

QUEEN'S HONOUR FOR HOMELESS SHELTER VOLUNTEER



I couldn't believe it when the letter arrived about my MBE

■ Good work – Pernille Petersen has been recognised for her work

Picture: STEVE BRADING CO33148

HELPING the homeless is often a thankless task. Volunteers work out of view of the public's gaze to support people unable to find a roof to go over their head.

Yet the work of one co-ordinator at a Colchester shelter has been recognised in perhaps the biggest way possible.

Pernille Petersen, co-ordinator at Colchester Emergency Night Shelter, has been made an honorary MBE.

The 56-year-old has been involved in the charity, now based in Alexandra Road, for more than 25 years, and has been co-ordinator since 1990.

She was so surprised when she found out about the honour, she had to get her husband, a retired doctor, to read the letter to make sure she was not seeing things.

Mrs Petersen said: "It arrived in a brown envelope and I thought it was another letter from the taxman.

"My family was quite gobsmacked, as was I. My friends have all been supportive, and I have had a very positive response.

"It's been like having a birthday which just keeps dragging on."

"I accepted the award mostly to highlight the work being done to help homeless people, but also because there are some sinister forces out there against immigrants, and I wanted to show

By WILL LODGE

were we doing lots of good things to help."

Mrs Petersen came to Colchester in 1976 to do a masters degree at Essex University in politics and government.

She got involved in setting up the shelter in 1984 after a priest at her church, St James the Less and St Helen, asked if she would be interested.

She said: "He said to me, 'You look like someone who might like to get involved with this', and the rest, as they say, is history."

Mrs Petersen was heavily involved in the shelter in its crucial first months when it was at risk of closure.

Her and husband Dr Lester

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Carlyon worked hard to secure its position. She became co-ordinator at the shelter after the birth of her first son.

During her tenure at the Night Shelter, Mrs Petersen has seen a number of changes to the homeless situation in Colchester.

The biggest difference between

HUNDREDS HELPED

- The Night Shelter, in Alexandra Road, has space to accommodate 20 people each night
- It provides temporary overnight accommodation for the homeless, and tries to set them up with other support networks.
- The Shelter helped almost

900 people between 2005 and 2008, and took in 217 people last year

- Of those, 33 were female and 184 male
- The shelter currently employs ten staff
- The turnover for the shelter in 2009/10 was £237,000

when she began and now are the background problems associated with homelessness.

Mrs Petersen said: "We used to see a lot of people where homelessness was their only problem.

"Now we see a number of people who have other problems too, such as being disabled or having drink and drug problems.

"They have a lot of problems in different areas, but there is no single service to help them. People don't know where to turn.

"We would like to be more proactive in helping the homeless. I don't think the Night Shelter will ever be in a situation where we can offer long-term solutions, but we need to be able to bridge the gap more between services."

Homelessness has always been a political issue to some extent, and Mrs Petersen says her degree has stood her in good stead.

She added: "It is about being involved at the grassroots level and that is my field.

"In my opinion there has always been a need to get past the sticking plaster, but then if someone in pain needs help, that becomes your concern.

"You do the wider campaign to get others to help directly, but you can't have the campaign without the services on the ground. Otherwise you end up back at the start."

To cope with the sadness a life dedicated to helping the less fortunate can bring, Mrs Petersen rides horses to unwind.

She has been a member of the Colchester Garrison Saddle Club for the past five years.

She said: "Horse-riding has played a big part in my relaxation for 15 years and is a very important aspect to my life alongside my Catholic faith."

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