



Unity in diversity

IT IS both a great privilege and somewhat humbling to be able to acknowledge and recognise the great work being done across the county by people who go above and beyond the call of duty to maintain and build the fabric of society.

One of my most pleasant duties during my final months in office was to host an 'Inspiring Others' event during which I presented a number of young people with a High Sheriff's Award for their outstanding accomplishments, often achieved in very trying circumstances. As has become traditional in the West Midlands the candidates for these awards are nominated by the mayoral offices, one from each of our three cities and four boroughs. I also chose this evening to present a further set of High Sheriff's Awards to four small charities from across the county with which I had been particularly impressed during my year.

I chose to hold the awards evening in one of Birmingham's oldest churches – St Martin in the Bull Ring. The church is at once both ancient and contemporary. While not quite as old as the Shrievalty, there have been churches on this site since 1290, although the current church was built in 1873. My reason for choosing St Martin's was twofold: the church has evolved with the changing needs of society and now provides a wide range of services and facilities for the highly diverse local community, including the homeless and forgotten; secondly, it contains a magnificent window which combines the work of Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris. This window is world famous among students of the pre-Raphaelite movement but I only became aware of its existence and history when visiting a client in Stockholm some three years ago! My point: we sometimes need others to point out the riches we have all around us (wonderful artefacts and wonderful people) but of which we are blissfully unaware.

The evening proved a great success. In addition to the sponsoring mayors, we were fortunate to have representatives

from the 'blue light services', faith leaders, business leaders and a good number of judges, including two High Court Judges on circuit at that time. Our winners were thrilled to be recognised and many of our guests remarked how much they had learnt about activities in the county of which until then they had been 'blissfully unaware'.

There are many events in a High Sheriff's calendar that are known about well in advance and can be properly planned. By way of contrast there are others that arrive entirely unexpectedly and require a spontaneous response. Earlier this year we learnt of the horrors of the shootings in Christchurch of people at prayer in their mosques. As well as being a tragedy in itself, these shootings led to a climate of fear among Moslem communities the world over. Sadly, in the West Midlands a number of mosques were vandalised during the following week, which served only to increase fear locally. So, together with the Chief Constable of the West Midlands, the leader of Birmingham City Council and other community leaders, I visited Birmingham's Central Mosque during Friday prayers to express support for and solidarity with those members of our county who were feeling particularly threatened. Our small yet symbolic gesture was



Photo: Jas Samsi Photography

Above: High Sheriff presenting his award to the team from Gro-Organic (commended in the National Crimebeat Awards)

warmly appreciated by the worshipping community there, a number of whom took the time to say so personally that evening at the Pakistan Day celebrations.

My year as High Sheriff has flown by. My wife and I have thoroughly enjoyed the privilege of serving the county in this manner and have been warmly welcomed wherever we have visited. The motto for my year was 'unity in diversity', and whenever possible I sought to emphasise, as the late Jo Cox MP said, that 'we have more in common with each other than things that divide us'.

◆ Chris Loughran
High Sheriff of West Midlands 2018-19



Photo: Jas Samsi Photography

Above: Chaplain to the High Sheriff, Mgr Daniel McHugh, and Deputy Lord Mayor of Birmingham, Councillor John Lines