



Encouraging the necessary skills

I AM honoured to be High Sheriff of the County of the West Midlands. My appointment makes me the first High Sheriff from Coventry in 30 years, with my shrieval year coinciding with the city's year as the UK City of Culture.

It also comes at the most extraordinary of times as we continue our battle against COVID-19. Nonetheless I have met with some fantastic individuals whose mission is to make a difference in their local communities.

One of my priorities is unearthing such motivators and highlighting their achievements. Another is young people, showing what we can achieve when we invest our time and effort in them, not

least those in care. I have met with young people who haven't had the best start in life, but work hard and seize opportunities.

Positive Youth Foundation (PYF) was established 24 years ago with just £50 to improve prospects for young people in Coventry. Today it employs 30 staff, working with 3,000 eight- to 25-year-olds every year. Offering education, training and employment, its main focus is those who are the least likely to find employment. PYF helps them realise their potential and make a positive contribution to society.

Another early engagement was an online event promoting the voluntary sector contribution during COVID.

'United in Hope – United for Humanity' was also organised to coincide with Earth Day which promotes environmental protection – a hot topic with the devastating effects of climate change.

A visit to the Coventry Food Bank proved a real eye-opener, with distressing tales of families regularly going three or four days without food, and others starving because they are too embarrassed to visit the food banks in case they are recognised. However, it was also heart-warming to learn of the food bank's collaborative efforts to provide longer-term solutions enabling people to get back on their feet as well as providing its own programmes to encourage them to acquire the necessary skills to gain employment.

In July I held a summer reception where I presented certificates to local heroes from across the county whose selfless efforts in their communities have made tangible difference to others. These included a Solihull teenager who had spent her childhood caring for relatives and later established a book club for other young carers, benefiting their numeracy, literacy and social skills, and two Dudley women who used their own experiences in care to help improve opportunities for children in the system today. These stories have been eye-opening and inspiring in equal measures.

My diverse forthcoming schedule includes a day with West Midlands Police, meeting senior officers and cadets and I hope joining a police operation, attending Pakistan National Day celebrations, celebrating St John Ambulance volunteers, lunching with Women of Distinction, unveiling a plaque at Birmingham's Hippodrome Theatre and hosting my own Justice Service. I will be supported by my cadet Freya Pinnick whose journey to joining me started when, after breaking her toe at a charity event and seeking help from St John Ambulance volunteers, she decided to train in first aid with them and is now a fully trained cadet with ambitions in medical science. As well as studying for A Levels and supporting me, Freya still finds time to continue volunteering. She is a true inspiration!

◆ Louise Bennett OBE DL
High Sheriff of the West Midlands 2021-22



Above: High Sheriff's visit to Coventry Food Bank: (l-r) Hugh McNeill (Coventry Food Bank), Sarah Perry (Deputy Under Sheriff), Very Revd John Witcombe (High Sheriff's Chaplain), Gwyn Williams (Coventry Food Bank), High Sheriff, Gavin Kibble MBE (Coventry Food Bank)



Left: High Sheriff presenting her High Sheriff's Cadet, Freya Pinnick, with a High Sheriff's medal