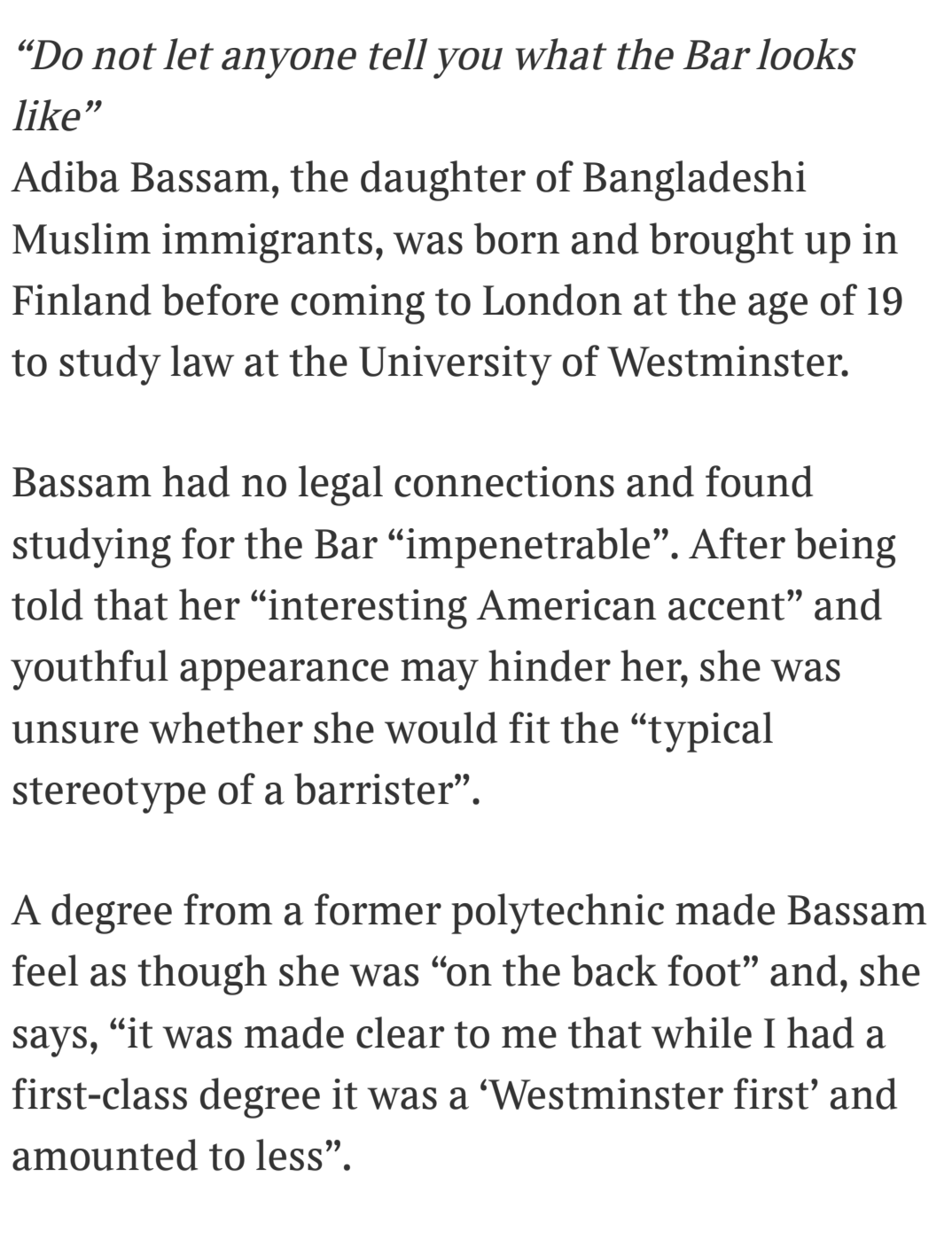


STUDENT LAW

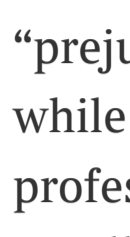




Bar Council's Becoming the Bar: 'There are incredible highs and crashing lows'

