

# *Increasing* **Access**

## **Tackling a crisis that hasn't gone away**

A new pro bono collaboration to address the refugee crisis in Greece

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### **Trekking the Carpathian Mountains in Romania...**

...and a 20-year programme to overturn the institutionalisation of children

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### **Ten questions for...**

Jane Waters, COO in Johannesburg

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### **Transforming access to the world of work**

Smart Start celebrates ten years of raising standards of work experience for disadvantaged young people

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THE CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS IN ROMANIA

# Giving well-deserved recognition

I've known Jo Hughes for nearly 20 years, first as a Litigation associate then Senior Professional Support Lawyer, and now working together in A&O's Social Mobility Working Group.

'Social mobility' is a term particular to the UK but an issue that every country faces: how to enable young people from disadvantaged and in many cases desperately poor backgrounds to break those cycles, access education and careers and build better lives for themselves.

It's an issue that both Jo and I feel very strongly about, so I'm proud that she has received the Outstanding Contribution Award in our London Pro Bono and Community Investment Awards this year, for two decades of work as both a mentor to young people and an advocate for improving social mobility. Read Jo's interview on [page 24](#).

Another of our award winners, trainee Bethany Gregory, has herself benefitted from social mobility programmes, without which she says she likely wouldn't have got to this point in her career. Bethany – winner of the Trainee Award – is now a committed volunteer, working on citizenship and immigration cases in London and New York, as well as mentoring young people.

Our full list of award winners is on the next page. We launched these awards in London last year to give more recognition to the huge amount our people do every day to help the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society – and having piloted the awards in London, we're hoping to help more offices launch similar recognition schemes. I've been in this role for six years now and it still amazes me how much work goes on, and the impact our teams make.

Elsewhere in this issue, we're marking the 10th

anniversary of Smart Start – our flagship work experience programme for young people from low-income backgrounds. Smart Start has won multiple awards over the years but, most importantly, has helped 1,450 teenagers build confidence in themselves and their futures. Read more from some of the people who've played a key role in its success on [page 18](#).

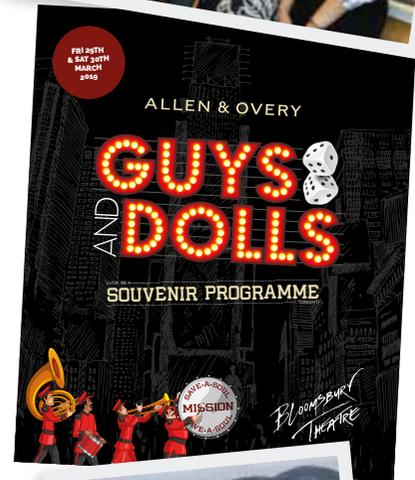
We also hear about two projects to support refugees and asylum seekers – one on the Greek island of Lesbos, where a team of 12 A&O lawyers are joining a wider legal effort to help process more than 14,000 refugees stranded in legal limbo; and another at Birkbeck, University of London, to give asylum seekers access to higher education and a chance to build new lives in the UK.

Finally, we are halfway through our global charity partnership with Hope and Homes for Children and are well on track to meet the GBP1 million fundraising target and deliver our programme of pro bono support. Read about a recent fundraising trek across the Carpathian Mountains, and how the charity has transformed a 50-year system of institutionalising children in Romania, on [page 26](#).



**Mark Mansell**

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**PHOTOS FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: JO HUGHES WITH SMARTER FUTURES MENTEES; 'GUYS AND DOLLS' PROGRAMME; HELEN TALKOWSKI AND CATHERINE HOWSON TREKKING THE CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS**

## WINNERS – A&O PRO BONO AND COMMUNITY INVESTMENT AWARDS 2019

Nominated by colleagues and selected by our Partner Committee, these are the winners of A&O's London awards:

**Outstanding Contribution Award:** Jo Hughes, Senior Professional Support Lawyer and Alumni Manager (see [page 24](#))

**Access to Education and Employment Award:** Cassie Austin-McKenzie, Cleuma Nascimento and Tina Alexander, all Legal PAs – for their long-term commitment to managing a rota of more than 30 volunteers who visit a local primary school in one of the most deprived parts of London to read with the children every week.

**Global Charity Partnership Award:** Helen Talkowski, Legal PA – for her fundraising efforts to support Homes and Hope for Children. Helen helped stage an A&O production of 'Guys and Dolls' for four performances at the Bloomsbury Theatre, London, with a cast and crew of over 60 staff and alumni, raising GBP29,000. She was also part of the team that trekked across the Carpathian mountains, raising nearly GBP47,000, and visited the charity's work in Bucharest.

**Access to Justice Award:** Robin Marshall, Associate – for helping to set up a programme of work with charity Z2K, mobilising a growing team of volunteers to appeal government decisions that deny thousands of people in the UK their disability payments. Read an interview with Robin in Issue 4 of Increasing Access – [download it here](#).

**Trainee Award:** Bethany Gregory – for volunteering at Coram Children's Legal Centre, helping children achieve their right to British citizenship; working on immigration cases for victims of domestic violence in the U.S.; carrying out research in the field of human rights for several NGOs; and mentoring young people from low socio-economic backgrounds.

**Team Award:** Naomi Briercliffe and Olga Owczarek (Senior Associates) and Sarah Morreau and Finnuala Meaden-Torbitt (Associates) – for supporting a complaint before the African Commission on Human and People's Rights filed by Minority Rights Group (MRG) and the environmental organisation, ERND, on behalf of a community that has faced widespread discrimination and eviction, without compensation, from their traditional lands in central Africa. This core team has mobilised 75 people from six offices to support the ongoing case, so far volunteering nearly 1,300 hours.



# News from the network

## ACCESS TO SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS IN CONFLICT ZONES

New York partner Elaine Johnston has led a substantial piece of research for the [Center for Reproductive Rights](#) – an organisation that uses the law to advance these fundamental human rights around the world.



ELAINE JOHNSTON,  
PARTNER

*“Nowhere is the need for sexual and reproductive health services more acute than in conflict settings.”*

Siri May, Senior Global Advocacy Advisor,  
Center for Reproductive Rights



Conducted by 19 A&O lawyers from across the U.S., UK and Europe, with associate Arpita Ashok and pro bono lawyer Kristin Bong coordinating the team, the research supports a new area of work for the Center, focusing on access to sexual and reproductive health rights in conflict zones – in particular whether effective legal mechanisms exist to enforce those rights.

A&O's report covered 14 countries across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America and found that, while international and domestic legal mechanisms do exist to promote sexual and reproductive health rights, this accountability on paper is often at odds with the prevalence of violations on the ground and the experiences of the victims.

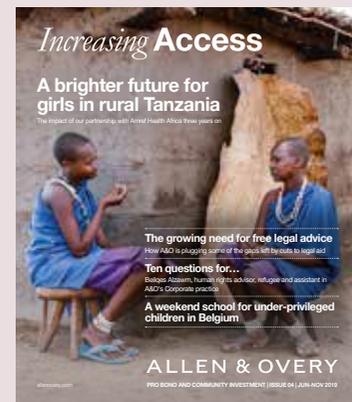
As Siri May, Senior Global Advocacy Advisor at the Center for Reproductive Rights, explains: “Nowhere is the need for sexual and reproductive health services more acute than

in conflict settings, where rates of sexual and gender-based violence increase exponentially. As well as being serious human rights violations in their own right, women and girls can go on to suffer long-term consequences, such as high rates of unsafe abortion, miscarriage, premature labour and sexually transmitted infections – all against a backdrop of disintegrating health systems, unsafe environments and fear of further violence for seeking care.”

“The Center for Reproductive Rights is doing incredibly important work in this area,” says Elaine. “We hope our report will help them to advocate for more effective protections and accountability mechanisms, and to engage with government officials, other decision makers and NGOs in affected regions in pursuit of these goals.

“This research builds on work we've done with Amref Health Africa to help advocate for better sexual and reproductive health rights in sub-

Saharan Africa,” Elaine says, “as well as more recently with Legal Action Worldwide to launch a landmark case against the Government of South Sudan for sexual violence against women.”



Read more about this work in Issue 4 of Increasing Access – [download it here](#).

## FT INNOVATIVE LAWYERS REPORT HIGHLY COMMENDS VICTORY FOR SEGREGATED ROMA CHILDREN

A&O's pro bono and community investment work has been commended in the Financial Times Innovative Lawyers Awards in Europe for the sixth year running.

The FT 'Highly Commended' A&O's work with local Budapest lawyers to bring a lawsuit on behalf of 62 Roma children to assess the damage suffered by their segregation in Hungary's state education system.

A&O Counsel and Head of Dispute Resolution in Budapest, Balázs Sahin-Toth, worked alongside local lawyers – Adél Kegye, Eleonóra Hernádi and Peter Gárdos – to advocate for the 62 children in more than 40 court hearings, providing testimony from teachers and families to establish a monetary value of the impact

of segregation on the children's futures. The hearings also condemned the state's failure to end segregation and drew further attention to the widespread social inequality faced by the Roma community in Hungary.

Read the Financial Times special report on the Roma case [here](#).

This victory – recently upheld by the Court of Appeal in Hungary – builds on a landmark six-year litigation won by Balázs against another school, in which the Supreme Court awarded 'moral damages' for the first time to Roma children who had suffered school segregation in Hungary, and held that there was no need to prove actual losses in future cases, as 'illegal segregation' already implies harm has been caused.



COUNSEL AND HEAD OF DISPUTE RESOLUTION IN BUDAPEST, BALÁZS SAHIN-TOTH

Read more in an interview with Balázs Sahin-Toth in Issue 1 of Increasing Access – [download it here](#).



## PROVIDING MISSING MAPS FOR MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES

In September, over 30 volunteers from A&O's Singapore office took part in a 'mapathon' exercise as part of Médecins Sans Frontières' (MSF) Missing Maps Project, which helps provide life-saving logistical support in areas affected by conflict, epidemics, disasters or exclusion from healthcare.

