

# ‘Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope’

– Kofi Annan

## Liz Green

High Sheriff of Hertfordshire 2023-24

During my year I have sought to highlight the challenges faced daily by people with low literacy. Many of us take for granted that we can travel almost anywhere in the world and someone will speak English, yet for over 16 per cent of those living in the UK a utility bill, a bus timetable, or an appointment for a medical check would be beyond them.

In November 2023 I hosted a symposium at the University of Hertfordshire on my theme of ‘Reading, writing and rehabilitation’. We brought together charities, the emergency services, those working in the criminal justice system, and businesses which help those with lived prison experience back into work. Workshops and panel discussions took place, and we heard from two representatives from Timpson, who spoke candidly about the benefits of employing those with lived prison experience. Our keynote speaker, Her Honour Judge Wendy Joseph KC (a retired Old Bailey judge and award-winning author), spoke powerfully about the link between literacy and levels of crime, and at the end of the symposium I asked myself and those present: ‘what next?’

Since 2020 I’ve volunteered for Shannon Trust, who work to improve literacy in prisons and have recently begun training in numeracy. With my focus on literacy, I’m delighted that Shannon Trust and Hertfordshire Probation Service are beginning a one-year pilot, with the objective of improving



Meeting PCSOs and staff at Croxley Green Library



At the literacy symposium with facilitator Greg Hurst (Head of Communications at Centre for Homelessness Impact and former Social Affairs Editor at The Times), Sam Onaguruwa (Founder Ascend Life Coaching), Caragh Arthur (Senior Policy Advisor HMPPS), Rachel Halling (Head of Education at HMP The Mount), Dan White (co-director DWRM Consultants CIC) and Matt Cannon (CEO of Herts Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders, HACRO) Photo: Elizabeth Dalziel

literacy levels for those on probation.

During visits to charities (Google is a useful search engine for discovering lesser-known charities) I’ve championed literacy, and both online and in-person training has recently taken place to help those in our communities who, for whatever reason, struggle to read. This new initiative has great potential, if we can encourage individuals to ‘have a go’.

While some established charities ‘expect a visit’ from the High Sheriff it’s been a joy to discover new ones, with some being chosen by our panel to receive a High Sheriff’s Award at our annual ceremony. I hosted lunch for the judges at St Albans Crown Court and invited



At County Hall for the Hertfordshire Faith Covenant with Cllr Terry Douris (Chairman of Herts CC), representatives from the County Council Exec, Diversity and Inclusion Team, charities, Herts Fire and Rescue and others. Twenty-two leaders from Bahai, Christian, Hindu, Islam, Jain, Jewish, Quaker and Sikh faiths and Inter Faith leaders signed the Faith Covenant

representatives of charities to join us and to sit in court, which was appreciated by those present.

To promote literacy, and raise funds for Herts Community Foundation, between January and March, my mascot ‘Herty’ and I visited all forty-six libraries across Hertfordshire. I had no idea of the range of community activities that libraries organise, nor that library card holders (in Herts at least) can download most newspapers, magazines and audio

books free of charge via the BorrowBox, Libby and PressReader apps. Those who think that libraries ‘only lend books’ should go and visit – they are a warm, safe, non-judgemental space, which is so important to local communities, and often this is the only time an individual will talk to someone else that day/week. Some libraries are the only place locally to access printers and photocopiers. Activities include health and nature walks, ‘Coffee & Chat’, digital skills, a home library service, meeting their PCSO or councillor, Lego, virtual reality, ‘Cosmic Curiosity’, hearing aid checks, advice from banks. Libraries enable young people to volunteer, offer work experience to those with SEND or lived prison experience and much, much more.

I should close with the vital, nearly always unsung work – unless something goes wrong – of our judiciary, police, emergency services and faith leaders. In these troubled times it’s been important to take part in Prayers for Peace, and interfaith gatherings. Those who work in the criminal justice system don’t know what they will face on a daily basis, and we owe them a huge debt.



With award winners and cadets at Micklefield Hall, Sarratt