

Robin Mills walked with Dorset's High Sheriff, Helena Conibear, from Stourton Caundle to Sherborne.



Helena Conibear © Photograph by Robin Mills

I'm lucky to be Dorset born and bred. Born in Poole, I grew up in Puddletown, but aged 18 I couldn't wait to escape Dorset, as one does at that age. I went to university in Exeter, then went off to work in California. I was learning all about wine and winemaking, which also took me to South Africa and France, and then I returned to work in London for about 4 years.

I met my husband Simon in Puddletown when I was still at University. We got married when I was 26 and moved to Bath where we had a very happy 4 years. Simon worked for the Duchy of Cornwall, commuting from Bath, so we decided to move back to Dorset, living in Godmanstone until 15 years ago when we moved to Frampton. It's said that an apple never falls far from the tree, and I feel privileged to have been brought up in such a beautiful county.

Working for various vineyards and wine merchants, I became very aware of the double-edged sword of alcohol. It can bring merriment in small doses, and illness, violence and misery when people drink too much. At that time there was an increase in binge drinking, and almost no education on the dangers of alcohol in schools. To cut a long story short I ended up setting up a charity with a group of like-minded people to ensure young people had the knowledge, skills and resilience to be able to make safer choices. Initially it was about drinking, but as time has passed issues including vaping,

Helena Conibear

cannabis, and now, sad to say, ketamine, have become more relevant. Our charity, The Talkabout Trust, started 17 years ago, and is now based on The Great Field in Poundbury. We support young people aged 8 - 25 in about 1000 settings a year, across England and Scotland, not only in schools but in children's homes, pupil referral units and youth clubs. We also train professionals to provide support for young people, and their parents and carers. This is almost universally free of charge.

Young people are drinking less today, but they are using other substances more, often to self-medicate as well as for hedonistic reasons. We're not about creating fear or stigma in young people's lives. It's all about equipping them with the knowledge and insight so that they can make the right choice, because in the end, it is a choice. It's also really important to know that what we are doing works. So, I'm very proud to say that an independent evaluation of Talk About Alcohol showed that there was a 15% reduction in teenagers choosing to drink regularly compared to those not in our programme. More than anything, we try to give people hope, which is why we run a youth club, an after-school art club, and holiday clubs, from our community hub, Pavilion in the Park in Poundbury, all of which provide a sense of purpose and belonging.

The background to my theme of youth opportunity and county lines in my year as High Sheriff is that we have about a million young people not in education, training or employment in this country. Across Dorset some of our young people do not have access to youth clubs or safe spaces, have no one helping prevent exclusion, and are not getting basic vocational skills. This makes them more vulnerable to county lines because they live without much hope of getting the basics of a good life which might include a job or somewhere to live, etc. These are the young people my walk and the funds raised are trying to help, namely those at risk of exploitation from the County Lines drug networks (19 currently operational in Dorset).

Child exploitation affects every county, and its insidious nature means children from all backgrounds, whether they live in rural villages or the bigger towns, can be lured with gifts and money into what they believe to be friendship, then are coerced into dealing drugs and dependency on them. The effects are dropping out of school, alienation from family, and involvement with the criminal justice system. Their life chances just disappear. I felt very strongly I wanted to try and do something about the problem whilst High Sheriff, and hence the idea came about of walking the county line of Dorset to raise awareness of County Lines and much needed funds for the grass roots charities.

In the role as High Sheriff, I didn't just want to spend my time in my uniform shaking hands and thanking people. Probably on a sleepless night, the idea of this walk occurred. By walking the county boundary of Dorset I could explore the county I'm representing, as well as meet and converse with all manner of supporters of the cause, which is to

raise awareness of the County Lines situation. I started in Charmouth in June (in 35°C heat!), and in stages have walked along the coast to Christchurch, the easternmost point of Dorset, where we held a dinner with Dorset police's head of County Lines. Although the 4th safest county, we have the second worst funded police force, which is very unfair. However, Dorset Police are hugely committed to tackling drug supply and the associated crime, fraud, violence and exploitation that goes with it, successfully closing down many County Lines.

The route of the walk continued north through Ferndown to Sixpenny Handley, thence to Tollard Royal and then to Shaftesbury, Stalbridge, Sherborne and Halstock, and will finish at Lyme Regis on the 25th October.

It's important to say, this walk is not just about the problem, it's to highlight the incredible network of organisations as well as our professional services who are helping protect our community. It's also been great fun to do. The Long Distance Walkers Association and the Ramblers Association have been so kind with mapping and leading the walks. If I hadn't had guides with me I'd still be lost in the wilds of East Dorset! Joking apart, their expertise and local knowledge has freed me to have wonderful conversations with the 250 or so walkers who have joined for a day or more—the youngest has been aged 6, and the oldest 95, lured out his care home by the promise of a cream tea and a glass of Pimms! It's also been an opportunity for people to talk about the issues they face in their families caused by County Lines involvement and drug dependency. Even more wonderful has been the welcome and hospitality that Town Councillors and Mayors as well as local charities have given us along the way, truly humbling.

Being asked to be Dorset's High Sheriff, officially the King's representative for the county, happens as a tap on the shoulder. There's a nomination committee made up of the services the High Sheriff represents, which are the fire service, the judiciary, education, the church, the police, coastguard and voluntary sector. The successful nominee is given 3 years' notice to prepare. My day-to-day workload is so varied; over the next few weeks I'll be visiting prisons, youth justice and probation service, and will sit in both the Crown and Magistrate's Court. Then there are awards, ceremonies and Remembrance Day parades.

As High Sheriff of Dorset, my role is to champion and thank the incredible services and voluntary services that keep us safe day-to-day—I call them our unsung heroes—such as our volunteer magistrates, councillors and mayors who deliver great things on our behalf. It is a humbling and highly enjoyable role.

On the County Line Walk I hope to raise £20,000 for 10 grassroots charities that either offer a safe space or a diversionary activity for vulnerable young people. Those wishing to find out more can email highsheriffofdorset@gmail.com or donate via 'Walking the County Line' at Crowdfunder. 