The A&O volunteers – all first-time mappers – digitally mapped nearly 3,000 buildings in the Rukungiri district of Uganda, supporting MSF's field workers in Ebola hotspots near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The process uses a computer to trace and mark buildings on satellite pictures of the area, which are then uploaded to a digital tool used by the MSF team. "It's a relatively simple process," says Singapore associate Gerald Tham. "Anyone with basic computer skills can do it – but the impact is really tangible."

Once the digital maps are created, MSF volunteers on the ground can then verify what the buildings are – houses, industrial estates, medical institutions, schools – which significantly improves their ability to operate in the area, as without this

they have to rely on basic hand-drawn maps.

"The threat of Ebola in the district that we were mapping is very real," Gerald says, "so this work will assist MSF to better respond if an Ebola outbreak happens in that community."



A&O'S SINGAPORE TEAM MAPPING BUILDINGS IN EBOLA HOTSPOTS WITH MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES

## PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT OF HETEROSEXUAL MARRIED COUPLES IN HONG KONG

In the largest pro bono project led by our Hong Kong office, earlier this year A&O published a report showing how people in heterosexual marriages receive preferential treatment under Hong Kong law compared with those in alternative relationships, including civil partnerships, cohabiting couples and same-sex marriages.

Partner Matt Bower led the team from Hong Kong, with international support from A&O's LGBT+ network, A&Out, plus Peerpoint consultants, volunteers from local Hong Kong firms and a major client.

The research, commissioned by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), analysed Hong Kong legislation and government policies that discriminate against couples not recognised as 'married' – marriage between opposite-sex couples being the only voluntary relationship recognised under Hong Kong law.

"We found evidence of differential treatment in each of the 21 areas of law we examined," Matt says, "from the moment a relationship is formed to the end of a person's life."

For example, heterosexual married couples are entitled to benefits, such as preferential tax treatment, access to public housing and the ability to use reproductive technologies, that individuals in other relationships are not. Failure to recognise alternative relationships also impairs the way some laws can operate as

intended and makes it harder for authorities to enforce certain criminal laws too.

A&O's report has generated significant interest, with the Equal Opportunities Commission in Hong Kong describing it as "excellently informative". A subsequent panel discussion hosted by A&O and prominent spokespeople on diversity and equality has looked further at the prospects for reform and how businesses can support LGBT+ employees.

"Our hope now," says Matt, "is that this positive response from so many organisations and individuals will prompt further discussion on whether and how reform can be pursued."

*"We found evidence of differential treatment in each of the 21 areas of law we examined, from the moment a relationship is formed to the end of a person's life."*

Matt Bower, Partner

Read the full report [here](#).



A&O has been named **Corporate Citizenship Law Firm of the Year** for the third year running at the Asian Legal Business Hong Kong Awards 2019. The award recognises our work for the Equal Opportunities Commission (see above); our advice to support refugees applying for permission to work in Hong Kong; and helping a domestic worker recover excessive recruitment fees charged in connection with her employment in Hong Kong.

## A NEW PRIZE FOR LEGAL LEADERSHIP IN WOMEN'S RIGHTS AT THE PARIS PEACE FORUM

The Paris Peace Forum, held annually from 11-13 November, brings together heads of state and government with NGOs, think-tanks and businesses to find solutions to global challenges and work towards international peace.

Over 7,000 people attended this year's event, including Ursula Von der Leyen, Emmanuel Macron, Wang Qishan, Sophie Wilmes and António Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations.

From A&O, senior partner Wim Dejonghe also attended the high profile event, together with a number of partners, lawyers and support professionals from our Paris office.

A&O is a major pro bono partner of the Paris Peace Forum, having been the first private company to support the event, and remains the only law firm partner. This year A&O's Paris team – now numbering 20 lawyers and support professionals – extended its legal and governance support, helping to create a fund which the Forum can use to finance projects

arising from the conference, as well as advising on the Forum's employment law issues and other areas like banking.

At the event itself, Paris managing partner Hervé Ekué was in conversation with several top female decision-makers on how to strengthen the role of women in the global economy in a session entitled 'The Future is Female: Achieving Women's Economic Empowerment'. Hippolyte Marquetty and Marie Stoyanov also presented A&O's proposal for an annual prize for lawyers and legal experts fighting for women's rights across all kinds of issues.

The first Global Prize for Legal Leadership in Women's Rights will be awarded in 2020. The winners will receive support, if needed,

from A&O and all other firms and organisations supporting this initiative. This could include pro bono assistance, media exposure, legal and management advice, and financial support to help the winners carry out their exceptional work.



*“The Paris Peace Forum is based on the value of cooperation and the importance of the rule of law. I think this is something we share as a firm and are very happy to support. It is also exciting for us to have been involved since day one and to watch this new organisation emerge into such a productive and innovative platform to address global challenges. In particular, the 2019 conference generated a large number of concrete initiatives which can be taken forward to address some global challenges. We are extremely proud to be offering a prize championing women's rights. Gender equality is a global issue and lawyers have an important role to play here.”*

Romarc Lazerges, Partner

L-R Partners, Hippolyte Marquetty, Marie Stoyanov, Hervé Ekué and Romarc Lazerges



# *Tackling a crisis that hasn't gone away*

As part of a unique pro bono collaboration, volunteers from A&O and five other law firms are helping an NGO on the Greek island of Lesbos provide legal assistance to thousands of stranded refugees.

Phil Worthington remembers the intense media interest on Lesbos when he first arrived there in 2016, at what was then assumed to be the height of the refugee crisis.

With people arriving in huge numbers, most having made the perilous journey by dinghy to the Greek island, the place was swarming with news crews and journalists.

Since then the crisis has fallen out of the headlines – the turning point, a deal struck in March 2016 between the EU and Turkey to contain the crisis.

Phil, a commercial lawyer by background, first went to the island as a volunteer helping to distribute food and sleeping bags. “People from the European authorities thought: that’s it, the problem is solved,” he says.

But although the EU/Turkey deal significantly reduced the numbers of refugees arriving on the island, it also completely transformed the legal situation.

Since then, refugees have been obliged to seek asylum in Greece. Rather than transiting through Lesbos swiftly, as in the past, new arrivals are under a geographical restriction meaning they cannot leave the island and are stuck in the Moria refugee camp waiting for their applications to be determined. Some of those considered most vulnerable are eventually moved to mainland Greece, but the process can take months longer.

“Instead of spending two days in the camp, they can now spend years on Lesbos or other nearby islands,” says Phil, who now runs European Lawyers in Lesbos (ELIL), an NGO set up by the CCBE (Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe) and the German Bar Association.

These groups founded ELIL in recognition of a profound legal need, he says. “Lots of lawyers came out to volunteer in the humanitarian effort, but then the question became: what can we do as lawyers?”

## **A TWO-YEAR WAIT**

The Moria camp, an ex-military base just outside the town of Mytilene, has capacity for 3,000 people. But since the pivotal EU/Turkey deal the numbers have swelled, made worse since July this year with arrivals from Turkey increasing, and with the process of moving the most vulnerable refugees to the mainland slowing down.

Over the summer numbers have doubled, with between 14,000 and 15,000 refugees now in Moria, many waiting more than two years to receive a decision or, in some cases, just to have their first asylum interviews.

ELIL has three permanent Greek asylum lawyers and, on average, three additional volunteer asylum lawyers. There are just 15 lawyers in all on Lesbos providing assistance

to asylum seekers – the equivalent, notes Phil, of one lawyer for every 1,000 refugees.

It was against this backdrop that ELIL started exploring ways to get more volunteer lawyers on to the island to increase capacity, so reached out to commercial law firms with an interest in doing hands-on pro bono work.

It has led to one of the most ambitious pro bono collaborations ever mounted in the legal industry.

Six firms – Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe; White & Case; Dentons; Ashurst; A&O; and now also Charles Russell Speechlys – have come together as part of a pilot programme running to July 2020, within which each firm will send volunteer lawyers for two weeks at a time to work with ELIL.

The six firms are also working with a second NGO, Refugee Legal Support, to provide intensive training for the lawyers on asylum law, as well as how to conduct interviews with their often traumatised clients, and, importantly, to help them build their own resilience for the challenges they will encounter.

## **FANTASTIC RESPONSE**

For A&O, this project builds on a growing body of pro bono and community investment work in recent years to address the global refugee crisis. The initial response was fantastic, with 40 lawyers asking to become involved.



European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL) has received the Award for Local Pro Bono Impact at the recent PILnet Global Awards 2019. This honours individual lawyers and firms who have made an exceptional effort to use their skills for the benefit of their local community.

*“Pro bono work is not always within your area of expertise, so the challenge is to find somewhere you can really add value. You always want to give something back.”*

Marton Eorsi, Senior Associate

Of the 12 selected to join the project from A&O offices in Europe and the Middle East, three have already completed their two weeks in Lesvos: associate Aoife O’Reilly (Litigation, London); and senior associates Marton Eorsi (Corporate, London); and Angélique Pfeiffelmann (Litigation, Frankfurt).

Before joining A&O as a trainee, Aoife gained experience of immigration and asylum law, including volunteering with Asylum Aid. While at A&O she has worked with the Coram Children’s Pro Bono Legal Service, helping UK-born children exercise their rights to citizenship, and completed a secondment

within A&O’s central pro bono team.

While based in A&O’s Budapest office in his native Hungary, Marton built on his student interest in human rights. When Hungary built a fence along its southern border and made it a criminal offence to cross, Marton went to the border with other lawyers from the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, an NGO set up to help defend refugees against criminal charges.

“When I saw the opportunity in Lesvos, I jumped at it,” he says. “Pro bono work is not always within your area of expertise, so the challenge is to find somewhere you can really add value.

You always want to give something back.”

Angélique studied elements of Human Rights and Refugee Law as part of a Masters degree – something that helped as she went through the training for Lesvos. She is also involved in supporting asylum seekers in Germany – her mother volunteers with refugee aid work in her home town – which triggered an interest in using her legal knowledge to help people in the asylum system.

But despite that experience, all three say the training they received ahead of travelling to Lesvos was vital.



