

MEDIA RELEASE
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2027 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS: VICTORIAN NOMINEES ANNOUNCED

People making an impact across disability reform, healthcare, science, LGBTQIA+ inclusion and initiatives supporting children and young people are among the Victorian nominees announced today for the 2027 Australian of the Year Awards.

Sixteen people from across the state have been named as nominees for the 2027 Australian of the Year Awards for Victoria, with nominees recognised in each of the Australian of the Year, Senior Australian of the Year, Young Australian of the Year and Local Hero categories.

Among this year's nominees are a woman who turned grief into pancreatic cancer research, an Indigenous astrophysicist combining traditional knowledge with space research, a woman shining a light on cultural domestic violence issues, a mechanic bringing independence and opportunity to young people in a remote region and a vet providing voluntary essential care for pets and people in need.

The nominees are:

2027 Australian of the Year for Victoria

Associate Professor David Chong - Volunteer surgeon (South Yarra)
Cherie Dear - Pancreatic cancer research advocate (Bayside)
Dr Zach Greig - Founder, The Stand Up Project (Moorabbin)
Associate Professor Jane Tiller - Preventative DNA screening advocate (St Kilda)

2027 Senior Australian of the Year for Victoria

Professor Bruce Bonyhady AM - Disability reform pioneer (Balwyn)
Associate Professor Wenn Lawson - Autistic autism researcher, advocate and author (Warrnambool)
Ivan Lister - Rural outreach worker (Ardmona)
Professor Manjula Datta O'Connor - Migrant domestic violence campaigner (Melbourne)

2027 Young Australian of the Year for Victoria

Dr Kirsten Banks - Space scientist and communicator (Melbourne)
Ryan Brigham - Founder, Health in Focus (Donvale)
Sagalee Omer - Founder and social impact leader (Tarneit)
Mikhael Touma - Interpreter and LGBTQIA+ advocate (North Melbourne)

2027 Australia's Local Hero for Victoria

Sally Beard - Founder, Backpacks 4 Vic Kids (Officer)
Gavin Hynam - Volunteer car mechanic and mentor (Horsham)
Sharon Mamo - Clinical innovator and social impact leader (Mont Albert)
Robyn Slattery - Delivering affordable veterinary care (Maldon)

**Detailed nominee biographies follow.*

The Victorian nominees are among 130 people being recognised across all states and territories in the 2027 Australian of the Year Awards.

National Australia Day Council CEO Carrie Leeson said the nominees for Victoria demonstrated the many ways in which people could support their communities.

"The nominees for Victoria are standing up for what matters – providing support to people when they need it most and helping to shape better futures for the next generation," said Ms Leeson.

The 2027 Victorian award recipients will be announced on Thursday 12 November in Melbourne. The ceremony will also be available to watch via livestream at australianoftheyear.org.au

The Victorian award recipients will then join recipients from the other states and territories as finalists for the national Australian of the Year Awards, announced in Canberra on 25 January 2027.

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Detailed nominee **biographies** follow and are also available at australianoftheyear.org.au.

Photos for download: Photos provided by the nominees for editorial use can be downloaded from here: [VIC Nominee photos - supplied by nominees](#) (please use photo credits where noted on file names)

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2027 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR VICTORIA – NOMINEE BIOS

Associate Professor David Chong

Volunteer surgeon

Associate Professor David Chong, 57, is a plastic and reconstructive surgeon specialising in cleft lip and palate surgery at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne. Compelled by his belief that every child deserves access to surgical care, David has volunteered on over 40 missions to the developing world where he conducts facial reconstructions.

David's commitment to global health began in 1996 when he volunteered on Mercy Ships as a young doctor. David now donates two months each year to Mercy Ships and the charity, Operation Smile, performing complex craniofacial surgery, training local clinicians, and strengthening long-term local surgical capacity worldwide – particularly across West Africa and Madagascar.

Children who were accustomed to being ostracised because of how they looked go home from hospital different people after receiving love and care from David, as well as other volunteer doctors and nurses.

A recognised leader in his field, David is the immediate past president of the Australasian Cleft Lip and Palate Association.

Cherie Dear

Pancreatic cancer research advocate

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 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.

Dr Zach Greig

Founder, The Stand Up Project

Dr Zach Greig, 46, is the founder of The Stand Up Project, a peer-led anti-bullying initiative empowering young people to become active upstanders in their schools and communities.

Zach's commitment to change is deeply personal. As a child, Zach was bullied and he feared going to school. After completing a PhD into power dynamics, Zach applied his lived experience with academic research and practical action to develop The Stand Up Project.

The initiative is student-designed and delivered where thousands of young Australians learn about the bystander effect, the drivers of poor behaviour and age-appropriate ways to challenge harassment. Students then teach these skills to younger peers, teachers and families, embedding evidence-based approaches to shift behaviour.

