

CUMBRIA

News from and about members



A controversial choice

Above: The High Sheriff at the presentation of a Blood Bike to Cumbria and Lancashire by the Provincial Grand Lodge of Cumberland and Westmorland

LIKE EVERYONE who has the privilege of being High Sheriff, I am truly elated by what is turning out to be a most interesting and activity-packed year. I knew that we were expected to contribute to *The High Sheriff* magazine and wondered what in my year would be unusual and interesting. We all undertake amazing visits to wonderful charities and meet terrifically giving volunteers. While it is always worth describing those people and their activities, I felt this wasn't different enough – as we all do it! And even though I have the wonderful distinction of being England's/Wales' third and Cumbria's first High Sheriff who happens to be black, I thought writing about race, race relations and/or the reaction to a High Sheriff who is black was interesting – but not what I wanted to write about. So, I have chosen my most controversial decision... whether or not to be involved with Cumbria's Freemasons.

It started weeks before I formally became High Sheriff. I had received an invitation to attend an event from the Province of Cumberland & Westmorland Grand Lodge Brothers. At that time, the then High Sheriff was scheduled to attend. However, two weeks beforehand he informed me that he could not attend. Having received the invitation, and without the presence of the current High Sheriff, I was in a quandary about attending the event. I had been given clear, general impressions that the Freemasons are controversial and many hold strong negative feelings – a 'no go' group for High Sheriffs! However, as a black woman, I had heard things like that before – usually against people like me! In an effort to not make a mistake, I consulted Cumbria's Lord-Lieutenant. She gave her approval. I did my own research which indicated that many Freemasons have received Queen's Honours (OBEs and MBEs). That gave me the feeling that if The Queen can acknowledge the men in this group, I could too. In addition, my research also showed that, at times, in some communities, the



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Freemasons were the only group/people to donate to the Boy Scouts and other such organisations. And then there was the reason for the invitation – the Freemasons had raised funds for a fourth Blood Bike which would bring much-needed blood quickly to anyone or anyplace within our county and parts of Lancashire. I felt that was truly admirable – and decided that I would attend.

I have to admit that I was unsure what to expect. However, I was sure that what I experienced was much more than what I expected. The Masonic Hall was full of men (brothers) in full regalia – quite a sight to see. The audience was made up of men and women – dignitaries and community people who were most accepting of all – and me. I really appreciated the warm welcome I was given.

All four of the Blood Bikes supplied by the Freemasons were on show. They were a terrific and massive contribution to Cumbria – my, in many places extremely rural, county. The display of the bikes demonstrated an impressive story of caring for others – all others. I saw the Freemasons' generosity as a selfless act of kindness. Having participated in the procession and listened to speeches about the

bikes, I gave a speech and handed over the new Blood Bike's keys to one of the leaders of the driver-medics. I was then unexpectedly shocked because the event ended with the Freemasons giving me a £5,000 donation! I need to say it again – I was shocked! Because I was not yet High Sheriff, I informed them that I would pass their donation on to the current High Sheriff. By way of response, they explained that they had done their own 'homework' about me and were giving the donation specifically to me for my chosen charity, the Cumbria Community Foundation. (They also stated their willingness to wait for two weeks until my installation ceremony if that was required.) I was the most stunned I have ever been and I gratefully and humbly accepted their donation. Actually, I was honoured to accept their extremely generous donation.

Since then, I have participated in a couple of the Freemasons' events – one when they took the disabled children from three schools for a fishing experience, and the other their 2019 Burns Night event. I have just received an early invitation to 2020's Burns Night event with notification that the Freemasons have paid professionals to create and choreograph a special melody and reel for the forthcoming Burns Night event – it's going to be named the 'High Sheriff's Lilt'!

So, while totally controversial, I am thrilled that I refused to allow any prejudice and/or bias from others to limit my participation with the Freemasons. Like the rest of my year, it has been quite a fantastic, surprising journey!

◆ Marcia Reid Fotheringham JP
High Sheriff of Cumbria 2019-20



Right: Eden District Scout Awards

Below: Gathering for the procession

