MEDIA RELEASE
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FROM SHARK BITE KITS TO A FLYING DOCTOR – MEET THE 2027 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARD RECIPIENTS FOR NEW SOUTH WALES

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Five extraordinary people have been named the 2027 Australian of the Year Award recipients for New South Wales at a ceremony in Sydney this evening.

2027 Australian of the Year for NSW – Dr Vanessa Pirotta (Sydney)
2027 Senior Australian of the Year for NSW – Dr David Cooke OAM (Port Macquarie)
2027 Young Australian of the Year for NSW – Danny Schouten (Bonny Hills)
2027 Local Hero for NSW – Jill Ashley & Paul (Fatty) Ireland (Nambucca Heads & Macksville)

From safeguarding marine life and the environment, to creating emergency shark bite kits for beaches, practising medicine on the fly and helping disengaged young people find meaning and employment, the recipients of the 2027 Australian of the Year Awards for NSW are playing pivotal roles across our communities.

The 2027 Australian of the Year for NSW is marine scientist and science communicator, Dr Vanessa Pirotta.

Dr Vanessa Pirotta is a well-known marine scientist who uses her passion for the ocean to engage Australians in conservation.

As a renowned whale researcher, Vanessa has pioneered innovative ways to assess whale health (whale snot) using drones. She is the founder of Wild Sydney Harbour, a citizen science project that seeks to document the diversity of marine life found in Sydney Harbour.

She works alongside the traditional custodians on Gamay (Botany Bay), the Gamay Rangers, to monitor marine populations. A strength of her work is a commitment to recognising the importance of First Nations cultural knowledge.

Vanessa, 38, is a popular science communicator and champions conservation messages across generations in her books, public appearances and school outreach programs. She is also a strong advocate for having more women in STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics) subjects. Through her research, conservation work and science communication, Vanessa inspires and mentors young women to follow a career in science.

The 2027 Senior Australian of the Year for NSW is pilot doctor, Dr David Cooke OAM.

For more than six decades, 84-year-old Dr David Cooke has dedicated his life to caring for patients in remote and regional Australia.

David's remarkable career is founded on his dual passions: medicine and aviation. As part of the Royal Flying Doctor Service, David provided care across vast and isolated parts of the Northern Territory and north Queensland.

Working with little access to diagnostic technology, he relied on clinical judgement and resourcefulness to diagnose and treat patients in some of Australia's most challenging environments.

A self-described ‘pilot who practises medicine’, David even trained in parachute jumping to reach patients in inaccessible locations.

After settling in Port Macquarie in 1988, David became one of the region’s most respected doctors, known for his skill, humour and deep humanity. Now well into his 80s, David continues to care for patients in Port Macquarie and South West Rocks, helping address the critical shortage of general practitioners in the region.

The 2027 Young Australian of the Year for NSW is the founder of Community Shark Bite Kits, Danny Schouten.

Danny Schouten, 30, is the creator of Community Shark Bite Kits, bleeding-control stations that are now installed at hundreds of beaches across Australia.

When a friend survived a shark attack only because a bystander quickly fashioned a makeshift tourniquet from a dog lead, Danny saw the critical need for on-site emergency equipment.

Danny responded by designing Community Shark Bite Kits: specialised first-aid stations containing tourniquets, compression bandages, dressings, thermal blankets, amputated-part bags, gloves, a whistle and clear instructions for treating severe bleeding. When the majority of NSW beaches are unpatrolled and emergency services may experience delays reaching remote locations, Danny’s kits will save lives.

Danny spends weekends assembling the kits, which have already proven their value, notably at a shark attack at Coogee Beach in June 2026. Community Shark Bite Kits have been installed at more than 330 beaches across Australia, and Danny’s vision is for every beach in Australia to be equipped with a kit.

The 2027 Local Hero for NSW award recipients are Jill Ashley and Paul (Fatty) Ireland, founders of Shoretrack.

Jill Ashley, 66, and Paul ‘Fatty’ Ireland, 57, founded ShoreTrack in 2020 to support disengaged young people in the Nambucca Valley through hands-on learning, mentoring and trade-based training.

In just five years, ShoreTrack has assisted more than 750 young people and helped shift community perceptions – showing that disengaged youth are full of potential. So far, 86% of those who completed a Certificate II pathway through ShoreTrack remain employed.

Jill and Fatty spend their time and resources to provide mentoring, meals, transport, trade-based training and employment pathways. Working with businesses, community, and government agencies, they have built support networks that help marginalised young people attain independence.

They've marked a significant achievement in a regional community where barriers such as lack of transport and low expectations can impede opportunity.

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

“The NSW recipients are all committed to using their skills, experience and time to make a difference,” said Carrie.

“Vanessa combines innovation and traditional knowledge to help protect marine life; David has devoted his life to providing medical care; Danny took action to equip others in emergencies; and Jill and Paul are creating life-changing opportunities for kids who need a helping hand.”

The NSW 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 NSW Media Distribution photos - High res (credit NADC/Salty Dingo).

LIVESTREAM VISION: The New South Wales awards announcement event livestream is available time via australianoftheyear.org.au. The vision is YouTube based and is accessible for media use.