The four barristers in the campaign, which seeks to highlight the success of recent graduates and pupils from underrepresented groups, tell their stories



Adiba Bassam and Robert Povall

Catherine Baksi
Thursday February 18 2021, 12.01am, The Times

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Adiba Bassam

“Do not let anyone tell you what the Bar looks like”

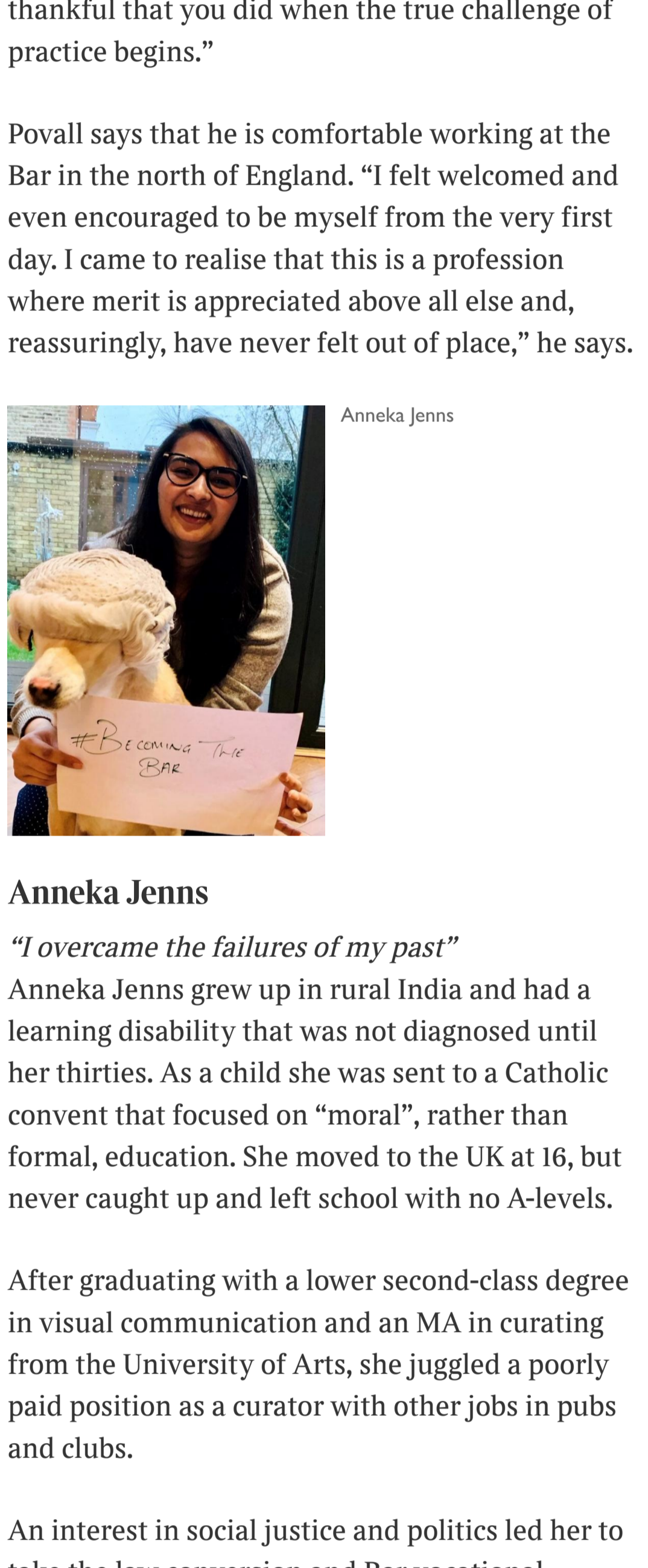
Adiba Bassam, the daughter of Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants, was born and brought up in Finland before coming to London at the age of 19 to study law at the University of Westminster.

Bassam had no legal connections and found studying for the Bar “impenetrable”. After being told that her “interesting American accent” and youthful appearance may hinder her, she was unsure whether she would fit the “typical stereotype of a barrister”.

