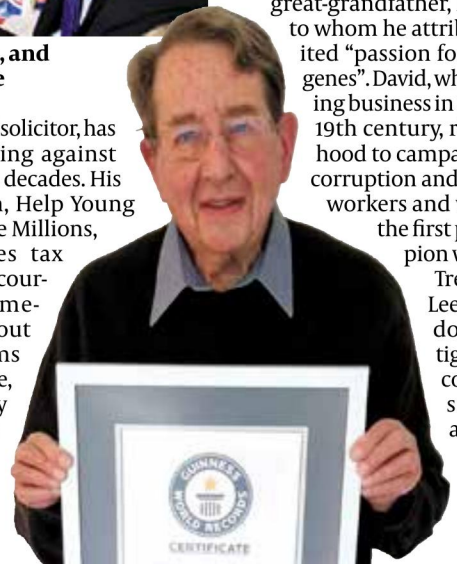
Hero for the ages! Campaigner for elderly sets world record for longest tenure as charity boss

BY JUDITH ZERDIN

PHOTOS: COURTESY



Making change: Trevor Lyttleton with David Cameron, and (below) holding his Guinness World Record certificate



▶ TREVOR LYTTLETON'S mission in life is simple: to help make the world a better place.

The 90-year-old campaigner from north-west London has gone some way towards doing this. He has helped make life better for thousands of elderly people since setting up his charity, Re-engage – formerly called Contact the Elderly – back in 1965.

Now he has achieved a Guinness World Record for the longest career as chair of a charity – his tenure lasted from 1965 until he retired in 2015.

The West London Synagogue member told the *JC* he accepted the accolade "on behalf of all the amazing volunteers and people who supported the charity over those years, because without them, this would never have happened. I hope this will boost the charity and help draw attention to the dire need to focus on combatting elderly isolation."

When Trevor founded the charity, originally just called Contact, his idea was simple: to set up volunteers to organise tea parties for elderly people to combat loneliness – through tea, cake and companionship.

The first group was set up in Marylebone after Trevor discovered that there were 6,000 isolated elderly people living in that area alone.

By the time he retired 50 years later, the charity had 8,000 volunteers, with 600 tea parties taking place every month. Over the years, tea parties have been held all over the UK, including two at 10 Downing Street. Trevor acknowledges his work has contributed to making life happier for older people but says there is still lots to do. "In 2018, the press reported that there were one million older people in Britain left starving through loneliness," he said. "I call this the greatest hidden humanitarian disaster of our times, that nobody knows about because there's nobody to shout for them."

Trevor, a retired solicitor, has been campaigning against loneliness for six decades. His latest campaign, Help Young and Old and Save Millions, which proposes tax incentives to encourage older homeowners to rent out affordable rooms to younger people, was supported by former prime minister David Cameron. He said that when he wrote to Theresa May after she took office in 2016, she promised that his charity would have a "major role in shaping our society and the place older people have in it". By July 2019, she was no longer in power.

Trevor cites his grandmother Gertrude as his inspiration. "She was an amazing woman, who told very witty stories, and I remember being fascinated listening to her. I learnt from her that the elderly were more fun to be with than most of us realise."

However, it is his Polish-born great-grandfather, David Lubelski, to whom he attributes his inherited "passion for campaigning genes". David, who set up a tailoring business in Leeds in the late 19th century, risked his livelihood to campaign against the corruption and exploitation of workers and was also one of the first people to champion women's rights.

Trevor grew up in Leeds in an Orthodox family and a tightly-knit Jewish community. After studying law at Cambridge, he specialised in music and copyright law, followed by elder law in the 1980s.

> "Even if the government can't do a complete social care reform, at least tackle this major tragedy, which I call 'ending our national shame'

Alongside his career, he composed, recorded and produced music for the BBC in the 1970s, receiving a Grammy nomination in 1980. He released his latest album, *Turn off the News, Turn on the Music*, at the age of 89, "to boost spirits in challenging times".

Trevor is no stranger to awards. After being an appointed an MBE for his long-term voluntary services in 2007, he received the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Volunteering Award in 2013, among other prizes since.

Having been disappointed by politicians' promises to fix the social care crisis, his hopes are on Andy Burnham. "I'm just hoping that the PM will be able to at least help old people and other vulnerable people too. Even if the government can't do a complete social care reform, at least tackle this major tragedy, which I call 'ending our national shame'," he says.