Publication: CNA Online
Date: 6 June 2026
Headline: 'Never poorer for helping': The first Singaporean high sheriff in Wales wants to make volunteerism a norm

'Never poorer for helping': The first Singaporean high sheriff in Wales wants to make volunteerism a norm

Mrs Shereen Aziz Williams never expected to build a life overseas much less in a place she knew next to nothing about. Twenty years on however, she's not only thriving in her new home but also giving back and injecting a bit of Singapore into her work.

Taufiq Zalizan
06 Jun 2026 09:30PM
(Updated: 07 Jun 2026 10:27PM)

These days when the high sheriff of Gwent in southeast Wales attends formal events she shows up dressed in a kebaya.

Unlike her predecessors, current office holder Mrs Shereen Aziz Williams is Singaporean and wants to pay homage to her birth country and cultural identity, even though she has set roots in her adopted home for the last two decades.

During our interview over Zoom this week, Mrs Williams, switched between English and her mother tongue Malay with as much ease as you'd expect of a typical Singaporean ordering food at a hawker centre.

We even spent a good part of our 90-minute conversation exchanging jokes in Malay.

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 6 June 2026
Headline: 'Never poorer for helping': The first Singaporean high sheriff in Wales wants to make volunteerism a norm

"I speak more Malay when I'm in Singapore because I have some relatives, especially the elderly, who are more comfortable conversing in Malay," said the 44-year-old mother of three, whose parents still live in Singapore in Tampines.

"And I also try to find as many opportunities to speak it there, because there's very little opportunity to do so here."

Another typical Singaporean quirk emerged during our conversation. The self-professed tiger parent let slip that before our interview, she told her 16-year-old son to sit quietly nearby and do revision for his mathematics exams.

When her children try to ask her to be less stressed about their school examinations because they are not national exams or the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), her response is always: "It doesn't matter. It's an exam, you still need to study."

If they continue whining, she usually adds: "This is the Welsh side of you. No self-respecting Singaporean will ever say these exams don't matter."

I found it particularly interesting how strongly her Singaporean identity came through, given that she has not only been living in Wales for 21 years, but has also been an active member of the community there.

Almost from the get go after arriving in Swansea, she started work in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community spaces that looked at helping to foster cohesion and helping victims of domestic violence, among other things.

Over the years, she has received multiple awards and appointments recognising her outstanding contributions to the community.

The latest feather in her cap – being appointed high sheriff of Gwent, and being the first Muslim to hold the appointment there and reportedly the first Singaporean too.

There are 55 high sheriffs appointed in England and Wales each year, one for each county and metropolitan area, with individuals fulfilling the role for a year. Since Apr 9, she has been representing the county of Gwent, which has a population of about 600,000.

The unpaid honorary role no longer includes traditional powers such as tax collection, and today involves ceremonial duties like hosting the royal family during their visits to the counties, along with community engagement and judiciary support roles.

Mrs Williams explained that ceremonial duties aside, the office of the high sheriff does still have the power to convene public service agencies to deal with community issues.

"If I see a problem, I've got the power to say ... I'm going to contact the police, I want to contact so-and-so public services, and I have the power to convene a meeting and say: 'Okay, we've got this problem, how are we going to solve it?'."

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 6 June 2026
Headline: 'Never poorer for helping': The first Singaporean high sheriff in Wales wants to make volunteerism a norm

THE UNPLANNED JOURNEY
Mrs Williams said she has been pleasantly surprised by how different her life turned out from what she had envisioned as a 20-year-old.

As a Singapore Management University accountancy undergraduate, she planned like many of her schoolmates to get a good job, climb the corporate ladder, buy a house, and maybe start a family.

The first unexpected twist in her life story happened after attending an exchange programme in Denmark during her final year. While visiting a cousin for a month in Swansea, Wales, she was introduced to a family friend who turned out to be her future husband, Mr Owein Williams.

Romance was not on her mind that holiday but after meeting him, she said that they both knew within a week that it wasn't a "dating for fun thing".

She was especially taken in by how well Mr Williams treated his mother and his daughter from his first marriage.

Just 11 months after meeting, they got married in Singapore and then moved in Wales, which seemed the natural choice for them despite it being a place of which she knew very little.

"My stepdaughter had just turned three when we met in June 2004 and it wouldn't be fair on her or my husband to be apart. It was something he was honest about and also something I would have never asked of him," said Mrs Williams.

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 6 June 2026
Headline: 'Never poorer for helping': The first Singaporean high sheriff in Wales wants to make volunteerism a norm

Her knowledge of Wales back then, she said, was limited to the fact that midfielder Ryan Giggs from her father's favourite football club Manchester United hailed from there.

