

Charity event «

Meeting of minds



Liz Nicholls looks forward to a *Getting To Know You* event with Dame Steve Shirley and John Craven OBE this month, to raise money for Oxfordshire disability support charity StyleAcre

Now and then a true story comes along you feel you must share. Recently, I dived into *Let It Go* by Dame Steve Shirley, who lives in Henley, and could not put it down.

Dame Stephanie writes about her life – starting with her journey as a five-year-old refugee from Nazi Germany on the Kindertransport – with breath-taking honesty. And, what a life she’s had, and continues to have. A pioneering IT professional and new mother in the early 1960s, Steve responded to the ‘glass ceiling’ by setting-up her own software business on her dining room table. Offering home-based employment to women in similar situations, she pioneered flexible working practices, developing a hugely successful, globally leading business technology business. She and husband Derek’s life (and Steve’s book) were dedicated to the agonies of caring for their son, who had autism, a condition which, along with many disabilities, was treated with criminal brutality by the system. She has worked to help families in the same predicament as her own, establishing The Kingwood Trust, with a residential centre for the profoundly learning disabled, in Henley, which today is in Reading and cares for 110 people. She set up the Oxford Internet Institute and has given almost £70m of her wealth to charities, devoting her retirement to philanthropy.

On September 7th, Dame Steve and John Craven will be the special guests at a *Getting To Know You* event at Oxford’s Harris Manchester College. She and Style Acre vice-patron John will learn about each other’s lives at this unique event. This will be followed by lunch in the Dining Hall and book signings.

Dame Steve told me: “Working with disabled people is so gratifying. It’s all very well supporting national charities – as important as they are – but fundraising is difficult for charities like Style Acre because it’s only when you’ve been touched by learning disability yourself that you understand the issues. Style Acre help people with high-functioning autism who don’t meet the local authority criteria, getting them into employment. In 20 years they’ve done really well as a charity.

“When my son Giles was young, people with autism were considered ineducable. No one had even thought of educating them. Today many people – with the help of charities like Style Acre are leading very happy, content, dignified lives in the community, which is huge progress.”

Dame Steve and John have never met before, and she says she is looking forward to quizzing him on helping others – the most rewarding thing any of us can do in life.

“If we were all kind to each other we wouldn’t need charities at all because that’s what care in the community is all about,” she adds. “Now that state support has been withdrawn in so many ways, there’s the assumption that philanthropists and charities will pick up the slack. “The title of my book sums up comes from the Buddhist philosophy. It’s about letting go of material things and focusing on pacifism or kindness, which leads to a much richer life. I look forward to asking John about this and getting to know each other in what should be a relaxed, stimulating and inspiring event.”

Tickets for this fundraising event are £46. Call Philippa on **01491 827591** or email pstannard@styleacre.org.uk to book. Visit www.steveshirley.com to find out more about Dame Steve

● We have two tickets to the *Getting To Know You* event to give away to readers who email LNicholls@roundandabout.co.uk (subject line: *Getting To Know You*) before September 5th.