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TOWARDS 'CARE AWARE' AND 'TRAUMA-INFORMED' JUSTICE: SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF CARE EXPERIENCE IN THE FAMILY JUSTICE SYSTEM

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Abstract

In this article, Lucy Barnes explores the importance of the lived experience of care experience and an understanding of care-experienced stories in the family justice system. She explores the founding story behind Lawyers Who Care, the UK's first mentoring organisation for care-experienced aspiring lawyers, and shares an insight into what she and Kate Aubrey-Johnson held in mind when designing the mentorship programme, as well as the two mandatory training courses that mentors must undertake (the Lawyers Who Care 'Care Aware' and 'Trauma-Informed' training). Lucy shares her vision for a care aware and trauma-informed justice system and, in turn, a more diverse and inclusive workforce, with care-experienced people at the centre feeling seen and heard, and practitioners equipped with understanding the 'language of care experience'.

Introduction: rejecting shame, speaking our language

'Understanding foster care is like learning about a foreign country. If you're not from there, you don't speak the language.'; Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*

Prior to finding out that I was successful in obtaining pupillage in 2023, I spent years piecing together my own story and building a narrative of my life – an uphill battle, given how trauma can disconnect you from your 'self' and the language to describe your experiences. However, five years of therapy and approximately 100 psychology books later, I found the words and, with it, my voice. I realised I was part of a community and I could use my voice to speak with my community. My first step, it seemed, was to reject the stigma and reclaim my narrative. I posted about my journey on X, and it gained nearly 1 million views. More powerful were the messages from *people like me*, thanking me for being a voice for them too. A sense of purpose ignited in me. What if I could be a part of translating our language to others?

Fast-forward six months and I reached out to the incredible youth justice practitioner Kate Aubrey-Johnson of Garden Court Chambers, who had just published her powerful guide to enable practitioners to support care-experienced young people in the justice system. Weeks after meeting, the idea for what became Lawyers Who Care was born. With the peace of mind and privilege of having secured pupillage and with my supportive husband behind me (the true luxury of family which I do not take for granted), I left my paid legal role to build Lawyers Who Care *pro bono*.

When founding Lawyers Who Care, I was told that not many care leavers would aspire for law. I was personally told years prior that 'we're not there with race

or sex diversity yet, so we certainly will not be there with care experience'. Kate and I couldn't accept this. We felt the community had so much to give. We felt that with the right support, care-experienced talent would enrich the profession.

Lawyers Who Care launched on 17 May 2024. Since then, we have become a key stakeholder in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; in our first year, we had over 130 care-experienced mentees sign up. We now have 88 solicitor and barrister mentors matched with their mentees, and across 20 law firms and chambers as mentorship

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