A degree from a former polytechnic made Bassam feel as though she was “on the back foot” and, she says, “it was made clear to me that while I had a first-class degree it was a ‘Westminster first’ and amounted to less”.

Undeterred and able to speak five languages, Bassam endeavoured to overcome the “prejudices” that she faced, and worked full-time while studying for her master’s degree and the Bar professional training course. She secured pupillage after her second attempt at 3 Dr Johnsons Buildings in London, where, aged 27, she is now a tenant specialising in family law.

Bassam is one of four barristers profiled by the Bar Council for its #BecomingtheBar campaign, which seeks to highlight the success of recent graduates and pupils from underrepresented groups.



She says that she kept going because “I thought someone — one day — may look at me at the Bar and feel more at home or more able to fit in”.

“Do not let anyone tell you what the Bar looks like and what you should do to fit in,” she says. “Change the Bar to look like, sound like you do.”

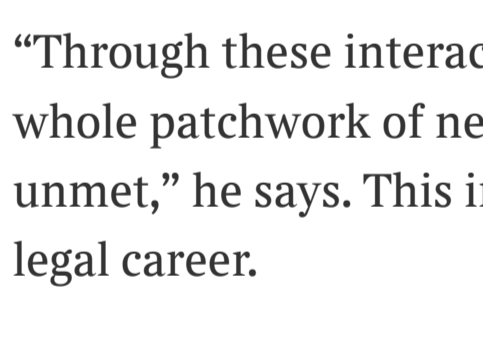
Robert Povall

“I felt welcomed and encouraged to be myself”

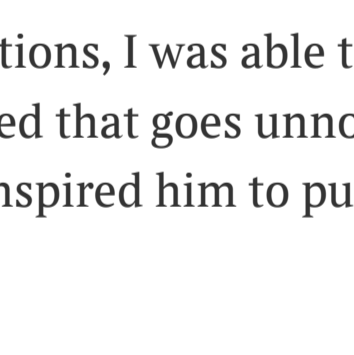
Robert Povall is the son of a police officer and a self-employed carer and childminder. He cared for his grandmother while attending the local comprehensive school and was the first in his family to go to university.

“As a gay man from a small village in Merseyside, I grew up believing the Bar was not a place for people like me,” he says.

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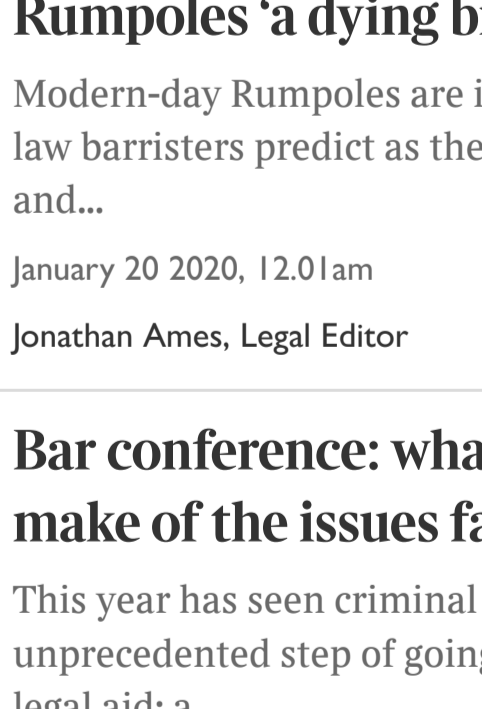
After being bullied at school over his sexuality, Povall gained confidence and acceptance while studying languages at the University of Leeds. A chance encounter at a local jobs fair inspired him to pursue a career at the Bar.

Like most aspiring barristers, Povall found the huge costs of training tough, but received an award from Middle Temple that opened the door to work experience. To make himself stand out, Povall worked for no charge, competed at mooting — mock hearings — and networked before landing himself a pupillage at Chavasse Court Chambers in Liverpool.