**VOLUNTEER LAWYERS WITH ELIL IN LESVOS**



**ONE OF THE CONTAINERS USED FOR LEGAL CONSULTATIONS – AND LATER A SCHOOL**

## THE NEED FOR IMMEDIATE ADVICE

The work there covers three main areas. The majority is about preparing refugees for the very rigorous asylum interviews with the Greek and EU authorities. It is a sensitive and demanding task, helping the refugees to understand that they must tell their story fully and accurately to demonstrate the credibility of their asylum claims – even if it means reliving painful traumas.

As Aoife puts it: “In a way, all these people have are their stories because they’ve left everything else behind. But explaining that they have to tell their stories in such granular detail is difficult.”

Listening and notating the stories, so that follow-on lawyers have an accurate record of individual cases, is skilful work, says Marton. “These are highly vulnerable people and eliciting their worst traumas is something you need a lot of experience to get right.

“When you do the interview prep, you focus on the job of getting the information you need. When you see a grown man break down in tears, you know you need to be strong and use common sense – offer a break or a drink of water.”

Lawyers are also working on family reunification cases – in which refugees are

allowed to move to another country if a relative is a refugee or pursuing asylum there – and assisting those considered most vulnerable who can be moved more quickly to the mainland. Part of the work is answering simple questions about medical support or clarifying confusions over documentation.

For Angélique, the most important task was responding to people’s need for immediate advice. “In our normal jobs, we have time to study the law in detail to give clients the best advice. In Lesvos, you are giving advice that people can work with quickly. It’s a totally different way of helping people.”

Morning work is carried out in two containers (used in the afternoon by another NGO as a school) in an area called the Olive Grove, just outside the camp. After lunch, the volunteers continue the work with refugees at ELIL’s office in Mytilene.

Impressions of the camp are understandably vivid for all three A&O volunteers.

For Aoife, it was the incredible overcrowding that sticks in her mind, with people living in tents, prefabricated units and containers in incredibly close proximity. The conditions in Moria were reminiscent of what she experienced volunteering in Nepal, after the 2015 earthquake destroyed over 60,000

homes. Walking around the Lesvos camp, she had to remind herself that she was in Europe.

“Every day you’d see a new tent crammed into the apparently non-existent space between two prefabricated units – it was impossible to walk through the rows of accommodation without feeling that you were encroaching on the entrance to someone’s home.”

Marton recalls one day when heavy rain swept piles of rubbish into the mud tracks running through Moria – a reminder that weather conditions on the island aren’t always like the images in holiday brochures. In recent winters it has snowed heavily.

Many refugees – whether from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Cameroon or the Democratic Republic of Congo – run into old disputes and rivalries in the camp and many feel insecure, Marton says. He recalls a husband and wife who took turns to stay awake at night to guard their tent and children.

Given the conditions in the camp and the long wait for even the most basic needs to be met, Angélique found it impressive how calm and patient the people were. “Although it would sometimes take a long time before we were able to speak to them, they were always very grateful for any kind of information or advice, even if we couldn’t help them immediately,” she says.



Between  
**60,000** and  
**70,000**  
 refugees  
 are currently stranded  
 in Greece

#### FAIR, ROBUST AND EFFICIENT

Phil puts the project into context. “Our role is not to try and make sure everybody gets asylum, but to ensure the system is robust and efficient and that people are able to present their case in a way that means they get a fair hearing.”

It’s too early for statistical evidence to prove, but Phil is in no doubt that the project is boosting ELIL’s capacity to do this important work. He remains amazed at the response of lawyers from the commercial firms, with many more applying than can be accepted during the pilot phase.

The volunteers also bring something else that is proving equally important to the ELIL team, he adds. “People come with new energy – it’s like a breath of fresh air.”

But, while the cameras and notebooks of the journalists are focused on other events now, Phil makes one important last point about a crisis that hasn’t gone away.

“This isn’t a Greek issue. It’s a European issue.

“There are between 60,000 and 70,000 refugees in Greece – the capacity of one football stadium. That is not a lot of people. If every EU member state took 2,000 refugees, the problem would be solved.”

*“Our role is not to try and make sure everybody gets asylum, but to ensure the system is robust and efficient and that people are able to present their case in a way that means they get a fair hearing.”*

Philip Worthington,  
 Managing Director, European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL)

*“I’m here as an example and to say: I broke these barriers. If you look beyond them, you might get the chance too.”*

Janahan Sivanathan, second-year Law student at Birkbeck, University of London

## *A space to belong to*

Birkbeck’s Compass Project, part funded by A&O, already provides asylum seekers with a new start through higher education and now aims to give the same chance to former prisoners.

Janahan Sivanathan has no doubt how fundamentally Birkbeck – part of the University of London – and its Compass Project has changed his fortunes. “It was my first real experience of acceptance. Finally I was being respected as a human being – someone was giving me a space to belong to,” he says reflecting on the moment he learned he had secured a place, through the Compass Project, to complete a one-year Certificate in Higher Education at Birkbeck.

The news came after a seven-year struggle to make a new life in the UK – having escaped imprisonment, torture and sexual assault as part of the persecuted Tamil minority in Sri

Lanka – and a further year waiting for asylum finally to be granted in 2018.

The details of his journey are extremely painful to hear – arriving at 17 in London, knowing no one, unable to speak a word of English, put up in a cold garage before being forced into homelessness. There were two spells in a detention centre – one for five months – self-harm, suicide attempts, a hunger strike that brought him close to death and a narrow escape from deportation, before finally, and without explanation, being granted refugee status by a Home Office that had repeatedly refused to believe his story.

The contrast to today could not be more striking.

With his status secured, he is now in his second year of a Law degree, has completed a placement with the solicitors, Bhatt Murphy, and is now on an extended placement with the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI) while his studies continue.

“The Compass Project really has changed my life,” he says.

It’s a journey that some 60 asylum seekers have experienced over the past three years, thanks to the Compass Project, for which A&O has been a founder funder alongside the consultancy AlixPartners.

## BUILDING A BRIDGE TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Birkbeck itself is a unique institution that has ‘advancing social mobility through access to learning’ written into its guiding principles. Nearly 80% of the College’s students are mature learners; more than 50% come from low-income households; 40% from a black or ethnic minority background; and 17% have a declared disability.

When Birkbeck’s academic community and Department of Access and Engagement started looking at how to help asylum seekers at the height of the refugee crisis, it was in keeping with that ethos. But the College wanted to do something different.

“Lots of institutions offer valuable and much-needed sanctuary scholarships but we saw that the real gap was in outreach,” explains Anneka Hendrick, Birkbeck’s Head of Corporate Partnerships.

“If you are someone seeking asylum in the UK, you often don’t have the structural access or cultural or social capital to think about accessing higher education. The question we asked ourselves was: how do you build that bridge?”

One immediate challenge was how to reach potential students in this widely dispersed community. Birkbeck did that by appointing a dedicated Compass Project Officer in the Access and Engagement Department and working with a range of charities that had established links with asylum seekers.

The second challenge was funding. “Asylum seekers are classified as international students and are not formally recognised by the Office for Students as a target under-represented group. So we knew we needed to work with corporate partners, alumni and friends of Birkbeck to make this project a reality,” says Anneka.

Getting A&O and AlixPartners on board at the inception stage, and before it was clear how successful the project would be, was a huge breakthrough, not least in the continued search for further corporate backers. A&O has also hosted events, giving Compass Project students a taste of life in a commercial law firm. “Without that support the project wouldn’t have happened.”

Each year the college welcomes 20 asylum

seekers studying a range of access or degree level courses. Their fees are funded and they receive additional close support, both to acclimatise to university life and, thanks to help from charities such as Refugees at Home and Breaking Barriers, to travel and find accommodation.

But Birkbeck wants to reach a wider audience. It holds a series of taster days and workshops to help others explore the possibility of study, perhaps not today but in the future. The first year attracted 80 people, but as word has spread the numbers have risen.

“You might have people who are quite far from going to university – they are not ready yet,” says Anneka. “Some will have very harrowing histories and may only have been here a short time. So an important part of the project is just to plant the idea of considering higher education in their minds.”

The project is not primarily a recruitment strategy for the College, she stresses. It is about making sure that asylum seekers can find the right support, the right course, the right university, at the right time for them. Increasingly Birkbeck is collaborating with partners in the sector, sending Compass students on to study their chosen subjects at other universities.

As the project has grown, new obstacles have emerged in what has become an increasingly hostile environment. It is already illegal for asylum seekers to work. But in 2018, just as the second year of Compass was beginning, the government introduced ‘no study’ clauses into many people’s claims. Birkbeck led a vocal campaign to overturn the study ban and all of its students were eventually allowed to continue.

“One of the things we have always been keen to do is to change the narrative around asylum seekers,” says Anneka. “We consider ourselves to be an important voice in that debate.”

## HIGHER EDUCATION FOR FORMER PRISONERS

The project has been widely recognised, not least in The Guardian’s prestigious University Awards in 2018. And that success has encouraged the College’s Access and Engagement Department, working closely with the law school and its

Institute for Criminal Policy Research, to plan Compass Project 2.0 – to offer a route into higher education for former prisoners. Currently at the research stage, the hope is to begin the outreach stage of the project in mid-2020. Once again A&O and AlixPartners have agreed to support the new project for three years.

Janahan, meanwhile, is an eloquent advocate for Compass and the possibilities it can unleash for the most vulnerable in society.

He recalls many poignant moments on his journey. He remembers how he taught himself English through newspapers, children’s books and nursery rhymes and by carefully watching people’s mannerisms and facial expressions.

He remembers the help he eventually got from the charity Medical Justice and from an ex-BBC journalist who now works with victims of torture. She helped him get counselling, pointed him towards studying and, at one dark moment, sent him flowers and a card that read: “You’re not alone. Have hope and look beyond what you are going through.”

And he remembers the moment in a Lincolnshire detention centre in 2015 when he began to put his own desperate struggle aside and to focus on helping other asylum seekers trapped in the system, as a translator. It was then that the idea of one day becoming a lawyer first entered his mind.

## THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE HEARD

He had no idea back then that he would go on to study at Birkbeck, would win a Law Society prize for essay of the year, or get the qualifications he needed to begin a law degree. No idea either that in a recent work placement he would support a team that prevented a woman from being deported. “The lady had tears in her eyes and thanked me. It felt so fantastic, I went away and cried too,” he says.

