



Be yourself – enjoy!

MOST HIGH Sheriffs in nomination are given a lot of advice. This includes ‘Be yourself’, ‘Build bridges’, ‘Have a chain gang party’ and, above all, ‘Enjoy’.

Being myself was the only way for me. Yes, being a High Sheriff is a very important role, but not an acting one. As a long-time resident of Merseyside, my involvement in the voluntary, cultural and business life of the county was a great preparation for my shrieval year, and I began my term thinking that I knew all there was to know. How wrong I was! Each of our five boroughs has its own characteristics, from great wealth to serious poverty. However, the one thing they do have in common is a great spirit and desire to improve their communities. This is manifested by the organisations which do amazing work and are mainly manned by worldly-wise retired people who give so generously of their time and skills. Many work closely with Merseyside police community officers engaging with young people and helping to keep crime off the streets. I was delighted to meet young people who opened up to me when I sat down with them in classrooms and clubs, where they learned about my role, and I in turn heard about the challenges facing them.

I had hoped to highlight how art and creativity enriched people’s lives and helped toward the regeneration of communities. We had some success with the Tate and the agency which provided art and education in prisons in Merseyside. This took the form of a project to educate prisoners and their families on aspects of art so that they could have a common interest at visiting time. I arranged for a local radio presenter to visit the prison and speak to the prison radio presenters. Time did not permit me to arrange cookery workshops or talks from the hospitality industry but hopefully I can nudge people into action in the coming months. I enjoyed the collaboration between The Royal Court Theatre and Merseyside Police who produced a series of plays highlighting gang and knife crime. This had great impact when performed at the theatre, schools and community centres.

Did I build bridges? I do not think that I can take credit for doing that, but I can confidently say that I pointed out the bridges to the people on either side and encouraged them to meet in the middle. Throughout my year there



Photo: Ray Farley Photography

Above: At the High Sheriff’s Awards evening with Tony Ravel, manager at the League of Welldoers, Liverpool’s oldest independent charity

were many charities and volunteer groups which impressed me and I was determined to honour them with a High Sheriff’s Award. My Under Sheriff added colour and theatre to the occasion by participating in the presentations.

My chain gang party for the mayors and consorts of the five borough councils was held early in my year. The invitation clearly stated that it was to be relaxed kitchen supper. Despite the brief, they all turned up resplendent in their chains of honour and with their drivers. We quickly learnt ‘no chain’ means ‘no driver’! The evening was a great success and paid dividends over the following months whenever we visited their mayoralities or required intelligence on organisations in their areas. Oh, how I wished that High Sheriffs wore some valuable hardware to merit having a car and driver at our disposal! Thank God for consorts without whom life would be difficult.

And reader, did I enjoy? Most certainly! I met some wonderful people and have hopefully made friendships which will last for many years. Would I offer any advice? Probably all of the above and perhaps consider having a Twitter account which is an excellent way of keeping a diary and promoting the work and role of the High Sheriff.

Finally, to all of you who have just come in to Office or are waiting in the wings, I would say again – ‘Be yourselves’ and ‘Enjoy’.

♦ Peter Woods DL

High Sheriff of Merseyside 2018-19



Above: Pupils at St Vincent’s, a specialist school for sensory impairment and other needs, having proudly received their ‘Lasting Legacies’ recognition for services to the community from the High Sheriff