

Hackney is one of the most diverse places in the UK. In this regular feature, we profile the borough's great & good or just plain interesting

Local, young, gifted and black

THINGS might have been very different for criminal defence barrister Tunde Okewale had he not been so ambitious – he admits a lot of his friends growing up in Hackney were ‘negatively involved with the law.’

But instead of getting sucked in himself, he used his friends’ actions as a catalyst to try and change other people’s attitudes to crime.

He says: “I used those experiences for two things: to say I don’t want to be involved in that lifestyle, and to think what skill sets I could cultivate to help people that find themselves trapped in it.”

After leaving Cardinal Pole Catholic School and graduating with a law degree from London Metropolitan University and BPP Law School, Tunde founded Urban Lawyers in 2008. It works with schools and other groups to give young people a better understanding of the criminal justice system.

Tunde, 30, recalls: “People would ask me, ‘how did you become a lawyer? You’re from Hackney, you’re black, you don’t have any family in the legal profession, how did you do it?’”

He created the organisation with financial help from UnLtd, a company that supports social enterprises. Since the start-up, Tunde admits funding has been an obstacle and much of it has been self-financed.

He now works as a barrister for Doughty Street Chambers in Russell Square, but worked in

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Dalston Sainsbury’s for six years while he was studying.

He says: “I will always have a soft spot for Dalston. Lots of the local shops are still there in the market, with the same owners and it has retained a lot of its character. I feel nostalgic there.”

Tunde believes people commit crime for a number of reasons, one being a lack of knowledge and understanding. He picks up a glass as an example and says:

“Jovially, I might joke around, pick up this glass and throw it. But, the glass may shatter and may go in someone’s eye.”

“It’s the same approach with crime. People can appreciate to a small degree the implications their actions may have, but they never appreciate the full magnitude.”

Tunde has hardly stopped for breath in his relatively short career. He has worked with young men in Jamaica affected by gun and knife crime, and helped them set up small businesses to steer them toward a more legitimate lifestyle. In Nigeria, he worked alongside local youth agencies, the police,

and law enforcement agencies to look at better ways to protect vulnerable children.

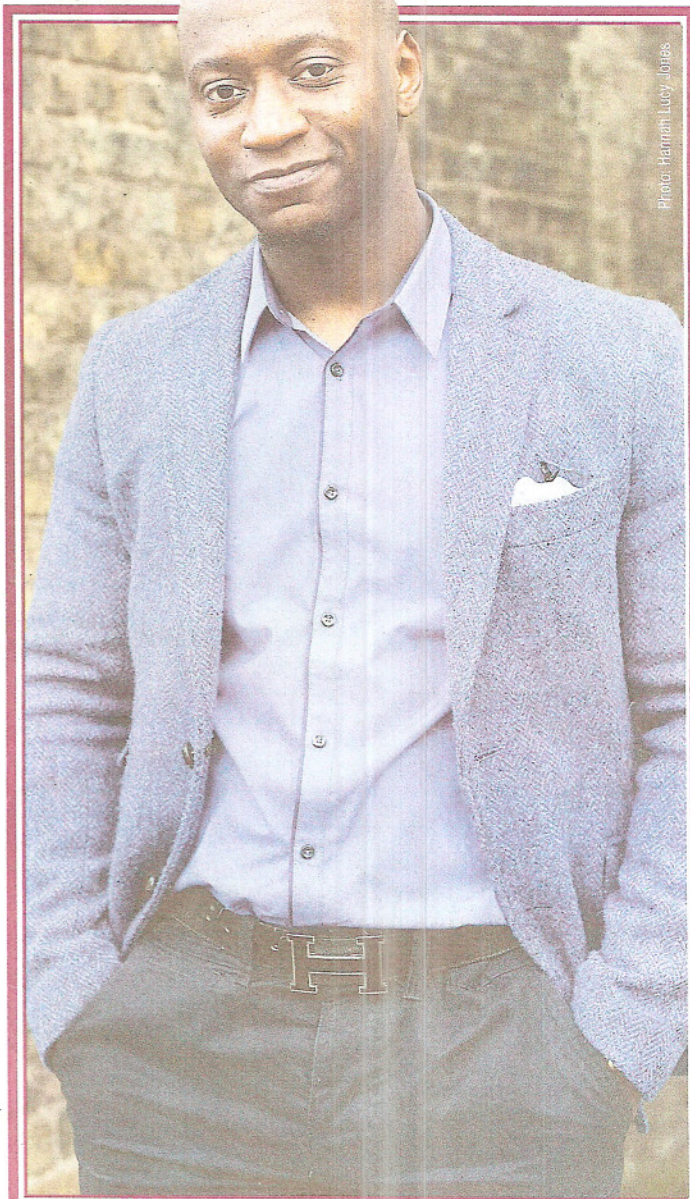
Tunde was also an advisor on the Citizens’ Inquiry into the Tottenham riots in 2011. The resulting report influenced national policy and helped secure funding for those worst hit. Last year, Tunde contributed to BBC Radio 1Xtra’s programme, ‘Gangs on Film’, where he spoke about the reasons people become involved in crime.

Most recently, he became patron of Hackney Community Law Centre in Clapton, and is looking for more projects to sink his teeth into – specifically in Hackney.

With an aptitude for public speaking, he often gets asked to talk at events and has spoken at a leadership forum in Switzerland, at Parliament in relation to the riots, and at Mossbourne Academy at a careers event.

He shows no signs of slowing down. In the future, Tunde plans to make Urban Lawyers a national, and then an international, project.

He aspires to become a QC one day, and perhaps, advance into politics. He says: “You just never know. I might do that here in Hackney.”



Criminal defence barrister Tunde Okewale has hardly stopped for breath in his relatively short career

Curriculum Vitae: Tunde Okewale

1983	Born in Nigeria
1985	Moves to Hackney
2002	Leaves from Cardinal Pole Catholic School
2005	Graduates with a law degree from London Metropolitan University
2007	Graduates from BPP Law School
2007	Called to the bar
2008	Founds first phase of Urban Lawyers
2011	Joins Doughty Street Chambers
2011	Advises on The Citizens Inquiry into the Tottenham riots
2012	Awarded Young Barrister of the Year from Lawyer Monthly
2013	Becomes patron of Hackney Community Law Centre in Clapton