“Birkbeck gave me a recognised opportunity to grow and for my voice to be heard,” he adds.

“But I’m not here to represent all refugees. I’m here as an example and to say: I broke these barriers. If you look beyond them, you might get the chance too.”

# Ten questions for...

## Jane Waters

Jane Waters is the Chief Operating Officer of A&O's Johannesburg office and has taken the lead in setting up its pro bono and community investment programme.

Jane first joined A&O in 1999 as head of Banking HR in London, then left in 2004 to move to South Africa and live with her husband in his native country. Jane re-joined A&O when the Johannesburg office opened in 2014.

### DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN 30 WORDS...

Donna (not sure where Harvey is though!). I'm a latecomer to the TV programme 'Suits' – in case it's passed anyone else by...!

### WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO BECOME INVOLVED IN PRO BONO AND COMMUNITY INVESTMENT WORK?

I spent six months working for a small charity in Calcutta in the late 1990s (my 'Eat Pray Love' book experience, as I call it!). I've always been conscious of the need to contribute to the society we live in, but that trip made me realise you can't change the world with one-off, short-term interventions. So as the Johannesburg office has evolved, it's been helpful and motivating to remember that we achieve traction and impact when people are committed for the long term.

### WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF ACHIEVING SO FAR IN THE COMMUNITIES YOU SUPPORT IN SOUTH AFRICA?

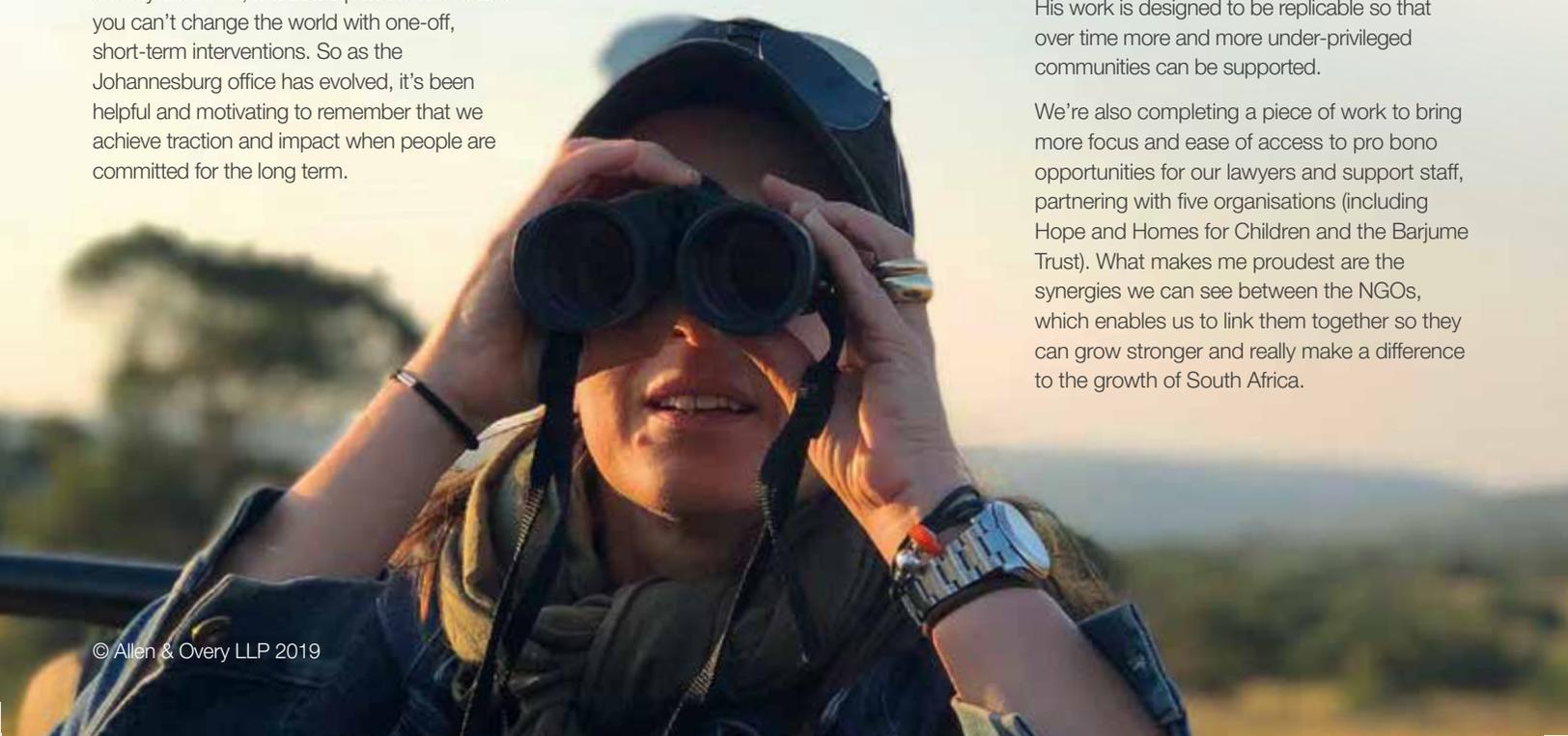
I'm proud that we're demonstrating a sustainable commitment to charities like Hope and Homes for Children and the Barjume Trust, as well as some of the smaller organisations we support.

We started working with Hope and Homes for Children locally before they became A&O's global charity partner, and it's been amazing to be part of a movement that changes the conversation about the institutional care of children.

I am so proud of Lourenza Foghill – country director of the charity here. Over the past three years, she has really moved the country forward to embrace deinstitutionalisation, which is incredible.

The Barjume Trust is equally humbling, as the programme lead, Barney Andrews, is such a force of nature. We've supported him in developing a skills centre, medical centre and legal resource centre for his local community. (Read more on the next page). He has an amazing ability to link one opportunity to the next, and the next, and the next... bringing people together to achieve ever more for his community. His work is designed to be replicable so that over time more and more under-privileged communities can be supported.

We're also completing a piece of work to bring more focus and ease of access to pro bono opportunities for our lawyers and support staff, partnering with five organisations (including Hope and Homes for Children and the Barjume Trust). What makes me proudest are the synergies we can see between the NGOs, which enables us to link them together so they can grow stronger and really make a difference to the growth of South Africa.



## HOW DO YOU FIT THIS TYPE OF WORK AROUND YOUR BUSY SCHEDULE?

A few years ago I attended A&O's first pro bono and community investment conference for our international partners and champions. I listened to the message that this work is part of all our jobs. It shifted how I prioritise this type of work and enabled me to acknowledge how much I enjoy it.

## IN WHAT WAYS HAS PRO BONO AND COMMUNITY INVESTMENT WORK HELPED YOU BUILD YOUR CAREER?

I think the principles embodied in pro bono and community investment work – of making a commitment and contribution to society rather than just existing, as well as kindness and decency to others – have been really important to me in how I operate.

I've also found it extremely useful to learn recently that contributing to pro bono/altruistic work is one of the greatest stress relievers researchers have found.

## DESCRIBE YOUR PERFECT DAY OFF WORK...

Can I fit all these in...?! Ride my horse, walk my dogs, laugh with my children, learn from my husband, drink wine with my friends, stay at a lodge in the Okavango delta and smell the bush sage while looking for wild dogs with my brother and his family, and have dinner on the beach on Benguerra Island with my family!

## WHICH IS YOUR FAVOURITE CITY IN THE WORLD, AND WHY?

Hong Kong – the noise, the pace, the smells, the dim sum, the water, the sea food and the diversity of culture.

## TELL US SOMETHING NOT MANY PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT YOU...

I'm the granddaughter and great niece of two English footballers who played for Aston Villa and Notts County. My grandfather also won an England Cap playing against Scotland. They earned the heady amount of 5 Shillings and a third-class rail ticket! Their father was also a footballer and ended his career

as a talent scout sourcing players into Wolverhampton Wanderers.

## WHAT WORDS OF ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE INTERESTED IN GETTING INVOLVED IN PRO BONO AND COMMUNITY INVESTMENT WORK?

You will not change the world through one effort, but by changing one person's experience of life you are making a difference.

## WHO DO YOU ADMIRE MOST, AND WHY?

I'm not great on idolatry, but I admire those who speak their truth and stand up to bullying and injustice.

Closer to home (and they will die of shock when I say this) I am guided by the values of my parents. My mother has always advocated hard work and relationship-building as a firm foundation for life, and I get great strength from my father's decision to prioritise his children – and his unfailing support and appreciation for anything we have done!

### BARNEY ANDREWS AND THE BARJUME TRUST



The Barjume Trust was established by Barney Andrews within his local community of Geluksdal – a township of around 15,000 people situated next to a large open cast gold mine, just south of Johannesburg. The community suffers from high levels of unemployment and drug problems – in large part because there is very little for young people to do.

"Most people move out when they become successful, leaving behind the young and old," says Jane. "But Barney's view is that, while he can leave, his family can't, so he would therefore prefer to improve his community rather than leave it behind."

One of the Barjume Trust's first projects was to convert a derelict building into a community centre for young people to learn construction skills (bricklaying, welding and painting),

using the expertise of retired older people in the community to build employability skills in younger generations, and creating internships for its graduates with the local mining company.

The Trust has grown quickly, tackling other community issues – for example the prevalence of drug abuse – by providing psychological support and evening activities to keep young people occupied. It has also set up a medical facility within the community centre run by a retired nurse to provide health screening, which is essential in order for people to get a job. The medical centre now funds itself by providing medicals to the local mining companies for their employees.

A&O's Johannesburg office has provided funding to the Barjume Trust, as well as office furniture, stationery and computers. We are now launching a legal clinic and training paralegals in the community, starting with labour law, to run the clinics twice a week. Named the 'A&O Academy' ("at Barney's request!" says Jane), A&O lawyers will be available to support the paralegals with phone advice during the clinics, and a lawyer with extensive experience in the

community has been recruited to help deliver the training and supervise the paralegals.

"Private sector firms must commit to a Social Labour Plan (SLP) to support local communities with schools, health centres, housing, training and so on," Jane explains. "This isn't being implemented, so Barney wants to use the model of his community centre as a way of mobilising private sector support and helping them to deliver their SLP commitments.