"I was open to the idea of living overseas, but Wales was definitely not on my radar," she said.

This marked the next interesting turn in Mrs Williams' life.

Concerned that she would feel homesick, her husband volunteered her name to an organisation working with youths that was looking for a treasurer so that she could fill her time, while contributing her accountancy skills in a meaningful way.

"That's how I got started working in what in Singapore you'd call the civic society sector," she said. "I later found paid employment within the sector and since then, I've gotten involved in all sorts of wonderful initiatives (that contribute to the community)."

Mrs Williams said that her parents have always taught her from young the importance of contributing to society and helping others.

"My mum used to say: 'Takkan miskin kalau tolong orang', or you're never poorer for helping others," she said.

After over 20 years in volunteerism, Mrs Williams said her mother's adage rings true.

"The people I've come across who are incredibly generous, they have never been poor, either with time or money or food in the house."

Despite being exposed to volunteering programmes in school, she always viewed giving back as an after-school or side activity, as it was not the typical career path that Singaporeans were exposed to back then.

"I don't think I was as conscientious about social justice before," she said. "I understood the importance of helping and giving back to society, but not to the level of what I do now."

Through the years, she has been involved with building community cohesion, helping vulnerable women and even countering extremist ideologies.

For her efforts, she was presented with a Recognising Achievement Award in 2010 for services to community cohesion by the First Minister of Wales. In 2017, she was made an honorary Member of the Order of the British Empire for her outstanding services to the community.

She now works as a chief executive officer of a statutory board in charge of reviewing the electoral boundaries and processes in Wales.

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 6 June 2026
Headline: 'Never poorer for helping': The first Singaporean high sheriff in Wales wants to make volunteerism a norm

Despite her full-time job at the statutory board, she doesn't consider her work in the community as being a co-curricular activity or just something she does in her free time.

While she has had to pare down her volunteer work this year due to her new appointment, she still clocks in an average of about four hours of community work a week including being in the governing body of a local school, being involved in a grassroots rugby club and going with her children to help out at soup kitchens.

Turning to her appointment as high sheriff this year, Mrs Williams said it was not something that she had expected at all.

High sheriffs are picked four years in advance. Members of the community submit names of outstanding individuals to a nomination panel, before being selected by the presiding office bearer.

When Mrs Williams first received an email from the high sheriff's office four years ago, she was convinced that they had just wanted her to sit on the panel to tap on her diverse network.

"I was not expecting it, I was quite shocked ... it was quite humbling and also an emotional experience," she said of her reaction when the then- presiding high sheriff broke the news to her that he would like to appoint her to take up the office.

Given her already busy schedule, she took some time to deliberate over accepting the appointment.

What helped her make up her mind was when she recalled an incident that happened a few years ago when the then-high sheriff visited a part-time basic religious class for children from underprivileged families which Mrs Williams and her friend had organised.

A young girl asked the high sheriff if a Muslim could one day sit in the office.

"The high sheriff told her: 'Of course, you could be a high sheriff in the future. This office is for everybody'," she recounted.

Mrs Williams realised that it was important that she accepted the nomination so that girls and any minority individual would know that the office was truly inclusive and open to any member of the community regardless of their background.

During her one-year tenure, Mrs Williams said that she would like to champion volunteerism because being involved in the community and helping others allowed her to build the life that she has in Wales.

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 6 June 2026
Headline: 'Never poorer for helping': The first Singaporean high sheriff in Wales wants to make volunteerism a norm

Just recently, she gave out a community award to a delivery driver and boxing trainer who started a support group for men to open up about their mental health issues.

"They're not psychologists, they're not doctors, they're just two men who have gone through a lot of their lives dealing with PTSD (post- traumatic stress disorder) and trauma, and so on," she said.

"They realise that there's long waiting lists to see a psychiatrist or get therapy, so they went: 'Look, let's see what we can do to support them'."

She said it was such unsung heroes who "quietly get on with their lives while actually making a real impact to the community" that she would like to spotlight as a way to encourage other members of the community to follow suit.

DEALING WITH RACISM
Mrs Williams said that growing up as a minority in Singapore, racism and prejudice were not new to her.

The difference was that in Singapore, these interactions came in less overt, though not necessarily less hurtful, forms.

"Growing up Malay in Singapore, I've had to deal with microagressions. I'd hear comments like: 'If only more Malays are like you' (whenever she did something well), or encounter people who held stereotypes about your community," she said.

In Wales, where Asians make up about 3 per cent of the population in Wales, and Muslims about 2 per cent, Mrs Williams has had to deal with more "in your face" racially-motivated hate.