Zach's leadership is reframing bullying prevention nationally by placing student voice, agency and leadership at the centre of urgently needed cultural change.

Associate Professor Jane Tiller

Preventative DNA screening advocate

Associate Professor Jane Tiller's research and advocacy have fundamentally reshaped Australia's approach to genetics, eliminating genetic discrimination and establishing preventative genomics as a public health priority.

Jane, 43, believes that no Australian should have to choose between understanding their genetic risks and accessing life insurance. So, for almost a decade, Jane led the national effort to eliminate genetic discrimination – a barrier that deterred Australians from undergoing potentially life-saving genetic testing and participating in medical research.

As co-founder of the Australian Genetic Non-Discrimination Working Group, she united more than 100 organisations and helped secure landmark 2026 legislation that banned the use of genetic test results by life insurers. With at least one in 50 Australians carrying a high-risk gene associated with preventable cancers or cardiovascular disease, Jane is advancing world-first population genomic screening and disease prevention.

Jane demonstrates how one individual, armed with evidence and integrity, can influence policy, protect human rights and improve national health outcomes.

2027 SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR VICTORIA – NOMINEE BIOS

Professor Bruce Bonyhady AM

Disability reform pioneer

Professor Bruce Bonyhady, 72, is one of the key architects of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and is driven by his passion for equity and inclusion for people with disability.

Two of Bruce's sons have disabilities, and he is acutely aware of the challenges that many people with disability and their families face. His response was to champion a national scheme for disability support based on need that would empower individuals to make their own choices in accessing assistance.

He was the inaugural chair of the National Disability Insurance Agency (2013-16) and co-chair of the NDIS Review (2022-23). Alongside his foundational work with the NDIS, Bruce has been instrumental in fostering research into disability, first at The Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne and now at the Melbourne Disability Institute.

Bruce's vision and strength of purpose have transformed support for people with disability, and championed new research that will shape the future for generations to come.

Associate Professor Wenn Lawson

Autistic autism researcher, advocate and author

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.

Ivan Lister

Rural outreach worker

Ivan Lister, 80, is an experienced rural outreach worker who helps families and communities in regional Victoria face the challenges of living on the land.

Ivan has been an outreach worker for more than two decades – both paid and as a volunteer – talking to farmers, families and the community about mental health issues.

Farmers are often reluctant to ask for help to address mental health concerns and will put off engaging with professional or medical services. Instead, Ivan connects with them informally, over the kitchen table or in the stockyards, holding conversations and building trust. He is well-known throughout rural Victoria as someone to turn to in a crisis such as during times of drought, bushfires and floods.

Ivan's strong commitment to his community has helped many people when they had no one else to turn to; his compassion and understanding providing a means for people to talk about mental health.

Professor Manjula Datta O'Connor

Migrant domestic violence campaigner

Professor Manjula Datta O'Connor, 79, is the co-founder of the AustralAsian Centre for Human Rights and Health (ACHRH), a pioneering think-tank that leads research into family violence in the South Asian community.

Through her research and public advocacy, Manjula has broken the silence surrounding domestic violence and the impact of dowry abuse on migrant women, helping to instigate legislative and community action. As a result, both state and federal governments have included provisions against dowry-related coercion in family law statutes.

Manjula has worked tirelessly with hundreds of survivors of domestic violence, lobbied politicians, raised awareness with police, social services and the judiciary, and worked on government advisory bodies to further the goal of protecting South Asian women migrants. She is also a highly respected psychiatrist and academic specialising in mental health.

Manjula's ground-breaking research and courageous championing of women have delivered genuine change in how domestic violence in migrant communities is perceived and acted upon.

2027 YOUNG AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR VICTORIA – NOMINEE BIOS**Dr Kirsten Banks**

Space scientist and communicator

Dr Kirsten Banks, 29, is a proud Wiradjuri woman whose ground-breaking work as an astrophysicist and science communicator is blending Indigenous knowledge with the latest space research.

Known online as AstroKirsten, Kirsten has built a significant global audience for her videos about cosmic phenomena, helping to communicate the latest scientific discoveries in an engaging, accessible manner. She has a special focus on Aboriginal astronomy and what it can teach us about First Nations knowledge of space.

Kirsten has a PhD in astrophysics and lectures at Swinburne University of Technology, teaching and mentoring the next generation of physicists. She is a popular public speaker, guide and media presenter, as well as a published author.

Through her research, online presence and public speaking engagements, Kirsten is building bridges between traditional knowledge and modern space exploration, attracting a whole new audience to learn about the wonders of the universe.

Ryan Bringham

Founder, Health in Focus

Ryan Bringham 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 28, 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.