"Barney's wife Melanie is also amazing. She has set up a 40-strong women's group and assigned each member a role – for example managing community gardens or distributing vegetables. One woman has set up a soup kitchen which many contribute food and money to, and she organised a women's march in August which I was invited to join," Jane says.

"Barney and Melanie are a remarkable couple, and I hope that by building a long-term relationship with them across different areas we can really support them in improving the future for thousands in their community."

# *Smart Start celebrates ten standout years*

In the summer of 2009, A&O invited 160 students from some of the most deprived areas of London into our Bishops Square office.

Ten years on, the Smart Start Experience has supported 1,450 young people from across the UK, been used as a case study by the government in how businesses can tackle social exclusion, driven up standards of work experience in the legal sector, and expanded to Hong Kong, India and South Africa.

Over the past decade, Smart Start has received dozens of awards and accolades, including from the Financial Times and Evening Standard newspapers, and the prestigious Queen's Award for Enterprise for Promoting Opportunity through Social Mobility.

As A&O marks ten years of Smart Start, we speak to some of the volunteers and people responsible for its success.

## **BROADENING ACCESS TO QUALITY WORK EXPERIENCE**

"When David Morley (then A&O senior partner) first brought the Smart Start team together in 2008, he had a very clear idea of what he wanted to achieve," says Sue Wisbey who, with Emma Turnbull, runs A&O's community investment programme. Government research had shown that it was harder for young people from non-privileged backgrounds to make it in

the top professions than it had been 30 years before. "I remember David saying, 'we just can't have that in our profession'".

A key part of the issue was work experience opportunities being handed out through personal networks – "based on who you know not what you know," Sue says. "Even the good schemes in our sector were mostly offering work shadowing for small groups of students who already knew they wanted a training

contract. So the aim for us was to create a programme that would provide broader access to the world of law and business, as well as high quality work experience and skills development to help less privileged young people get a foot on the career ladder," she says.

"We wanted to target students from low-income families," Emma adds, "who weren't necessarily getting the top grades but who had ambition and drive. Students whose backgrounds meant



they would probably never consider a career in business or know how to access the right opportunities. No one was really focusing on that harder to reach group back then.”

### PREPARING FOR THE WORLD OF WORK

The impact of the first Smart Start programme exceeded expectations. “The change we saw in the students during that week and the feedback from them, as well as their parents and teachers, was amazing,” says Sue. “It hit home what a big impact we could have.”

The core of the Smart Start programme remains very similar today. “We put a lot of thought at the outset into what skills these young people needed to develop and what they’d find interesting about A&O,” she says.

As well as practical workshops on presentation skills, interviews, personal brand and CVs, the programme focuses on creative thinking, problem solving and resilience. Students take part in a speed networking activity with A&O and client volunteers, prepare the defence in a mock murder trial and negotiate the sale of a football club in a fast-paced business challenge.

“We want the students to learn about different career options – whether that’s being a lawyer, paralegal or legal PA, or working in finance, IT, marketing or HR. The week is challenging but interesting and fun, and importantly provides skills the students can build on in the future,” Sue says.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORING AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

While the main workshops have stayed constant, Sue and Emma have added to the wider programme every year, offering mentoring, bursaries, university summer school placements, employability support during university and work experience with clients.

Over 500 students have now been through the online mentoring programme, Smarter Futures. “They benefit so much from having ongoing support at a time when they’re making big decisions,” says Emma. “In many cases, they don’t have anyone else like that in their lives – someone outside their existing network, totally focused on them, who can bring different experiences and contacts.”

Ten years ago, the main decision was whether to apply to university. But now, Emma says, at age 16 young people in the UK have around 12,000 choices – from school leavers’ programmes to apprenticeships and higher education qualifications.

“That’s why mentoring is so important, because ‘network poverty’ creates real inequalities among young people. Depending on your upbringing, you might never hear about many of these options. Or you might experience complete ‘choice overload’ and not know how to make the right decision.”

The bursaries of GBP10,500 awarded to two standout students every year have helped address another concern for many young people: funding the cost of higher education. “We see a lot of confusion and anxiety from students about university fee structures, as well as how to fund the cost of living. It adds another layer of stress for low-income households,” says Emma.

### THE VOLUNTEERS WHO MAKE IT HAPPEN

The Smart Start programme is delivered by over 200 volunteers each year, with 30% coming from A&O’s clients – many of whom return each year, bringing more colleagues with them.

Jonathan Price is a Director of Legal at Aviva and has volunteered for the past six years in nearly every element of Smart Start, including mentoring students through Smarter Futures. He is also helping Sue to target students across East Anglia – one of the least socially mobile areas in the UK.

“I started off doing the speed networking event in 2013 and got hooked,” Jonathan says. Over the course of Smart Start, you see the students’ confidence grow – partly from the core skills they’re learning but also by becoming comfortable in this environment. They leave the scheme positive and ready to aim high.”



Rachel Donelan is a Litigation associate and has been volunteering with Smart Start for five years.

"I always take part in a couple of different sessions each year – one of my favourites is speed networking because you meet such a variety of young people. It amazes me how mature and engaged they are with Smart Start and their future careers," says Rachel.

### THE BENCHMARK OF QUALITY

Smart Start remains the first and only scheme across the legal sector to be formally accredited by City & Guilds, the vocational education organisation.

"The accreditation process was rigorous," Sue says. "City & Guilds reviewed all our materials and activities, interviewed volunteers and spoke to lots of students. It was tough to achieve, but we really wanted to show how Smart Start stands out for its quality. It also means the students get a certificate of attainment to use in CVs and interviews – something very tangible for them."

As Smart Start has developed each year, the list of awards and accolades has grown too – a particular highlight being the Queen's Award for Enterprise in 2017, one of only six businesses to receive this.

But, as Sue and Emma say, the real pride comes from seeing the difference Smart Start makes to the students themselves.

### BUSINESSES HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY

"Since we opened up the programme to students across the UK, teenagers are coming from as far as Sheffield, Cardiff, Bradford and Hull – around 60% are from outside London now," says Sue. "For some, this is the first time they've got on a train and left home – it's huge for them. When they walk into A&O, most have never experienced anything like this before.

"When I see kids – who at the beginning of the week were so shy and nervous they could barely speak – become confident and enthusiastic about their future, and when parents tell me their children come home buzzing with excitement, that's the point of Smart Start."

Emma agrees. "It was never about finding lawyers – we have great programmes in graduate recruitment for that, which target young people from low socio-economic backgrounds. Some of our students go down that route and get training contracts here or with other firms, which is fantastic. But our

original aim was to support young people who have potential and ambition – just no idea how to realise them.

"With the help of our volunteers – who put everything into this – these students start to unpick the big decisions, learn about their options and what they might be suited to. They grow in confidence and ultimately build a picture of what they can do with their lives. I love hearing the conversations that go on between the volunteers and students. I'm proud of the way A&O comes together to make that happen."

As Emma points out, businesses have a big role to play in getting young people ready for the world of work and providing access to opportunities for everyone, regardless of social background. That is one of the objectives of A&O's Social Mobility Working Group, she says, "to challenge ourselves to think more about this, because coming from a disadvantaged background still creates so many barriers."

And that, says Sue, is what motivates her to keep pushing to do more every year – "the thought that otherwise these young people might not get this chance, and we know they're capable of achieving so much."



## In 2019, our Smart Start students told us...

Each year, we measure the impact of the Smart Start Experience on our students. By the end of the week-long programme in 2019, the students told us:

- **90% understood** the large number of different careers open to them in law – compared to 33% at the start of the week
- **93% felt confident** about meeting new people and growing their network – up from 44%
- **84% knew how to prepare** for and handle an interview – up from only 20% at the beginning of the week



*“Smart Start has helped me discover that I am good enough to work at a firm like A&O. The warm atmosphere and welcoming people have truly impacted my career choice.”*

*“Smart Start teaches you about things that you can’t learn at school but are essential to life and the world of work.”*

*“It has been a great experience. Not only have I learned more about the world of work and law, I have met so many great people and it has helped me develop lots of skills. I have enjoyed every second.”*



### Interested in applying for the Smart Start Experience in London?

Smart Start is open to students from across the UK – anyone who can travel to A&O’s London office for a week can apply. The scheme prioritises 16-17 year-olds who will either be the first generation in their family to go to university and or are eligible for free school meals (one of the key measures of low-income households).

The application process for Smart Start 2020 is open until 17 January 2020 – [click here to find out more and apply](#).



JONATHAN PRICE, DIRECTOR OF LEGAL, AVIVA

**Jonathan Price is a Director of Legal at Aviva and has volunteered for the past six years in nearly every element of Smart Start, as well as being a Smarter Futures mentor.**

“Back in 2013, we were looking to increase our involvement in pro bono initiatives at Aviva. We approached a number of our panel law firms and through that I was introduced to Smart Start. I was hooked from that point onwards.

I think Smart Start removes the mystery around a professional career and makes it an attainable goal. It makes the City less intimidating. Over the course of the scheme, you see the students’ confidence grow – partly from the core skills they’re learning, but also by becoming more comfortable in this environment – and they leave the scheme positive, ambitious and ready to aim high. They see the City as somewhere they have every right to be; and most importantly as a place where they can succeed.

All of my mentees have gone on to have successful university careers and one has a training contract with A&O. That’s a great testament to Smart Start. I am still in contact with nearly all of them – it’s always great to hear what they’re doing – I find the students so inspiring. While I love having the opportunity to share what I know (I am a frustrated teacher!), I learn as much from them. The level of enthusiasm, drive and determination they bring is something we should all aspire to. I am also continually inspired by what Sue, Emma and the Smart Start team manage to deliver – it is a huge operation, delivered at scale by a small team. I most definitely learn from that too.

I really believe the legal profession needs to reflect the people it serves, and it’s a given that a more diverse profession will meet the needs of its clients more effectively. I think we’re more aware of the need for greater diversity now, but a great deal remains to be done. That’s why Smart Start is such an important initiative – and one that we’re very committed to supporting.”

