


Breaking through barriers to reach the bar

22 February 2023  Kiera Riddy

Our action and commitment to tackling inequality in accessing the legal profession have put us at the top of the UK's Social Mobility Employer Index for two consecutive years. Kiera Riddy, an associate from our barrister's team in Exeter, talks about the many obstacles she overcame to achieve her career goals, and why social mobility matters so much.

When she was just 15, a former family friend told Kiera Riddy she "didn't run in the right circles" to make it as a barrister, but she remained undeterred.

Detractors were just one of a variety of obstacles she faced in breaking into a profession still often misconceived as the realm of the middle-aged white male.

Kiera's state school education - not the 'traditional' barrister background – offered scarce insight or encouragement around legal careers. Studying in her home county of Cornwall brought challenges, including a four-hour daily bus trip to the only college offering A-level law. And when Kiera set out her barrister aspirations to teachers, they told her it wasn't the done thing:

"They'd say, 'we don't really know how you'd go about that' and that was it," she explained.

Finances posed the most significant barrier. Kiera grew up in a single-parent, low-income household and supported her A-levels, law degree, and Bar course through part-time work before eventually winning a scholarship. Pursuing the barrister route also brought additional costs, a more expensive course, memberships, clothes for court and costly textbooks.

And as the first in her family to go to university, though she had full emotional backing from her mum, Kiera had no legal connections to call upon to try and secure the all-important work experience. And no one to guide her through what to expect when taking the bar.

"When I was on the Bar course, it was very much assumed that I was a trust fund child with my mum and dad paying for the course and for me to live in a nice flat. But, I was working almost 30 hours a week alongside my studies and trying to stay afloat."

Giving up was never an option. Instead, Kiera was relentless in chasing the goal she'd held since around the age of eleven, borne out of a personal experience of the positive impact the legal system can have.

"I'm like a dog with a bone," Kiera explained. "I knew I wanted to do it, and there would be no stopping me."

And she meant it. With little career advice from school or college, online research helped her map out a route to the Bar, and a tenacious attitude took her there. The breakthrough came when Kiera secured a spot on the Pathways to Law programme with the University of Exeter during her A-Levels. This opened the door to work experience, Inns of Court visits, new connections, and a mini-pupillage. She returned to the programme as an undergraduate, continuing to build her networks.

It's the kind of foot on the ladder also offered by Browne Jacobson's award-winning FAIRE (Fairer Access Into Real Experience) initiative – which offers paid work experience alongside virtual careers events, connecting students and would-be lawyers with an important inroad

into the legal world. FAIRE's a big part of the firm's social mobility commitment along with a host of other initiatives designed to make the legal sector more inclusive, accessible to all, and reflective of the society it serves.

It's something Kiera wishes had been around when she was studying.

"If I'd had a paid placement, that would have ticked off so many different elements. Not having to stress about the financial side of things. It's an incredible thing to offer, and it's why employers' commitment to social mobility is so important."

After two years as a paralegal, Kiera joined Browne Jacobson in 2021 and completed her pupillage. She's now a fully qualified associate barrister in the firm's Exeter office.

Tom Lyas, the architect of Browne Jacobson's FAIRE scheme, understands the powerful effect of Kiera's candid story:

"The challenges Kiera encountered will undoubtedly resonate with many others, but her success should also inspire them. The impact of openly sharing the career journeys (good and bad) of those who have tangibly demonstrated that a legal career is an achievable aspiration for anyone, regardless of background, can't be understated. Our firm continues to make a real difference to the career prospects of individuals like Kiera, and we're not stopping anytime soon!"

Knowing only too well how it feels to compete with those who haven't faced the same socio-economic hurdles, Kiera's keen to give back and help others from similar backgrounds. It's one of the reasons she shared her story with students at Browne Jacobson's recent FAIRE virtual careers event, and volunteers on her former Pathways to Law course.

"The fact that the firm is committed to social mobility is incredible because lots say they are, and then you don't get anything out of it. You don't see where it's going, and that's why it's so important for me to put back."

"To anyone thinking of a career in law but concerned they don't come from the right background, it is possible with hard work and determination to get to exactly where you want. If I can do it so can anyone!"

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