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SINGAPORE – Lawyer Iris Ng usually represents clients in shipping, commodities and commercial disputes, and was part of the team handling claims for a major oil spill at Pasir Panjang Terminal in 2024.

In December 2025, a different kind of brief landed in her e-mail inbox.

The 30-year-old counsel at law firm Helmsman was assigned by the court as young independent counsel (YIC) for a set of seven appeals that concerned the sentencing approach for young offenders convicted of scam-related offences.

In May 2026, she made oral arguments before a High Court panel of three judges for the first time.

She submitted that short detention orders should be recognised as a sentencing option, alongside reformatory training and imprisonment, for young offenders who hand over their bank accounts to scammers.

Speaking to The Straits Times about the scheme, Ng said looking at a case from an independent perspective meant having the latitude to explore issues further.

“When you are advocating for your client, you would also have their interest in mind and see what is legally permissible, what is in the best interest of your client.

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“Whereas in the case of the YIC, you are really taking a step back from everything, and you have a bit more latitude to consider what the current law is and what the law should be.”

She said the YIC’s role was to help the court have a fuller picture of the options open to it, such as the approaches taken by other jurisdictions, or to dig a bit more into the history of a provision.

The scheme is a chance for her to work on topical legal issues that she may not necessarily touch on in her day-to-day practice, she added.

On Oct 7, Ng and 11 other lawyers on the panel of YICs for 2026 were recognised for their contributions to the law at the annual judiciary volunteers appreciation event. It was the first time lawyers on the scheme were recognised at the event.

Applications for 2027 are currently open.

The YIC scheme

Since 2009, promising young lawyers who are at an early stage of their careers have been appointed by the court under a scheme to bring a fresh perspective on novel or difficult questions of law.

Originally known as the young amicus curiae scheme, it was renamed the YIC scheme as part of efforts to use court terminology that is easier to understand.

Applicants to the scheme are required to have good academic grades and at least two years’ experience as a practising lawyer or as a legal service officer or judicial service officer.

They have to submit their law school transcripts, a piece of written work, and at least one recommendation from a judge, or a member of the legal profession with at least 10 years’ experience.

YICs, who are appointed for a one-year term, do not act for any party to a case.

Their role is to provide submissions from a neutral standpoint to help the court consider a wider range of viewpoints.

The scheme allows these lawyers to gain courtroom experience, hone their advocacy skills, and contribute to the development of the law through their research and submissions.

Fresh slate

A former YIC, Jonathan Trachsel, was assigned a civil case and a criminal case during his time on the panel in 2023.

He applied for the scheme after a partner at his firm asked him to think about it, and his mentors at the time encouraged him to go for it.

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"You're not put into a position where you have to advance one side or the other. You really get to just look at it, fresh slate, what do you think the law is or should be," he said of a YIC's duty.

Now 34 and a partner at Allen & Gledhill, practising in commercial litigation and arbitration, Trachsel said it makes sense to have another set of eyes look at cases with novel issues or wider implications.

The civil case he did was an accident claim involving the question on whether government subsidies and grants covering a portion of the claimant's medical expenses were recoverable as damages, as an exception to the general rule against double recovery.

The case had gone through two rounds in the State Courts before he was appointed as YIC for the High Court appeal.

Trachsel said he was familiar with the arguments, which centred on a certain line of cases, but he thought no one had considered a particular set of UK legislation.

"So I thought that was like a new angle that was relevant," he said.

Supportive bosses

Both Ng and Trachsel said managing the YIC assignment alongside their regular practice required good time management and communication with superiors and colleagues.

Ng, who obtained her master's degree from Harvard Law School after graduating from Singapore Management University as valedictorian, said she was fortunate because her brief came during the December holiday period.

"So clients go on holiday, and then you just naturally have a little bit more time to deal with that. Beyond that, I communicated with my superiors, my bosses, who are generally very supportive, and manage timelines."

"You take the time that you need to, and you just work out a schedule that works for everyone."

Trachsel, who graduated with first class honours from the National University of Singapore and served as a Justices' Law Clerk, said he put in the time that he thought was necessary to study the issues.

He said his mentors at the firm were quite understanding and supportive, and his peers and colleagues would step up to take over some of the work.

"But, for that period, it's like you have an extra gear where, okay, now you finish your day work that's urgent. You need to then dedicate that extra few hours a day to do your research or your drafting. It's like a side project," he said.