**SMART START INTERNATIONAL**

In 2016, Smart Start International launched in India at the National Law University of Delhi, and two years later ran again at the National Law School of India University, Bangalore, both in collaboration with the Increasing Diversity by Increasing Access (IDIA) project.

Smart Start International has also run in South Africa and in 2018 launched in Hong Kong alongside one of A&O’s major clients.

The international programmes take the resources, materials and basic principles of Smart Start and apply them to the particular circumstances and barriers certain groups of young people can face in each country. The programmes are developed and delivered by local A&O volunteers and are aimed at providing exposure to the profession, as well as skills development and confidence building for students from communities that are marginalised and under-represented in those countries.



RACHEL DONELAN, ASSOCIATE

**Rachel Donelan is an A&O Litigation associate in London and has been volunteering with Smart Start for five years, including as a Smarter Futures mentor.**

"I first volunteered with Smart Start in 2014 and try to take part in different workshops each year – one of my favourites is speed networking because it's a great opportunity to meet such a variety of young people. It amazes me how mature and engaged they are with their future careers.

I really enjoy working with sixth formers (age 16-17) because they are starting to grapple with big questions like what to do when they finish school and how to make it happen. Smart Start is an amazing opportunity for students from less privileged or less academic backgrounds as it gives an insight into the corporate world that they're unlikely to have otherwise. That's really important as it makes it seem less unattainable or intimidating, and instead makes them believe they belong in that sort of environment.



ANDREW BALLHEIMER (MANAGING PARTNER); SUE WISBEY (PRO BONO AND COMMUNITY INVESTMENT MANAGER); MR LESLIE MORGAN OBE DL (REPRESENTATIVE DEPUTY LIEUTENANT FOR THE LONDON BOROUGH OF TOWER HAMLETS); EMMA TURNBULL (PRO BONO AND COMMUNITY INVESTMENT OFFICER); WIM DEJONGHE (SENIOR PARTNER) – RECEIVING THE QUEEN'S ENTERPRISE AWARD FOR PROMOTING OPPORTUNITY THROUGH SOCIAL MOBILITY IN 2017

Smart Start also helps students to develop important skills that aren't always the focus at school (presentations, teamwork, interviews). I'm always so impressed with the self-confidence many of them have by the end of the programme – it's amazing preparation for their next steps, whether university, an apprenticeship or work.

Being a Smarter Futures mentor, I see how much students appreciate having a sounding board outside of their usual support circle – someone with different life experiences to their parents, teachers and friends.

It means they can ask different questions – like, is it possible to have a job while studying at university? Should I go to the same university as my boyfriend? – and get a different perspective on issues that are worrying them. I think being able to ask for advice like this helps them manage stress and have confidence that the decisions they make are the right ones.

I've been lucky to have so many bright and talented mentees over the years. The first I worked with in 2014 was a very smart, ambitious young woman who went on to

read modern languages at the University of Cambridge. She received a Smarter Futures bursary that enabled her to have fantastic experiences and to spend a year abroad, which wouldn't have otherwise been possible. We kept in touch throughout university and I was absolutely delighted to hear she'd been offered a training contract with A&O and will start in 2021. She'll have had a very long relationship with us by that time!

I think it's so important to encourage young people to consider careers in business or law, particularly if they come from a school or a community where that isn't the norm. One of the things Smart Start does so well is to make the legal profession seem accessible no matter what your social background is."

*"I see how much students appreciate having a sounding board outside of their usual support circle – someone with different life experiences to their parents, teachers and friends."*

Rachel Donelan, Associate

# Meet the champions:

## Jo Hughes

A&O's network of over 100 pro bono and community investment champions – partners, lawyers and support professionals – drive our programme of work around the world, finding new opportunities, recruiting volunteers and sharing the impact of what we do... all on top of the busy day jobs.

Here, we meet Jo Hughes, Senior Professional Support Lawyer in the London Litigation practice and Alumni Manager. In November, Jo received the Outstanding Contribution Award in A&O's London Pro Bono and Community Investment Awards, in large part for her work mentoring young people to overcome the barriers social disadvantage can bring.

### AN UNENDING COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL MOBILITY

Talk to Jo Hughes for just a few moments and her passion and energy for helping young people from disadvantaged backgrounds shines through.

The sheer scale of the work she does in this area is remarkable, as colleagues who nominated her for the Outstanding Contribution Award attest. One described her commitment to tackling social mobility as “unending – she brings so much energy to the room and the people she connects with.”

It's a cause linked directly to Jo's own background. Coming from Ipswich – a social mobility ‘cold spot’ in the UK – and from a family where she remains the only person to have gone to university, she has always been struck by how young people from low socio-economic backgrounds so often “deselect” themselves from opportunities, just through lack of knowledge and guidance.

“I do feel passionate about it. Nothing makes more sense to me than ensuring a person's occupation and income are not tied to where they started in life,” Jo says, pointing out that young people from low-income backgrounds earn on average 24% less a year than those

from higher-earning professional backgrounds – largely because of the cycle low-paid work and disadvantage can create.

“It's hard not to contrast the opportunities and knowledge my own four children have now, compared to me when I was their age.”

Jo believes business has a huge part to play in tackling a problem that a recent UK Social Mobility Commission report says has stayed stagnant since 2014. And working for a firm that wants to address this issue has allowed her to make a significant personal contribution.

### MENTORING YOUNG PEOPLE TO SUCCESS

Jo first got involved with A&O's community investment work in 1999, not long after qualifying as a solicitor in the Litigation practice. She began volunteering as a mentor for a schools programme in Hackney – one of the most deprived boroughs in London at the time – and went on from there to take part in a whole series of A&O programmes supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, including Smart Start, Smarter Futures, Future Frontiers and Mosaic mentoring.

It's mentoring these young people at important points in their lives that Jo enjoys the most – as well as meeting fascinating people working at the

forefront of social mobility. “For me life is all about relationships,” she says.

Jo has provided much support for colleagues working in the area too, for instance convincing the community investment team to enter A&O's Smart Start Experience for the prestigious Queen's Award for Enterprise – an award the firm went on to win, becoming one of only six businesses in the category of Promoting Opportunity through Social Mobility. (Read more about Smart Start on [page 18](#)).

Jo is an active pro bono champion in the Litigation practice and a member of A&O's Social Mobility Working Group, which brings together the diversity and inclusion, graduate recruitment and pro bono and community investment teams – plus others at A&O with a personal interest in the subject – to join up the firm's thinking, generate ideas and track progress.

It's good to see, Jo says, that the group's work has been recognised in the recent Social Mobility Employer Index – with A&O rising over 40 places to number 32 of 125 companies.

The Index ranks employers on the actions they are taking to ensure access and progression for people from all backgrounds.

Programmes like A&O Accelerate, Lawyer of the Future and Smart Start, which address

the access and recruitment points, were recognised in the Index. “But it’s important we also stay focused on how our current people are progressing,” says Jo. “The Working Group maintains a large spreadsheet of action points!”

Outside of work, Jo helps a private school raise funds for Assisted Places for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Assisted Places can pay up to 100% of the school’s fees, which enables the school to include a greater number of pupils from diverse backgrounds.

**MANY HIGH POINTS**

There have been so many high points, but one sticks out for Jo: a poem written for her by a group of female students she had worked with in the Mosaic mentoring scheme, which aims to raise the aspirations of girls aged 9 to 11 and empower mothers to help their daughters fulfil their potential. Each line of the poem started with

the letters in ‘Mosaic’ – and the last line was: ‘Confident. That is what I will always be.’

Jo is realistic about the challenges the UK – and many other countries – face in tackling the barriers children from disadvantaged and low-income backgrounds encounter. It is an issue, she says, that will take time to break down across society. But she has no doubt that change is coming in the legal profession in general, and at A&O in particular, thanks to the commitment of many different parts of the firm to keep working on this.

So what does it mean to win this award from her peers?

She has a simple answer: “Everything!”



Jo Hughes with Social Mobility Commissioner Saeed Atcha MBE DL, at a recent dinner she helped to organise for the A&O-supported charity upReach, which works to help students from less advantaged backgrounds secure top jobs. The event at A&O’s London office invited ten close alumni contacts of the firm – now in senior roles with clients – together with ten Peerpoint consultants, to host tables of upReach students at dinner. As well as helping to organise the dinner, Jo’s LinkedIn article on the event received over 10,000 views.



**SMARTER FUTURES CELEBRATION EVENT, APRIL 2019.  
JO HUGHES WITH HER 2018/19 SMARTER FUTURES MENTEE  
PLUS TWO OTHER MENTEES FROM THE PROGRAMME**

# *At the halfway point with*



**hope and homes  
for children**

Our global charity partnership with Hope and Homes for Children has just passed the halfway mark. The fundraising total stands at GBP665,000 – on course to meet our GBP1m target – and our programme of pro bono work is well under way.

Hope and Homes for Children is a charity working to end the institutional care of children around the world.

Half of the GBP1m will fund new programmes in India and Nepal to change the lives of 4,400 children confined to or at risk of being placed into orphanages. The rest of the money we raise will provide the charity with unrestricted funding to use wherever it is needed most.

Unrestricted funding is a crucial element of all our charity partnerships, as Kate Cavelle, A&O's head of pro bono and community investment, explains. "It's not always easy for charities to access this type of funding, as donors understandably often want to know exactly how their contributions will be spent. But it's important for charities to have funds to invest in staff or operations, or to react quickly in an emergency.

"And because it enables the organisation to invest," says Kate, "it's more likely that our financial support will last beyond the life of the partnership – for example leveraging our funding to attract investment from much bigger institutions like the EU, which Hope and Homes for Children has done to great effect in Romania."

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**OF THE 100,000 CHILDREN  
CONFINED IN ORPHANAGES  
IN 1998, ONLY 6,500 ARE  
STILL LIVING IN ONE TODAY  
– A FALL OF OVER 90%**

## **ROMANIA – A 20 YEAR TRANSFORMATION**

Romania is one of Hope and Homes for Children's success stories – but also a stark example of how the cycle of institutionalising children becomes systemic and therefore very hard to overturn.

Before the Second World War, the country had few children's institutions, instead largely supporting vulnerable children through extended families, communities, local charitable organisations, churches and an effective system of foster care.

