



What has happened not what's wrong

THIS HAS certainly been a very odd year to have been High Sheriff!

I was recently asked what I had learnt about the individuals who end up in the criminal justice system. My answer is that one should ask oneself not what's wrong with them but what has happened to them.

My focus has been on ACEs (adverse childhood experiences). Scientific evidence shows that the impact of trauma causes toxic stress, which may lead to cognitive emotional and social impairment, which impacts on health and life outcomes. These can increase the chances of victims of ACEs having drug and alcohol addiction, interactions with the police and ultimately

having a criminal record, and in some cases leading to imprisonment.

But, what a year! My greatest privilege has been to witness the astounding work that is going on, day after day, with young people and adults in Gloucestershire and South Gloucestershire. In spite of the shortages, in spite of the fiercely increased demand during the pandemic, this work is changing the outcomes of these lives.

I would like to tell you a story of transformation in the face of real adversity through building a trusted adult relationship, which science shows is key to changing life outcomes of ACEs victims.

Jimmy was living in a foster home,

his eighth in the previous four years. Excluded from school, he was well known by the police and targeted by a county lines drug gang. His father was in prison and Jimmy's primary aim in life seemed to be to hurt his dad as much as his dad had hurt him. Volunteers with a caring local charity provide him with fitness training and his trust in his ex-army fitness instructor, Dave, slowly begins to grow. One day, Dave asks him why he always shows up for their sessions when he doesn't turn up for meetings with his school or social worker. Jimmy's answer is simple: you are the first person to spend time with me without being paid for it. Jimmy is now in the army.

I have learnt about the work of Gloucestershire Constabulary, which is trauma informed, the statutory sector and a plethora of local charities that are committed to changing people's lives through care, compassion and through building unconditional trusted relationships. They are committed to supporting individuals and families going through rough times or provide a space for a youngster where there is no aggression, no danger. If Jimmy had not been given the opportunity to build his fitness, he would not have met Dave. His life would have taken a spiral downwards.

I urge you to become ACEs-aware and trauma informed, to increase your understanding so that your question is not what is wrong with somebody in the criminal justice system but what has happened to them.

◆ Helen Lovatt

High Sheriff of Gloucestershire 2020-21



Photo credit: Paul Nicholls



Photo credit: Gloucestershire County Council

Left: Helen Lovatt at Gloucester Cathedral for Declaration and annual Legal Service
Above: The T-shirts and grins say it all