

Kluwer Arbitration Blog

#ArbitrationIdol: Community Spirit in Times of Crisis and Beyond

Svenja Wachtel (Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP), Chris Campbell (Baker Hughes), and Amanda Lee (Costigan King) · Saturday, October 24th, 2020

February 2020: Everyone was looking at the events calendar for the year. Flights were booked, hotel prices had been compared and the list of people that we hoped to meet and speak to at various conferences was growing longer. Fast forward four months to June 2020 and the picture was bleak: all in-person events cancelled; social gatherings postponed indefinitely; and – for some of us – enforced isolation, with no physical interaction for weeks. The warm familiarity of sharing a cup of coffee or tea with friends or colleagues is but one of the many comforts that vanished in the wake of the [Covid-19](#) global pandemic. Social distancing remains the “new normal”. Even now, four months later, meeting for coffee can still be a challenge.

It was a few weeks into the current pandemic when, in June 2020, Svenja Wachtel (**Digital Coffee Break in Arbitration**), Chris Campbell (**Tales of the Tribunal**) and Amanda Lee (**Careers in Arbitration**) decided to try and find a way to make the best of the situation, create opportunities for the arbitration community to engage and help those in need. What everyone was lacking was social interaction, the opportunity to actually talk to one another in person. Therefore, we wanted to find a way to connect experienced leaders in the field of international arbitration with lucky individuals from around the world for a digital coffee break, while collecting money for children, who were particularly badly affected by the pandemic.

The idea was simple: anyone, anywhere in the world, could donate whatever they could afford (minimum donation EUR 1) in exchange for the chance to win a one-on-one digital coffee break with a leader from the field of international arbitration. The proceeds would be donated to UNICEF. And so #ArbitrationIdol was born!

The idea was just the start: action was required. Finding a charity platform, contacting UNICEF, preparing advertisement material and – of course – identifying arbitration leaders who were willing to participate in #ArbitrationIdol and asking them to donate their time and support. While the word “Idol” might sound questionable to some, an *idol* describes “*someone who is admired and respected very much*”. In this context it was a play on words, a tongue-in-cheek parody of the US singing competition show “American Idol”. It is not solely the outstanding work of each individual chosen, but their willingness to support and help others in difficult times that was relevant. We are beyond grateful to the distinguished leaders who became our #ArbitrationIdols. We wholeheartedly wish to thank:

Catherine Rogers, Dana MacGrath, Darius Khambata, Eleonora Coelho, Funke Adekoya SAN, Gabrielle Kaufmann-Kohler, Gary Born, Joongi Kim, Lucy Reed, Michael McIlwrath, Mohamed Abdel Wahab, and Toby Landau QC.

for immediately agreeing to donate their time and share their valuable experience with our winners.

In the end, we counted 92 donors and collected EUR 1,936 for UNICEF! THANKS to everyone who participated, donated, shared the links, advertised #ArbitrationIdol and otherwise helped to make our initiative the great success it was! Every penny helped, and we are thrilled to be part of a professional community that actually cares.

After the winners enjoyed their digital coffee breaks, we received plenty of positive feedback about the unique opportunity to talk to such experienced professionals provided by #ArbitrationIdol. Discussion topics ranged from arbitration to hobbies, families, books, nature and so much more.

We sincerely hope that everyone who participated feels as happy as we do about #ArbitrationIdol. Stay tuned for Season Two of #ArbitrationIdol.

Some of the Arbitration Idols and winners share their experiences below:

I was incredibly impressed by how prepared my paired person was for our virtual meeting, he had spent time learning my background and put together a list of questions for me, both substantive about arbitration funding and mentoring/career advice questions. It was quite reaffirming to see the passion the younger generation has to succeed in this field and with such positivity during a climate of challenges and uncertainty

Dana MacGrath

“I was delighted to help support UNICEF and, hopefully, the international arbitration community by participating in #ArbitrationIdol. Thanks so much to everyone who made – or still plans to make – a donation, no matter how large or small!”

Gary Born

“We all carry the seeds of greatness within us, but we need an image as a point of focus in order that they may sprout.”. Epictetus was right, wasn't he? We all need idols or mentors who will help us become the best version of ourselves. In the middle of a global crisis, Amanda, Svenja and Chris managed to gather the most influential arbitrators, who generously offered their valuable free time for a virtual coffee with a few fortunate fans, for a good cause. To be in with a chance of winning the only thing we had to do was to donate any amount of money to UNICEF, which has been

playing a pivotal role in helping children in danger. It worked as an excellent reminder of the fact that COVID-19 is either a source of new tragedies or an additional layer to pressing problems and emergencies for the vulnerable groups of the society that we tend to turn a blind eye on. I was offered an amazing opportunity to enjoy a digital coffee with Professor Lucy Reed, with whom we discussed about archaeology, her career path, my struggles, her views on a number of IA issues, including her genuine commitment to diversity that covers brilliant colleagues who have been facing a high degree of bias because they need special facilities. We are all familiar -to a certain extent, as there are many more aspects to be discovered- with her phenomenal work, but a discussion with her enlightened me on her “plus” qualities that make the difference between a good, famous IA practitioner and an IA idol. I am most grateful to Lucy, Amanda, Svenja and Chris for this lesson.”

Dr. Artemis P. Malliaropoulou, MCI Arb

“I was incredibly lucky to be paired with Mohamed Abdel Wahab. I loved hearing about how Mohamed has crafted his career – from being the top law student in Egypt, to study in the UK, and building his career from Egypt to the world. He also introduced me to his family and it was wonderful to get to know that personal dimension to his life. He was also so generous in listening to my story and offering advice and support. Thank you again to Svenja, Chris and Mandy for this amazing #ArbitrationIdol opportunity.”

Elizabeth Chan

“The interview with Prof. Kaufmann-Kohler on my birthday made it definitely a most memorable one. After checking for the essentials (“Do you have your coffee and some chocolate ready?”) we talked about the arbitration world, career paths and everything else that came to mind and she gave me great advice as well as some pointers for which I will be forever grateful. Many thanks again to the Arbitration Idol team for this opportunity and to Prof. Kaufmann-Kohler, who is just as amazing and impressive in person as you would expect from afar.”

Dr. Sandra Gröschel (née Kühn)

“I missed networking a lot during the confinement and thanks to Svenja, Chris, and Amanda for launching an initiative that supports a social cause and offers a chance to network at the same time with some big names. If it wasn’t for Arbitration Idol, I

don't know how I would have had a virtual coffee with Toby Landau. We need Arbitration Idol Season 2 very soon!"

Sneha Ashtikar

"Participating in Arbitration Idol is an experience that I will always cherish. I really enjoyed taking part in this worthwhile initiative at such challenging times and meeting Funke Adekoya was a great honour. Here's to more projects connecting arbitration practitioners and academics worldwide!"

Zeyad Abouellail

"It was wonderful to meet Joongi Kim particularly at a time like this when we are all missing the opportunities to connect which arise at conferences. When you work in private practice you can see things through a certain lens and become very impatient so it was eye opening to talk to a senior arbitrator with a different perspective. As an experienced arbitrator and academic Joongi was both very generous with his time and also had lots of helpful advice and ideas that were new to me. As you progress in your career it is important to seek advice from people outside your own firm and with a wide range of perspective. Thank you very much Arbitration Idol for giving me the opportunity to meet Joongi and support a great cause at the same time."

Paula Gibbs

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