Australian of the Year Awards
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MEDIA RELEASE
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FROM PANCREATIC CANCER RESEARCH TO PUTTING KIDS ON THE ROAD TO SUCCESS – MEET THE 2027 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARD RECIPIENTS FOR VICTORIA

australianoftheyear.org.au

Four extraordinary people have been named the 2027 Australian of the Year Award recipients for Victoria at a ceremony in Melbourne this evening.

2027 Australian of the Year for Victoria – Cherie Dear (Bayside)
2027 Senior Australian of the Year for Victoria – Associate Professor Wenn Lawson (Warrnambool)
2027 Young Australian of the Year for Victoria – Ryan Brigham (Donvale)
2027 Local Hero for Victoria – Gavin Hynam (Horsham)

From funding pancreatic cancer research and improving access to healthcare, to leading internationally recognised autism research, and empowering regional young people to live independently, the recipients of the 2027 Australian of the Year Awards for Victoria are remarkable Australians whose compassion, innovation and determination are transforming lives and shaping a better future.

The 2027 Australian of the Year for Victoria is pancreatic cancer research advocate, Cherie Dear.

Cherie Dear, 59, is the tenacious and visionary co-founder of Dare to Hope, a national platform for pancreatic cancer awareness and research.

In July 2022, Cherie lost her husband and co-founder, AFL legend Paul Dear, to pancreatic cancer. Only months later, Cherie's father died from the same disease. Her grief was surpassed only by her indignation towards a cancer that takes the lives of nearly 4,000 Australians each year.

Cherie established the Dare to Hope AFL match, now an annual fixture between Hawthorn and Geelong. The Easter Monday fixture draws more than 80,000 fans and reaches 1.5 million viewers, raising critical funds and awareness. Dare to Hope is the official charity partner of the Hawthorn Football Club.

Now in its fifth year, the volunteer-led organisation funds three research fellowships, testament to Cherie's determination, grit, innovation and leadership in creating national momentum for pancreatic cancer research.

The 2027 Senior Australian of the Year for Victoria is autistic autism researcher, advocate and author, Associate Professor Wenn Lawson.

Associate Professor Wenn Lawson, 74, is an autistic autism researcher, British educational psychologist and Australian social worker who has made an important contribution to society's understanding of autism and neurodivergence.

Misdiagnosed with schizophrenia in his teenage years, Wenn spent decades in and out of mental health institutions until he was correctly diagnosed with autism at 42.

For more than 30 years his lived experience has fuelled his research and advocacy work. Having presented at numerous conferences and published 30 books – as well as three children's books – Wenn's contribution to society's understanding of autism is both nationally and internationally acclaimed.

Wenn has developed guides for autism in Australia and in Europe and created multiple short courses in autism, as well as a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). He has a special interest in exploring the untold histories of older autistic people and is considered a key theorist on autism and monotropism.

The 2027 Young Australian of the Year for Victoria is the founder of Health in Focus, Ryan Brigham.

Ryan Brigham founded Health in Focus (HIF) at 21, a charity delivering healthcare initiatives and education programs in Australia and overseas to ensure everybody has access to basic healthcare support and information.

To date, HIF has engaged more than 800 young volunteers across Australasia, Southeast Asia, and Africa, mobilising more than $500,000 for health initiatives reaching thousands of patients, students and community members in Australia and overseas.

In Victoria, HIF runs mobile cardiac screening clinics offering free heart health assessments to promote early detection of cardiovascular disease. Ryan's endeavours are underscored by his personal experience of years of serious illness, repeated hospitalisations, and more than 10 operations, which have given him an understanding of the need for equitable healthcare access.

Now aged 27, Ryan's leadership and vision are providing opportunities for young volunteers to help direct and deliver healthcare programs designed to create genuine change and address healthcare inequity.

The 2027 Local Hero for Victoria is volunteer car mechanic and mentor, Gavin Hynam.

Gavin 'Bear' Hynam, 65, is helping young people gain independence and mobility through his Cars 4 Youth gifting program and mentorship of learner drivers.

He donates his time and automotive skills to sourcing second-hand cars, making them roadworthy and then giving them to young people in need of support and transportation.

Gavin also volunteers with Victoria's L2P program that matches mentors with young people without a car or supervising driver, to help them practise driving skills and support them to become confident and safe drivers. Once the learners have gained their licence, Gavin gives them their first car along with six months' registration.

As a result of Gavin's generosity and community spirit, many young recipients in the Wimmera region are now able to go to university, apply for jobs or support their families by having a safe, reliable car.

National Australia Day Council CEO Carrie Leeson congratulated the Victorian award recipients.

"The Victorian recipients are inspiring examples of how personal experience can drive change," said Carrie.

"Cherie has turned personal loss into a determination to find answers to pancreatic cancer. Wenn has drawn on his own experiences to advance understanding and acceptance of autism. Ryan has transformed his own personal health challenges into initiatives that make healthcare more accessible for others, and Gavin has turned a simple idea into an opportunity for young people in remote communities to gain independence."

The Victoria award recipients will join those from all other states and territories for the national awards, to be announced on the evening of 25 January 2027 in Canberra.

For more information on the Australian of the Year Awards, visit australianoftheyear.org.au.

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PHOTOS: From the awards announcement event can be downloaded from VIC Media Distribution photos - High res (credit NADC/Salty Dingo). Award recipient photos will be available after approx. 9:30pm Melbourne time.

LIVESTREAM VISION: The Victoria awards announcement event is livestreamed from 7:30pm Melbourne time via australianoftheyear.org.au. The vision is YouTube based and is accessible for media use.