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 6 June 2026
Headline: 'Never poorer for helping': The first Singaporean high sheriff in Wales wants to make volunteerism a norm

One incident happened while she was having lunch at a food court with her mother during her first few years of living there.

"Somebody came up to me, hit me on the back of my head, and then said: 'May God be with you', and laughed and ran off," she recalled.

While the police were very supportive and prompt in helping her, they ultimately could not find the perpetrator who had fled immediately after attacking her.

Another incident occurred when she received Islamophobic comments in the guise of a joke. Ironically, the comment came from an IT support staff member helping her set up a laptop when she visited an organisation to give a talk about countering extremist views.

She said while she loves Singapore and being Singaporean, the culture in Wales has helped her deal with racism better.

"Culturally, over here it's not as hierarchical," said Mrs Williams. "Over here you can offer challenge without being seen as being difficult or in a negative light. You can ask difficult questions, or even challenge politicians."

So while she kept mum in Singapore whenever she faced racist remarks, when the IT staff member told her the inappropriate "joke", she immediately told him off firmly.

As for the incident at the food court, she immediately stood up and shouted at the person.

"My mum was there trying to calm me down, and I thought then that if I want to shout at someone (for doing something wrong against me), I should be allowed to," she said, visibly animated and upset despite the incident happening almost 20 years ago.

"Looking back, I think it's a very Singaporean thing to try and calm things down, don't shout, don't rock the boat."

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 6 June 2026
Headline: 'Never poorer for helping': The first Singaporean high sheriff in Wales wants to make volunteerism a norm

These incidents have been part of Mrs Williams motivation to continue contributing whatever way she can to make her community in Wales better.

"We need to make sure that our systems, this country, the institutions we have, can support (diverse groups of people) to live their best lives here and allow them to contribute, because we all have a contribution to make," she said

"We should set up our system so this place is safe for everybody."

Against this background, too, Mrs Williams said it was all the more important that diversity and inclusivity is visibly practised and encouraged in the community.

She feels that one key way to combat hatred or divisive talk is for ordinary people to have "willingness to challenge and push back".

"As Asians, we are told not to rock the boat. Being a passive bystander is very much part of our culture ... not to interfere in other people's fight," she said.

"But I think you should interfere, you should let the people who are wronged know: 'You are not alone, I will stand with you'."

BRINGING SINGAPORE TO WALES

There is plenty about Singapore that Mrs Williams loves and misses and whenever she can, she includes elements of Singaporean and Malay culture at home and at work.

As a self-respecting Singaporean, of course food is first and foremost.

Her children have taken a liking to spicy and Asian food – nasi ayam (chicken rice), soto ayam (spicy chicken soup) and roti kirai (savoury pancakes) are regular dishes in the household – though she said it was a "shame" that her younger son dislikes coconut, a key ingredient in many Malay dishes.

And while her children may not be fluent in speaking Malay, phrases like "let's makan (eat)" or "go and mandi (shower)" have become part of the family's vocabulary.

"They (the children) understand more than they can speak," she said.

She found this out the hard way when her children came over to her after she had ended a video call with her mother complaining about them.

"They said they knew we were talking about this and that ... I thought okay so you know our secret language," she said.

In her public and professional capacity, Mrs Williams also tries to preserve and portray "tangible elements of my culture" by wearing her kebaya traditional costume in public occasions.

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 6 June 2026
Headline: 'Never poorer for helping': The first Singaporean high sheriff in Wales wants to make volunteerism a norm

She said that back in Singapore, she would wear it only on special occasions such as Hari Raya and weddings, similar to the frequency of other Malay Singaporeans.

But in Wales, she saw how residents there of South Asian origin, for example, would wear their traditional costumes on formal public occasions, which would then elicit positive comments and spark curious conversations from those around them.

This was why when she was informed about her appointment, one of the first things she asked was whether she could don a kebaya modified to resemble the ceremonial court dress uniform worn by the office bearers, which the president of the High Sheriffs' Association agreed to readily.

"For me, it was very symbolic," she said.

"It was about saying: We (the high sheriff's office) are committed to making this office more inclusive, and if wearing your traditional clothes gives you ownership of this office, please go ahead and do it."

When she received the green light, Mrs Williams during one of her visits back to Singapore went to a boutique in Arab Street to tailor a kebaya panjang (long kebaya).

After returning to Wales, she continued liaising with the boutique to ensure the dress met the high sheriff's uniform requirements – such as the use of dark velvet and steel buttons, which her mum in Singapore helped to deliver to the dressmaker.

While her one-year tenure may be short, Mrs Williams told me that she plans to continue volunteering and doing community work in whatever capacity she can, for as long as she can because "the work is never done".

"Just when you think you solve something, something else happens and then you'll think, 'Okay, what can we do about that?'" she said.