



## Working together to break the cycle

I WAS honoured to be nominated as High Sheriff of Hertfordshire. I was born in Egypt, to Greek Cypriot parents with British nationality, in an American car being driven at speed along the Suez Canal road en route to a French hospital. It is a wonderful feature of British society, that someone with my background was given the privilege of occupying this ancient Office.

I took up the post with pride and a determination to place domestic abuse and its effect on babies high up on the county's priorities and to encourage links between charities, public bodies and business.

This county is where my wife Susie calls home, where I have lived for most of my adult life and where I grew my business. Hertfordshire residents enjoy a generally high quality of life, along with comparatively low crime rates and high levels of public confidence in the police.

With all this good fortune, however, we must never be blind to those who remain suffering.

In 2008, I set up a philanthropic organisation *The Stefanou Foundation*. Philanthropy, co-operating alongside public and voluntary services, can be a catalyst to bring about meaningful improvements for vulnerable people. Our foundation created and is now running the *Healthy Relationships: Healthy Baby* programme, working with expectant parents to break the cycle of domestic abuse and give babies the best start in life.

My shrieval year began when the Radio 4 programme *The Archers* had reached a climax in one of its most devastatingly compelling storylines to date – the coercive control and abuse of Helen Titchener. The storyline echoed the situation in which many victims of domestic abuse find themselves trapped. The show portrayed the nuance of abuse, the cycles of control and the patterns

*“Money cannot create a good soul, but a good soul can turn money and everything else in private life and public life, into a good thing for people”  
(Socrates)*





of power so accurately that many struggled to listen. Given *The Stefanou Foundation's* work and research, my thoughts turned to the young child and unborn baby and the trauma they'd experienced.

The NSPCC estimates that one in five children is touched by domestic abuse nationwide. These early experiences have a lifelong impact on a child's brain development and mental health. Such children are less likely to form secure attachments, succeed at school, or maintain employment or closeness with a life partner. They are also more likely to go on to experience or perpetrate abuse themselves.

It was a perfect fit to make domestic abuse the main theme for my year, especially given the timely publication of Hertfordshire's excellent new Domestic Abuse Strategy (2016-19). The strategy called for stronger partnership between the public and voluntary sectors and the courts, and committed the county to an ambitious action plan to combat domestic abuse. More broadly, I recognised that the creativity and innovation within Hertfordshire was best harnessed when people, organisations, services and disciplines came together in partnership. I therefore wanted to encourage and support partnership working between a wide range of organisations. I visited many inspiring domestic abuse services and used my Christmas cards to raise money for Hertfordshire's Domestic Abuse Helpline. My garden party included an exhibition of local domestic abuse services and I was glad to include prayers about combatting domestic abuse in my Justice Service, which in turn had motifs of justice and mercy. Our High Sheriff's Awards were particularly inspiring, as they generated 44 excellent case studies about partnership working. We are working with local government and the voluntary sector to publish these as an online resource to highlight good practice.

One of my proudest achievements was a seized opportunity for partnership working to identify tangible actions that reinforced Hertfordshire's Domestic Abuse Strategy. It is traditional for a Hertfordshire High Sheriff to be invited to attend a series of lunches by the resident judge at St Albans Crown Court. With his support, we turned these lunches into round-table discussions to identify opportunities to break the cycle of domestic abuse. We brought together Crown and Family Court Judges, Magistrates and senior leaders in criminal justice, policing and the public and voluntary sectors. We discussed making better use of technology, bodycam evidence and improving the court experience for witnesses. We considered



combining accountability and behaviour change support for those acting abusively. We examined the needs of those experiencing abuse and their children, particularly considering the latest understanding of coercive control. These discussions proved highly valuable in advancing understanding and trust between organisations and individuals. Without the Office of High Sheriff, such a productive discussion may not have been facilitated. This crucial work will be continued despite my year coming to an end.

The role of High Sheriff has changed, but it has by no means become redundant. A High Sheriff can be a signpost, a bridge for forging stronger relationships and an ambassador for innovation. My shrieval year has taught me to try to make even the smallest encounter, event or discussion meaningful.

My themes have brought me closer to great work being done by so many and also highlighted potential routes for improvement. There is more to be done to understand and respond effectively to the complex dynamics of domestic abuse. We must continue developing the landscape of domestic abuse services, and make holistic services widely available that succeed in breaking the cycle for good. If we fail to do this, then no matter what the outcome of the scenario in *The Archers*, real adults, children and babies will continue to be put at risk.

### ❖ Stelio Stefanou OBE DL

*High Sheriff of Hertfordshire 2016 - 17*

**Above:** With the Lord-Lieutenant, councillors, shrieval representatives and senior leaders in criminal justice and policing

**Opposite page:** Welwyn Hatfield Domestic Abuse Forum at the High Sheriff's Awards 2017 for Partnership Working

“At his best, man is the noblest of all animals; separated from law and justice he is the worst” (Aristotle)