Australian of the Year Awards

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

People making an impact across community support, conservation, child safety, First Nations healthcare, disability advocacy, domestic violence prevention and volunteering, as well as a record-breaking pilot and athlete, are among the nominees for the 2027 Queensland Australian of Year Awards.

Sixteen people from across the state have been named as nominees for the 2027 Australian of the Year Awards for Queensland, 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 parents educating children about safety following the abduction of their son, a wildlife conservationist using the camera lens to take his message global, the youngest person to circumnavigate Australia in a supported light aircraft and a man who arrived in Australian on humanitarian grounds to become a tower of community strength. The nominees also include a woman tackling domestic violence through intervention and prevention, a teenage gymnastics sensation using her own experience to make mobility easier for those with disability, a surfer changing the lives of kids in need, a sprinter breaking records, and a man whose weekly barbecue has become a source of comfort to the community.

The nominees are:

2027 Australian of the Year for Queensland
Beny Bol OAM - Community leader (Marsden)
Robert Irwin - Wildlife conservationist (Beerwah)
Bruce Morcombe OAM and Denise Morcombe OAM - Child safety campaigners (Sunshine Coast)
Carolyn Robinson - Founder, Beyond DV (Kangaroo Point)

2027 Senior Australian of the Year for Queensland
Carmel Crouch AM - Advocate for people with disability (Sunshine Coast)
Joan O'Keefe OAM - Community volunteer (Gold Coast)
Cait Wildman - Community builder (Kelvin Grove)

2027 Young Australian of the Year for Queensland
Ruby Allen - Founder, Kids of Purple (Gold Coast)
Ava Costa - Disability support advocate (Gumdale)
Gout Gout - Sprint sensation (Ipswich)
Byron Waller - Record-breaking pilot (South Brisbane)

2027 Australia's Local Hero for Queensland
Noel Brown - First Nations hospital greeter (East Trinity)
Jenny Jenner - Founder, Kalbar Sunflower Festival (Kalbar)
Mark Skinner - Founder, Surf for Kids (Sunshine Coast)
Terry Summerell - Community volunteer (Port Douglas)

**Detailed nominee biographies follow.*

The Queensland 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 Queensland were an inspiring group of Australians.

“The Queensland nominees are excelling in diverse ways. Whether they’re chasing spectacular goals on the world stage, supporting those in need or strengthening communities at the grassroots level – they are all doing wonderful work,” said Ms Leeson.

The 2027 Queensland award recipients will be announced on Monday 16 November in Brisbane. The ceremony will also be available to watch via livestream at australianoftheyear.org.au

The Queensland 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: QLD Nominee photos - supplied by nominees *(please use photo credits where noted on file names)*

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2027 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR QUEENSLAND – NOMINEE BIOS

Beny Bol OAM
Community leader

Arriving in Australia on a humanitarian visa in 2007, Beny Bol has spent nearly two decades strengthening families, empowering young people and building safer communities.

Born in a remote village where he was the only child to attend school, Beny went on to study International Law and International Relations before becoming one of Australia’s leading voices on multiculturalism and youth advocacy. As engagement and support program manager at Youth Off The Streets, Beny worked with disengaged and at-risk youth, and was often the first person the police called when incidents involved African-Australian young people.

Beny founded the African Youth Support Council, initially employing 11 mentors. The Council – now known as Village Support Limited, where Beny is CEO – today employs nearly 40 youth and community workers, delivering rehabilitation and early-intervention programs in detention centres, schools and the African Youth Centre, and African village hubs. As president of the Queensland African Communities Council, 43-year-old Beny has established multiple youth and community centres across Queensland.

Beny’s initiatives continue to change lives and strengthen communities.

Robert Irwin
Wildlife conservationist

Robert Irwin, 22, is a passionate wildlife conservationist, whose contagious energy inspires others to join him in supporting the preservation of our environment and endangered wildlife.

