28 day time limit for immigration detention (which is currently indefinite in the UK). For Matthew, the most powerful campaigns combine media and legal action.

Matthew referred to a recent claim against the Government in which Detention Action tried to prevent a number of individuals from being forcibly removed to Jamaica. Thankfully, his clients succeeded in their claim. Non-EEA citizens who receive a custodial sentence of longer than 12 months face the prospect of automatic deportation; there is very little discretion. Matthew’s clients had been vilified by the press and had been portrayed as ‘monsters’ in order to reduce public sympathy for them. DA launched an awareness-raising campaign featuring stories of the people who were due to be deported in an attempt to dismantle this false impression. As Matthew said ‘it is our job as lawyers to show that [our clients] are human beings.’

Matthew talked about his previous work at [Reprieve](https://reprieve.org.uk/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIrMGslLCi6wIVWeDtCh2yOwKAEAAYASAAEgLoA_D_BwE) alongside clients facing the death penalty. He spoke of clients at Guantanamo Bay, whose release was unlikely to ever be secured through the courts. An effective campaign can be an essential tool for release. Matthew told us of the importance of story-telling and really investigating experiences in order to mount a successful campaign.

Everyone at Detention Action has been working exceptionally hard during the COVID-19 pandemic. Matthew told us that ‘Detention Action have been successful in getting 1,000 people released from immigration detention, meaning that the number of people currently in immigration detention is at the lowest level now than it has been in ten years.’ He added that ‘this campaign was successful due to public campaigning and legal work which highlighted the terrible and unsanitary conditions in these centres; they are given no soap, masks or information about COVID-19.’

Next up was Ngaryan Li, director and senior solicitor at [Vauxhall Law Centre](https://www.vauxhalllawcentre.org.uk/) (VLC) in Liverpool. She began by telling us about VLC’s work with victims of domestic abuse, and its collaboration with other organisations in the sector to help to protect their rights. Ngaryan talked about the importance of collaboration with other local organisations to best pool talent and resources. She told us about their domestic violence project, which aims to improve victims’ rights and amplify their voices.

Ngaryan also told us about VLC’s work in other areas, such as housing. She gave one example of a campaign which resulted in possession proceedings being suspended through collaboration with local MPs.

Ngaryan talked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on her work and the community around VLC, which suffered a high number of death rates. Many people in the local area, including a number of her own clients, have sadly passed away as a result of COVID-19. In response, Ngaryan told us that, with other law centres and campaigning organisations, she has been mounting pressure on the Government to open a comprehensive public inquiry into their deaths. Ngaryan ended by outlining what she believed makes an effective campaign: shared values; working together; agreed targets; arranged deadlines.

The third and final speaker was Natasha Thompson, Grenfell Project Coordinator and a Caseworker at [INQUEST](https://www.inquest.org.uk/). She outlined the main aims of her work: to ensure that the investigation process treats families with dignity; to hold those responsible to account; and to share and implement vital information.

Natasha spoke about one of INQUEST’s current campaigns: ‘[Now or Never! Legal aid for inquests’](https://www.inquest.org.uk/legal-aid-for-inquests). There is an inherent inequality of arms in inquests between bereaved families and state agents and yet inquests are out of scope for Legal Aid. There are significant barriers to accessing Exceptional Case Funding, the only form of means-tested public funding currently available for legal representation at inquests. This means that bereaved families may struggle to access lawyers to assist them in the process and, ultimately, justice. The inquest process can take many years and unrepresented families are not often aware that they can seek legal representation or how to obtain it.

The *Now or Never!* campaign was presented to Parliament last year, and the petition has been signed by over 96,000 people. Natasha outlined the demands of the campaign: to automatically grant non-means tested funding to families following a state-related death which is equivalent to that given to state bodies; representation for more than one family member; and funding support for attendance at the inquest including travel expenses, lost wages and accommodation.

Next, Natasha told us about INQUEST’s involvement in the Grenfell Tower enquiry and their campaign. She works with bereaved families and residents, and the organisation also offers a supportive role for people affected by the Grenfell tragedy. INQUEST held a consultation day for bereaved people to share their experiences, which [highlighted the frustrations of many](https://inquest.eu.rit.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=47e60cf4-cc23-477b-9ca0-c960eb826d24). Natasha explained that the work is ongoing and that, despite the government’s promise that ‘no stone [would be] left unturned’, bereaved families and survivors still have to fight to make their voices heard.

During the Q&A session, the panel was asked how campaigners persevere when change is so slow to come about. Natasha explained that campaigners really have no choice but to keep going, and that it is important to keep gathering information about the impact on clients and to keep pushing for change. Matthew agreed, adding that there is comfort in being part of the solution and that he takes part in group sessions with a therapist every two weeks to manage the impact that the work has on employees. Ngaryan added that it is important to have passion in what you do.

When asked for tips on how to deal with vicarious trauma, Matthew and Natasha said that it is important to have discussions within organisations, but that structural mechanisms for countering vicarious trauma are usually overlooked.

The next question was about the transferable skills between career in the law and campaigning. Ngaryan told the audience that listening skills and probing skills are useful in campaigning, and a conviction to break down barriers and build networks can be useful for both professions.

When asked about the vilification of ‘activist’ lawyers and their clients, Matthew explained that he has received letters and online abuse, but feels it is important not to engage with it. Natasha and Ngaryan agreed that it is important not to read the comment sections of newspapers in order to protect clients.

For those interested in a career in campaign work, Ngaryan recommends taking part in volunteering opportunities at organisations that you have properly researched. Natasha agreed, and suggested that approaching lawyers and campaigners was an effective way to secure volunteering experience. Matthew added that there are so many skills and people involved in campaigns; it is important to be positive about the work that you are doing and to stay focussed on creating the change that you want to see.