But under decades of communist rule this care system was completely dismantled and replaced with a process of placing children separated from their parents into state institutions. Abortion was criminalised (it was women's 'patriotic duty' to bear children) and children became the property of the state. The study of social work and psychology were banned, leaving a 20-year skills gap in the country.

The horror of children's institutions was only fully discovered in 1989 after the fall of communist leader Nicolae Ceauşescu.

Since setting up its operations in Romania in 1998, Hope and Homes for Children has worked alongside the government to overhaul the system of institutionalisation and move to one of family-based care. Of the 100,000 children confined in orphanages in 1998, only 6,500 are still living in one today – a fall of over 90%. The charity has now helped to close 57 orphanages and is on course to close all those remaining in the country by 2026.

"It's a remarkable story," Kate says. "Hope and Homes for Children has invested EUR20m over 20 years to achieve systemic change and completely transform the care system for children in Romania, to the point where they can now see the end goal of closing all orphanages.

"This shows that it is possible – we know that Hope and Homes for Children can achieve its ultimate aim of closing down all children's institutions around the world. But it takes an enormous amount of money, resources, expertise, influence and education."



Read more about the argument for closing all orphanages in [Issue 3 of Increasing Access](#).

In July, A&O managing partner Andrew Ballheimer, along with Dubai partner Kyle Nevin, Paris partner Hippolyte Marquetty and head of pro bono and community investment, Kate Cavelle, travelled to Romania to find out more about Hope and Homes for Children’s work and the importance of unrestricted funding. [Watch the video here](#).



**SINCE SETTING UP ITS OPERATIONS IN ROMANIA IN 1998, HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN HAS WORKED ALONGSIDE THE GOVERNMENT TO OVERHAUL THE SYSTEM OF INSTITUTIONALISATION AND MOVE TO ONE OF FAMILY-BASED CARE.**



# *A history of childcare in Romania*

**1944**

The Soviet Union occupies Romania during the Second World War and stays until the late 1950s, during which time the communist party takes control of the country.

**1953**

A Family Code is enforced, defining children as state property to be raised as 'faithful to the state, the communist party and to be useful to the people'.

**1954**

Only state institutions are regarded as legal entities, leading to the closure of NGOs and churches across the country (both of which had played a major role in the childcare system before the war). A law is passed defining the state as parent and family, and stipulating the types of care to be provided to children separated from parents – all of which are state-run institutions.

**1965**

Nicolae Ceaușescu becomes leader of the Romanian Communist Party. He bans abortion – with up to seven years in prison for women and doctors who carry out illegal abortions – and defines giving birth as the patriotic duty of women.

**1970s**

The study of social work, psychology and sociology are banned. No professionals are trained in these areas again until the 1990s, leaving a huge skills gap in the country.

**1984**

Food shortages become extreme, a form of rationing is introduced and widespread starvation occurs.

**1989**

Following the mass anti-communist protests across Central and Eastern Europe – known as the Revolutions of 1989 – the communist party is overthrown and Ceaușescu is executed. Journalists enter the country and see the horrors of Romanian orphanages, with more than 100,000 children starving, naked and with shaved heads – images that will be shown repeatedly around the world.

**1998**

Romania is one of the first countries Hope and Homes for Children targets to start the process of removing children from these orphanages.

**2000**

UNICEF commissions Hope and Homes for Children to develop a process of reform that puts the needs of children first. This model of deinstitutionalisation begins to be implemented, and alongside the Romanian Government an alternative care system of small family homes, foster care and returning children to extended families starts to create change.

*Following the mass anti-communist protests across Central and Eastern Europe in 1989, the communist party in Romania, and its leader Nicolae Ceaușescu, were overthrown.*

**2003**

This model is recognised by UNICEF and the World Health Organisation, with Hope and Homes for Children also influencing the development of new childcare legislation to underpin the process of deinstitutionalisation. This is supported by building expertise and training parents and those in the care system in how to look after children with physical and mental disabilities, including autism, thereby addressing one of the drivers of children being confined in institutions.

**2004**

The broad programme of deinstitutionalisation accelerates across the country, focusing on closing down large institutions, training people in social work and child protection, and implementing a prevention programme to tackle the reasons families become separated.

**2011**

The current phase of Hope and Homes for Children and the Romanian Government's programme, which began in 2011, is nearing its goal of closing every institution in the country by 2026. A key part of this is being able to leverage existing funding (such as from A&O) to attract larger grants and support from bodies like the EU – to ensure that everything from legislation and local level infrastructure, to in-country skills and expertise, are firmly in place so that complete and lasting reform is achieved.

# *Pro bono support to deliver key objectives*

In addition to fundraising efforts across A&O, an important aim of the partnership is to deliver a programme of pro bono support that helps Hope and Homes for Children make progress against specific objectives in its broad programme of deinstitutionalisation.

## **CHILD PROTECTION AND CARE REFORM CONFERENCE, NEPAL, 2020**

A key area is contributing to a regional conference on child protection and care reform in Nepal in 2020, which will bring together policy and decision makers in Asia to learn about family strengthening and alternative care.

To help prepare for this, an A&O team led from Singapore has researched and produced an article on 'Institutionalised Children: Explorations and Beyond' looking at alternative care across South Asia. The article reviews the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in eight South Asian countries, with our conclusions highlighting priority areas where action is needed to ensure that laws translate into visible outcomes for children. The article and conclusions will appear in full in a journal published by Udayan Care, an organisation that works with vulnerable children and women across in India.

## **BUILDING EVIDENCE TO INFLUENCE NATIONAL LEGISLATORS**

Another key pro bono project is building evidence to help Hope and Homes for Children influence national legislators. Two key global milestones are the UN General Assembly Resolution on deinstitutionalisation, and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Rwanda in 2020. These provide an opportunity to

inform states' laws and policies, which could have a huge impact on child protection and deinstitutionalisation around the world.

To support this, we are working on a research project, particularly focusing on Commonwealth countries, to identify examples of any legislative texts successfully being used for child care and protection. This will help to establish whether any precedents exist that can propose wording for new legislation and legal accountability structures to drive reform in childcare. In particular, A&O's team is researching precedents that relate to the transformation of childcare systems away from institutionalisation, and banning the referral of children into orphanages.

### **The other two main areas of our pro bono programme, currently in the development phase, are:**

- Helping to stop the cycle of overseas volunteering in orphanages by looking into policies, laws and regulations around travel and 'voluntourism', and exploring how emerging best practice from Australia, in particular, can be replicated in other countries.
- Developing a technological solution to allow easy access to India's child protection laws, policies and guidelines. This will assist people dealing with child protection issues in India's courts and administrative system to support children and families and to prevent unnecessary separation.



# *Trekking the unspoilt Carpathian Mountains*

In September, a team of 17 A&O staff and alumni took on a fundraising challenge for Hope and Homes for Children, trekking 70km across the Carpathian Mountains and raising GBP47,000.

Stretching over 1,500km in an arc from the Czech Republic to Romania, the Carpathian Mountains contain some of the largest remaining tracks of pristine forest in Europe, along with nearly half the continent's population of big carnivores (brown bears, lynx and wolves).

A&O's team took on a six-day trek along mountain peaks, lakes and caves, ending in Bucharest to see how Hope and Homes for Children is nearing its goal of ending the institutional care of children in Romania. On their return, we asked them to tell us about their highs and lows, and what they learned from witnessing the charity's work first-hand.



## THE TREK: SIX DAYS, 70 KILOMETRES...



### DAYS ONE AND TWO

Team travel north from Bucharest to Sinaia on edge of the Bucegi Mountains – famous for 17th century monastery. Next morning, cable car and trek towards 2,000m-high peak of Varful cu Dor; then back through woodland and around Bolboci Lake to Pestera.



### DAY THREE

Visit to famous Ialomitei Caves, eroded over time by water from limestone rock, before hiking uphill towards striking rock formations, then descending to Piatra Arsa – national training centre for Olympic athletes.



### DAY FOUR

Nine hours' trek up and down Omu Peak, highest point in the region at 2,500m, taking in WWII memorial – the Caraiman Cross – as well as sharp peaks above and rolling valleys below.



### DAY FIVE

Walk out of mountains to beautiful Prahova Valley, ending trek at neo-Renaissance Peles Castle – summer residence of Romanian royal family until 1947.



### DAY SIX

Visit Hope and Homes for Children's projects in Bucharest to see how the charity is on track to close all orphanages by 2026.

## FULL LIST OF TREK PARTICIPANTS

#### Belfast:

Cheryl-Anne Savage  
(Communication &  
Facilities Administrator)

#### Brussels:

Lola Stenuit (Trainee);  
Mathilde Vandormael  
(Trainee)

#### Dubai:

Laura Mooney  
(Legal Support Supervisor);  
Beth Thompson (PA)

#### Hong Kong:

Jody Smith (Alumna)

#### London:

Patricia Cullen (Know-How  
Work Flow Assistant);  
Stella Ekkeshis  
(Global Alumni Manager);  
Jenny Enever  
(Global Alumni Manager);  
Jane Gibson (Alumna);  
Catherine Howson (PA);  
Helen Talkowski (PA)

#### Luxembourg:

Clémence Colson  
(Senior Associate)

#### Paris:

Lou-Andréa Bouet  
(Associate)

#### Sydney:

Matt Ayre  
(Finance Manager);  
Carolyn Aldous  
(Managing Director,  
Peerpoint)

#### Yangon:

WinMaMa Aye  
(Head of Operations)

*“The physical aspects of the trek were tough, especially when the weather changed in minutes and our guides had to run us down the mountain in poor visibility.”*



*“The stories Hope and Homes for Children shared with us strongly affected me – I was shocked at my own misconceptions about orphanages.”*



JENNY, JANE AND STELLA

**JENNY ENEVER,  
GLOBAL ALUMNI MANAGER, LONDON**

When A&O asked us to vote for our new charity partner in 2018, my daughter insisted I vote for Hope and Homes for Children because the children had no-one to love them so needed the most help.

Listening to a talk by the charity then inspired me and my job-share Stella Ekkeshis to get involved. Not seeing our own children for a week was a small sacrifice.