Sagalee Omer

Founder and social impact leader

Sagalee Omer, 28, is the founder of Shooters Shoot, a youth-led organisation creating opportunities for young people through sport, culture, education and community initiatives.

Beginning as a grassroots basketball event, Shooters Shoot has grown to engage more than 5,000 young people across its programs and events. Through its charitable initiatives, the organisation has raised over \$100,000, distributed more than 400 bicycles and provided more than 200 therapy sessions for young people needing support.

Alongside leading Shooters Shoot, Sagalee works with Foundation House to develop culturally-safe programs for young people from refugee backgrounds. He is also a member of the Refugee Advisory Group for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, contributing to international conversations about refugee inclusion and representation.

Through local action and global advocacy, Sagalee is committed to helping young people access opportunities, build connections and shape stronger, more inclusive communities

Mikhael Touma

Interpreter and LGBTQIA+ advocate

Mikhael Touma, 25, is the co-founder of Queer Arabs Australia (QAA), a community organisation supporting LGBTQIA+ people from Southwest Asian and North African backgrounds. QAA delivers a range of community services including social events and advocacy.

Drawing on his experience as a certified Arabic interpreter, Mikhael founded and leads the Language Justice Network that delivers safe and affirming language services, training and workshops on ethical interpreting and language access for LGBTQIA+ people with lived experience of forced displacement.

Additionally, Mikhael helped set up Zyara, an Arabic-language social support program specifically designed for LGBTQIA+ refugees and asylum seekers, where members can come together to connect, receive support and share their stories in a welcoming environment without linguistic barriers. He is also a regular speaker at international conferences on language and migration justice.

Through his community work, public speaking and work as an interpreter, Mikhael is creating safe spaces for people with similar lived experiences through language and community.

2027 AUSTRALIA'S LOCAL HERO FOR VICTORIA – NOMINEE BIOS

Sally Beard

Founder, Backpacks 4 Vic Kids

Sally Beard, 54, is the founder of the state-wide charity, Backpacks 4 Vic Kids, that provides essential care packages for thousands of vulnerable children.

Often when children are moved into residential care or foster homes, they may have little of their own to take with them. As a foster carer, Sally was once asked to help a baby wrapped in just a police officer's coat. Realising there was an urgent need to help displaced children, Sally started Backpacks 4 Vic Kids.

Today, the charity offers a range of My Essentials packs containing different items for babies, children and young adults. Since 2014, the charity has delivered more than 60,000 packs to children in out-of-home care throughout Victoria as well as interstate.

Thanks to Sally's tireless work and compassion, Backpacks 4 Vic Kids makes sure that each child is provided with a few essential items to help them feel safe and comfortable at a time of great stress and anxiety.

Gavin Hynam

Volunteer car mechanic and mentor

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.

Sharon Mamo

Clinical innovator and social impact leader

Sharon Mamo is a clinical designer and social justice advocate, challenging how Australia supports vulnerable people.

Born to European wartime orphans, Sharon left school at 15 and experienced homelessness, domestic violence and 25 years of chronic addiction. As a single mother, she struggled to meet welfare requirements while stabilising her family.

After recovering from substance use, she attended university and studied neuroscience, trauma and human behaviour. She recognised that employment services demanded compliance from people who first needed clinical care.

Sharon founded Creating New Pathways and later developed SAMMs (Self-Awareness, Motivation and Management) with her daughter, establishing a clinical role for complex needs within employment services. Her principle, stability before capacity, guides her work developing clinical practices and complex needs standards.

She is a strong voice for vulnerable Australians, working to improve the systems and services they rely on.

Recognised nationally and internationally, including a 2026 Gold Stevie Award, Sharon has delivered over 38,000 appointments, showing people they mattered.

Robyn Slattery

Delivering affordable veterinary care

Robyn Slattery, 60, is helping to deliver essential care for animals in regional Victoria through the not-for-profit veterinary clinic she co-founded to help disadvantaged pet owners.

Robyn understands the vital role that pets play in boosting the health and welfare of their owners. Many owners in regional Victoria, however, have difficulty accessing or being able to afford regular preventative healthcare for their pets.

In response, Robyn co-founded the Regional Community Vet Clinic (RCVC), initially running pop-up clinics and, since 2025, from a permanent clinic in Castlemaine. Staffed by volunteers, the clinic provides low-cost services to disadvantaged people with companion animals so the owners can afford to keep their pets healthy. RCVC also provides volunteer-led outreach services, such as dog walking for owners who are physically incapacitated, and they plan to set up a mobile vet service for owners unable to reach the clinic.

Robyn's tireless efforts are bringing hope and reassurance to pet owners who might otherwise be unable to afford regular treatment for their beloved companions.