



# Positive PR for prisons

IT WAS a daunting experience to walk into a high security prison for the first time, albeit in the capacity of a visitor. Like most people, my knowledge of what happened inside prison walls was derived from press stories or television documentaries which were invariably negative – overcrowding, drugs, violence – so I was prepared for the worst.

Kent seems to have more than its fair share of prisons and my wife Caroline and I visited all seven of them. Having listened to accounts of the challenges faced by the prison service, I asked several governors: ‘How can a High Sheriff help you?’ Their response was clear: ‘Anything you can do to elicit some positive publicity about our prisons would be really welcome.’

As soon as I saw for myself the work being done in education, skills training and rehabilitation, I knew it was a worthwhile cause and so achieving positive PR for Kent’s prisons became the focus of my year.

Despite undeniable financial challenges, I was repeatedly impressed by the dedication and enthusiasm shown by governors, officers and staff to improve the life skills and future prospects of offenders. They were creating environments in which change was possible – setting standards, being role models, providing encouragement and slowly building self-esteem – all with the ultimate aim of reducing re-offending.

To spread the word more effectively, I facilitated access for my son Thomas, a professional photographer, to record not only classrooms and workshops but, importantly, prisoners developing new personal skills of concentration, teamwork and job satisfaction. The images are now used to showcase the potential employability of offenders as well as being a resource for the governors to use for purposes such as staff recruitment.

To understand the resettlement work of open prisons better, my wife provided seasonal employment on our farm for an offender on ‘ROTL’ (Release on Temporary Licence). She also helped develop a project whereby video interviews with prospective employers are used as the basis for discussion with prisoners about their own potential employability on release.

To achieve an ongoing network of contacts, I enabled visits into two open prisons by a group of influential county leaders, the Kent Ambassadors. Their experiences of tours and unrestricted conversations with offenders and prison officers over lunch mean they can now speak about the prisons from personal knowledge and, in some cases, offer advice and practical help.

The annual High Sheriff’s Awards allowed me to recognise and thank individuals from organisations I encountered during my year. I was pleased to include those dedicated to prison work



Above: HMP East Sutton Park: assessment for trainee gym instructor qualification

in the areas of art, community service and education – and the event itself, in County Hall, generated enthusiastic networking and high-profile publicity.

Equally as valuable were the High Sheriff’s Prison Awards, initiated by Andrew Wells, our editor (Kent 2005). Every year, staff nominate prisoners to be recognised for exceptional personal progress or contribution to their prison community. These awards were deeply appreciated – often being the first time recipients had been praised or recognised for their abilities.

High Sheriffs have privileged access to the prison system and there is much we can all do to support this challenging area of society.

◆ William Alexander  
High Sheriff of Kent 2015-16



Above: HMP Rochester: bicycle recycling repairs workshop



Above: HMP Swaleside: business education class