The physical aspects of the trek were tough at times, especially on day three when the weather changed in minutes and our guides had to run us down the mountain in poor visibility. But the most challenging part was visiting the families supported by the charity's reintegration and prevention programme (the latter designed to stop families from being separated). It was really upsetting to see the daily struggles they face. I didn't expect such poverty in an EU country.

It makes a difference to see the work of the charity up close. No story or video can put across what you see in person, so we need to bring this to life for others too. The trip also gave me a great opportunity to meet alumni and people from other offices – I felt a real sense of bonding. And I discovered I love trekking – I've found a new hobby!

**STELLA EKKESHIS,  
GLOBAL ALUMNI MANAGER, LONDON**

The stories Hope and Homes for Children shared with us strongly affected me – I was shocked at my own misconceptions about the supposed benefits of orphanages. I looked at my own two children growing up in a loving home and knew I had to do something.

Reaching the 2,500m summit of Omu Peak was a highlight of the experience, as well as finding out there was a cabin selling hot chocolate! Each day I got to stop and look at the most breathtaking views, and I've made some wonderful new friends along the way.

But I will never forget the visit to the Robin Hood orphanage in Bucharest. The sights and smells still haunt me. I also visited a young couple with a two year-old boy living in a garage – I couldn't stop staring at this beautiful child and wondering what would become of him.

I've also learned that the strength of human spirit knows no bounds. I met a young girl, abandoned at birth, who has a promising career ahead of her as a tennis player. She's doing everything she can to make a brighter future for herself, despite her rough start in life.

The Hope and Homes for Children team are some of the most wonderful people I've ever met, working tirelessly with the Government and other agencies to achieve systemic change. They have to witness these hard situations every day and keep fighting to make things better.



LAURA (PICTURED ON FAR RIGHT) AND TEAM

**LAURA MOONEY,  
LEGAL SUPPORT SUPERVISOR, DUBAI**

I had never trekked before so I liked the idea of having a brand new experience and getting the chance to see Romania – a country I'd never thought of visiting.

Getting up each morning with sore hips and knees was tough. I struggled with parts of the trek – the 600m steep climb on day three – but made it with encouragement from the rest of the team. It's taught me to believe more in myself.

I also learned a lot about the process of transitioning children from institutions to small family homes and, where possible, reuniting them with families. Having two young children, I just can't imagine them growing up without a loving family. It was so hard to see mothers struggling so much that they actually had to give up their child – it broke my heart.

I took away so much from the week, both physically and emotionally. I saw in action the strength of human kindness – people with almost nothing still wanting to help others. We are so fortunate to have all that we do.

A highlight was meeting the amazing A&O team and being able to experience something new. It's one of the great benefits of working here that people from around the world can come together like this, make new friends, share stories and broaden horizons.



LOU-ANDRÉA AND CLÉMENCE

**LOU-ANDRÉA BOUET,  
ASSOCIATE, PARIS**

This trek for me was a wonderful opportunity to bring together the concepts of adventure and solidarity.

This kind of experience is truly instructive. Spending an entire day with Hope and Homes for Children showed us how dedicated they are. It was challenging facing up to the daily life of children growing up in soulless orphanages, but I will never forget the generosity of the people we met in sharing their stories and opening their homes to us, and I will never forget their smiles.

**HELEN TALKOWSKI,  
LEGAL PA, LONDON**

For me, this trip was a wonderful opportunity to raise money for an important cause while seeing a beautiful part of the world that I'd never considered visiting. I hadn't done much hiking before but really enjoyed it so I think it will become a regular hobby!

The highlight was getting to know the other participants – I met some wonderful people. The scenery in the mountains was breathtakingly beautiful too – I'd had a stressful few months but felt completely at peace up there.

When we saw the extreme poverty some families face in Bucharest, I had conflicting emotions of sadness, guilt and hope – that Hope and Homes for Children can give people the chance of a better future.

I learned that even when children have next to nothing, above all they just want to be with their families. We visited a family of ten, living in two small rooms, whose children didn't stop smiling. And a ten year-old boy, David, who lives with his mother in her tiny flat at weekends and the rest of the week in a 'small family home' built by Hope and Homes for Children. The house is beautiful and spacious but he would still prefer to live with his mother the whole time, in a small flat in a bad area.

I adore my nieces and nephews, so the thought of them spending even an hour in an institution is bad enough. The thought of any child living in one is appalling.



HELEN AND CATHERINE

*“I learned that even when children have next to nothing, above all they just want to be with their families.”*

**CAROLYN ALDOUS,  
PEERPOINT MANAGING DIRECTOR, SYDNEY**

I wanted to do this trek to have the chance to see A&O's charity partnership in action. Along with my Asia Pacific colleagues on the trip – Matt Ayre from Sydney and WinMaMa Aye from Myanmar – we really wanted to engage colleagues across the region with the charity's work, so came up with fundraising activities that everyone could take part in. We held an art competition for the best children's drawing of 'what home means to me'; and a challenge to guess the number of steps the Asia Pacific team would take in total on the trek.

I learned so much from the trip. Like others, I found it hard to believe such poverty could exist in the EU. I understand now about the systemic cycle of poverty and institutional care, and what it takes to break that cycle and reunite families.



**PATRICIA CULLEN,  
KNOW-HOW ASSISTANT, LONDON**

My inspiration for going on the trek was the story of Mark and Caroline Cook, who founded Hope and Homes for Children. They read about the children struggling to survive in Sarajevo’s main orphanage at the height of the Bosnian War, and within weeks had boarded a plane to see what they could do to help. The whole experience has taught me that I want to do more for charity – and that I like trekking (who knew?!).

Going on trips to see how hard these charities work is important because it makes our sense of commitment to the partnership very real. When you process the stories you hear and the situations you witness, it makes you wonder: who wouldn’t want to see an end to the institutional care of children around the world?



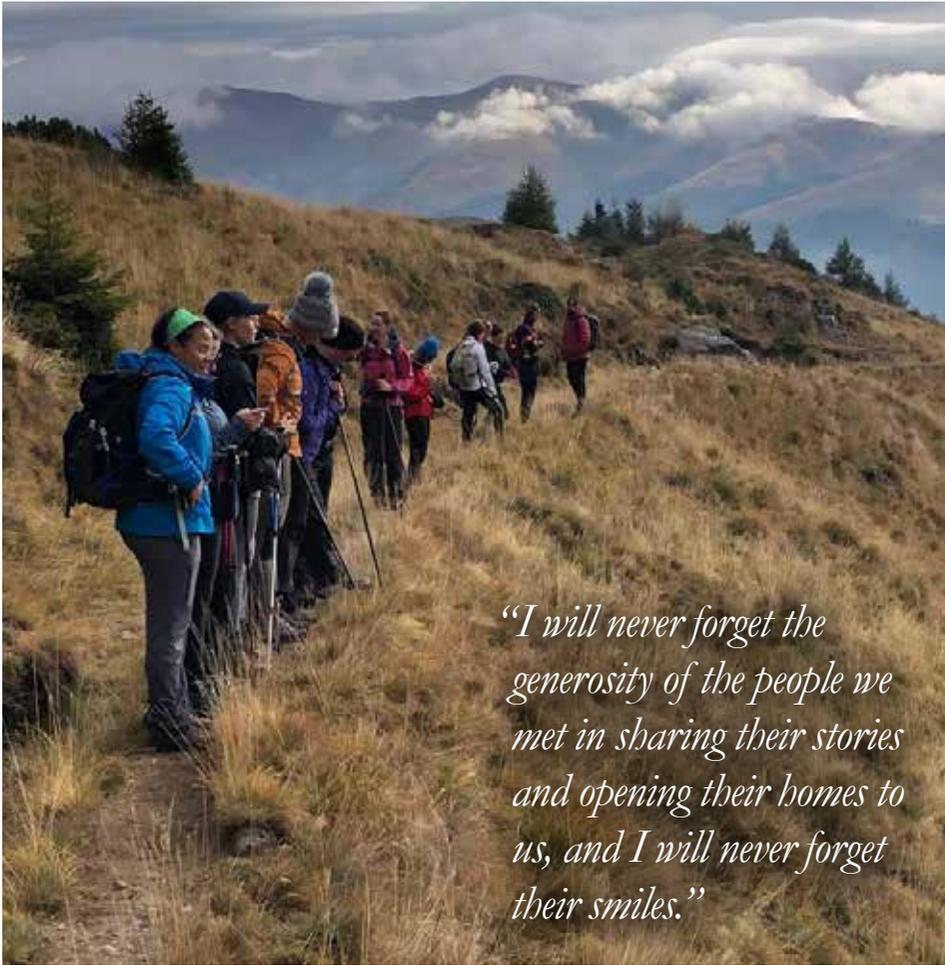
PATRICIA

**JANE GIBSON,  
A&O ALUMNI, LONDON AND HONG KONG**

I worked at A&O between 1992-2003 and have stayed in close contact with former colleagues through the alumni network. I recently worked on a case in Romania so jumped at the chance to learn more about the country and Hope and Homes for Children’s work there.

One of the best parts of the experience, as well as the amazing scenery and our charming Romanian guides, was the sense of camaraderie in completing the climbs, with everybody sharing kit and encouraging each other through blisters and aching legs to achieve our goal.

I am grateful after all this time to still feel part of the A&O family – the core values remain firmly in place, demonstrated by so many nationalities coming together, giving up holiday and time with families to raise funds for such a worthy cause. It’s hard to rival these trips as an opportunity to bring people together in such a meaningful way.



*“I will never forget the generosity of the people we met in sharing their stories and opening their homes to us, and I will never forget their smiles.”*

**MATHILDE VANDORMAEL,  
TRAINEE, BRUSSELS**

I went on the trek because I thought it would be a great way to meet colleagues, challenge myself and most importantly discover more about Hope and Homes for Children.

The experience exceeded all my expectations. At first, I have to admit I didn’t clearly understand the charity’s objectives in wanting to close all children’s institutions. However, after visiting the orphanages, ‘small family homes’ and foster parents that Hope and Homes for Children support, I have realised how much their work matters.

I am extremely proud to be a global charity ambassador in Brussels and am even more determined that we do our best to support them.



MATHILDE

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FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

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## Email

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