**Civic Service –Mayor’s Inauguration 25th June 2023**

**Speech by Michael Ellsmore – Chair of Centrepieces**

Thank you Mr Mayor, Mayoress , Deputy Mayor and Mayoress for inviting me to speak today. What a wonderful occasion this is. It is a real privilege to be able to talk about the work of Centrepieces and mental health.

But before I start, I would like to share with you a few brief personal reflections on how I got involved in Centrepieces. I have lived in the borough for 47 years - we moved here in 1976, buying our first house in Belvedere, and moving to Barnehurst in 1983, where we still live. The Borough has given me a lot; it has educated my girls, provided me with a career and provided endless Zumba classes for my other half!

When I retired in 2014, it was time to put something back. I had spent over 40 years in local government, largely in a finance role.

I never really got close to mental health issues at work and that was my lost opportunity.

I have been lucky – I had a supportive employer, a supportive family and I had my running. We all have our down moments but I’d go off for a run. My Sunday run is a 14 mile round trip to Bluewater. At the age of 71, I can assure you that after 14 miles, you are so tired that you literally don’t have a care in the world. TRUST ME!

However I would not recommend running as the answer for everyone. Back in 1989 I got hit by a car in the Maidstone Marathon – an Austin Maxi. Anyone here today who is old enough to remember an Austin Maxi, will know that it didn’t take prisoners. I spent an interesting 4 weeks in Maidstone General with 3 compound fractures of the right leg. It gave me an opportunity to reflect on life.

Others are not so lucky with their mental health. Our aim at Centrepieces is to help those who have had a mental health issue. We have some 150 members and we help them through providing regular art, sculpture and creative writing workshops. We operate out of both Hall Place Lodge and more recently, Sidcup Manor House, where we have created 18 mini studios for our members.

I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge publicly the support provided by Bexley Council, particularly in allowing us to occupy both the Lodge and the Manor House.

We hold regular exhibitions, which allow our members to sell their work. This does much to improve their self-esteem. All our volunteers and trustees are unpaid, and we receive no formal external funding. We survive on one-off grants and donations. Our engine room is our army of volunteers, I just do the up-front stuff. We are lucky to have a mental health professional as our lead volunteer.

Of course, that is the means by which we help people with their mental health issues but what about outcomes and what do we achieve?

At our recent AGM, a young member, Izzie, 23 years of age stood up in a packed room to tell us something about her story. Izzie’s Mum and Dad brought her to us –she had rarely ventured outside the house, as she puts it.

I was chairing the meeting and I have to say that I feared for Izzie as she stumbled over her opening words - I was ready to step in. As she got into her speech, she visibly grew in confidence and by the end she was in full flow, blossoming into a mature and confident speaker. She explained that her Mum and Dad had found Centrepieces and encouraged her to come along.

Before she joined Centrepieces, she was largely housebound - rarely venturing out. Centrepieces through our art workshops had given her a lifeline and a reason to get out of the house and engage with people. She has allowed me to share her story with you.

I can talk about measuring outcomes and social inclusion but Izzie is what it is all about.

And Bexley is blessed with an amazing voluntary sector- the work it does, does not appear in the nation’s economic statistics or GDP but it makes a real difference to lives such as Izzie’s.

Mr Mayor, we are so pleased to have been selected as one of your charities - it significantly raises our profile and has given a real lift to our membership.

I know both you and the Mayoress, ably supported by the Deputy Mayor and Mayoress, will throw yourselves into your Mayoral year.

We at Centrepieces would like to wish you a fantastic and enjoyable year.

Thank you

Mike Ellsmore
Chair of Centrepieces