

The power of community: protect, care, serve



With Cllr Cathy Glynn-Davies (Mayor of Worthing) and members of the Bangladeshi community celebrating Pohela Boishakh

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As the first medical High Sheriff of West Sussex, it is perhaps not surprising that a focus for my year has been mental health. Meeting the ever-changing and increasing mental health needs of our population presents a series of challenges which the role of High Sheriff is not designed to resolve; but what it can do is build on those elements of our society which are proven to maintain, protect and strengthen our collective and individual wellbeing. This is the power of community.

Societal and psychological studies show that strong and long-lasting communities improve health, reduce loneliness and vulnerability, and build resilience in adversity. Belonging – whether through family, faith, neighbourhood or shared purpose – is one of the most powerful determinants of wellbeing and safety.

Five years ago, my first year as High Sheriff was bedevilled by the demands of – and the barriers created by – the pandemic. Now, in very different circumstances, I have been able to be among the crowds at the 80th VE Day anniversary celebrations in Lancing or among the Pohela Boishakh celebrations in the spring.

I have visited communities based around specific needs or within our hamlets, villages and towns. There have been invitations to remarkable multi-cultural and multi-faith communities with their warmth, richness and vibrancy. Along our 90 miles of coastline, each of the three RNLI station forms its own community hub and, within the military community

of the 7th Air Defence Group on Thorney Island, there is a sense of service which exemplifies the best of community spirit.

And while each of these communities is clearly bonded together by compassion, shared interests and belonging, it is equally true that each depends on the foundational principles of justice and mercy that underpin them.

It is absolutely appropriate, therefore, that a key element of the High Sheriff's role is to support the judiciary and all who uphold the rule of law and preserve the freedoms we so easily take for granted in our society. As such, I have attended criminal, family, tribunal and coroner courts and have been deeply impressed by the dedication and humanity of judges, magistrates and court staff.

I have also spent time with police and other emergency services, attending award ceremonies, joining officers on duty and observing training. Their professionalism and compassion are deeply inspirational and impressive.



With members of the Chagossian Crawley community celebrating their history and culture through storytelling, dance and music



Standing alongside Simon Williams, Coxswain of Shoreham Harbour RNLI Lifeboat

However, I was unprepared for the extent of the mental-health burden now being carried by the blue light and RNLI services. At a recent police ceremony, 70 per cent of the awards recognised officers who had attended individuals suffering from a mental health crisis. Through their courage and skill, the police and others have saved many lives, but such interventions inevitably divert them from other duties.

In response to this mental health crisis, in my capacity as High Sheriff, I have initiated community conferences to be run in each of the seven neighbourhood areas of the county at which the elements of mental health – stigma, access and men's mental health – will be discussed along with those matters which are important to each locality. The conferences will bring together every agency involved in the provision of mental health care and support; lived experience will be heard, networks strengthened and practical solutions identified or grown.

In a neat but unintentional, alignment of dates my Judges' Service coincided with World Mental Health Day and I used the opportunity to connect the themes of justice, mercy, community and wellbeing. In a sense, these four words capture the essence of the work of a High Sheriff.