The 28-year-old is now a family law tenant at Exchange Chambers, Liverpool. “The Bar has incredible highs, but also crashing lows,” Povall says. “Once you weather the storm you will be thankful that you did when the true challenge of practice begins.”

Povall says that he is comfortable working at the Bar in the north of England. “I felt welcomed and even encouraged to be myself from the very first day. I came to realise that this is a profession where merit is appreciated above all else and, reassuringly, have never felt out of place,” he says.

Anneka Jenns



Anneka Jenns

“I overcame the failures of my past”

Anneka Jenns grew up in rural India and had a learning disability that was not diagnosed until her thirties. As a child she was sent to a Catholic convent that focused on “moral”, rather than formal, education. She moved to the UK at 16, but never caught up and left school with no A-levels.

After graduating with a lower second-class degree in visual communication and an MA in curating from the University of Arts, she juggled a poorly paid position as a curator with other jobs in pubs and clubs.

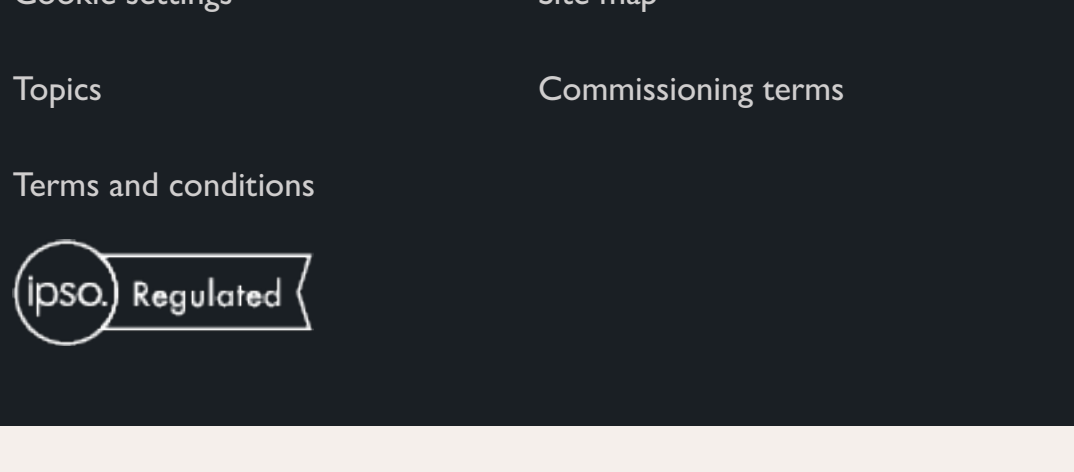
An interest in social justice and politics led her to take the law conversion and Bar vocational courses despite being “strongly advised” against the Bar. Jenns says that she built her CV to “overcome the failures of my past”.

Her first experience of the Bar, Jenns says, was an “absolute train wreck of a scholarship interview”, which “felt like a full blown attack on my past”.

Looking back, she realises that it was not personal, but as an outsider — nervous and unfamiliar with the world of the Bar — it “completely threw me off”.

Jenns says that she accepted that “certain chambers would always be out of reach for someone with my background”, so applied for a pupillage with the Crown Prosecution Service.

The applications, she says, are assessed “blind” without information about past grades. Jenns succeeded and now, aged 33, is a CPS lawyer.



Aaqib Javed

Aaqib Javed

“I saw a patchwork of need and felt inspired”

Aaqib Javed is the son of immigrants and went to an “underfunded and underachieving comprehensive school”. As a teenager, he recalls helping his neighbours with housing benefit forms and family members with immigration documents.

“Through these interactions, I was able to see a whole patchwork of need that goes unnoticed and unmet,” he says. This inspired him to pursue a legal career.

Javed felt that he was not a “typical” Bar candidate because his initial degree was from Leeds Beckett University, which is not a Russell Group university. He also struggled to support himself financially during his studies.

Javed worked each summer during his undergraduate degree and had two jobs while studying for his master’s, including as a complaints handler for Europe’s leading flatpack furniture company.

Last September, after two years of trying, Javed secured a pupillage at Spire Chambers in Leeds.

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