The son of conservation pioneers Steve and Terri Irwin, Robert grew up surrounded by animals. He proudly follows in his Dad’s footsteps while carving a new legacy for the next generation. Alongside his mother Terri and sister Bindi, his work at Australia Zoo inspires and educates the community about the importance of preserving biodiversity. He also sits on the board of directors of their charity, Wildlife Warriors, where he promotes the protection of wildlife through a state-of-the-art wildlife hospital, conservation properties, and international conservation projects.

Robert’s wildlife photography has earned Australian Geographic awards and has been recognised in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Awards. His global television efforts have helped his message reach millions across the world.

Bruce Morcombe OAM and Denise Morcombe OAM
Child safety campaigners

Bruce and Denise Morcombe are known throughout Australia for their personal courage and powerful advocacy on behalf of child safety.

In the wake of the 2003 abduction and murder of their 13-year-old son, Daniel, Bruce and Denise founded the Daniel Morcombe Foundation to educate children about their personal safety. Today, the Foundation is a leading voice in providing information and resources about child safety to children, parents, schools and organisations.
Each year the Foundation holds Day for Daniel, a national day of action which attracts thousands of participants around the country to promote awareness of child safety. The Foundation has also been instrumental in campaigning for legislative changes – known as Daniel's Law – which give parents and guardians access to information about child sex offenders in the community.

The work of the Foundation has been driven by 67-year-old Bruce and 65-year-old Denise's bravery and determination to keep children safe. Their advocacy has inspired thousands of people and had a profound effect across Australia.

Carolyn Robinson
Founder, Beyond DV

After her daughter experienced domestic violence in 2017, Carolyn Robinson was determined to forge a positive outcome, leaving her role as an educator to establish Beyond DV.

Central to Carolyn's work is the Recovery Pillars Framework, a world-leading holistic model of long-term support for victim-survivors, addressing social connection, health, legal assistance, housing and financial recovery. Through this framework, Beyond DV has supported thousands of women and children to rebuild their lives.

In 2022, Carolyn established the first HOPE Hub at Westfield Carindale – a highly accessible early intervention and recovery space now being replicated by Beyond DV in other shopping centres.

Carolyn, 59, has also created the Ask a Mate primary prevention program, where high-profile male role models inspire young men to learn about consent and respect through the Ask a Mate App and other initiatives.

Currently the Chair of the Australian DFSV Recovery Alliance, which she co-founded in 2022, Carolyn was also awarded 2026 Queensland Volunteer of the Year.

2027 SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR QUEENSLAND – NOMINEE BIOS

Carmel Crouch AM
Advocate for people with disability

For more than four decades, Carmel Crouch has helped thousands of people with disability gain skills, find work and live independently because she believed in their potential.

A founding board member of STEPS Group Australia in 1989, and managing director of STEPS Group of Companies, Carmel helped transform a small community organisation into a national leader in training, employment, disability and mental health support services. Under her leadership, STEPS pioneered the only Australian independence college of its kind, STEPS Pathways College. Here, students with disability and autism are empowered to build the skills and confidence needed for lifelong independence.

Carmel, 80, has broadened her impact to migrants, refugees, First Nations communities, and through a string of social enterprises. Carmel has proven time and time again that bringing the right partners together can turn complex social challenges into practical opportunities that strengthen communities, improve individuals' sense of belonging, self-realisation and wellbeing.

Joan O'Keefe OAM
Community volunteer

Joan O'Keefe has dedicated more than 50 years to voluntary community service. This includes helping to run the Refugee Mentoring Project begun by her husband, Rock O'Keefe. Joan set up apartments, sourced furniture and offered friendship, help and advice to 42 refugees, predominantly Afghan women and children.

Joan also supported the founding of Friends with Dignity to support families escaping domestic violence. She sourced donations and helped set up of 1046 homes for women and children escaping violent situations. She was the catalyst in the construction of the Ashmore Men's Shed, the Ashmore Rotary Community Centre and the Rotary Storage Shed.

Joan, 76, also contributed to the building of homes for abused girls in Samoa and abused boys in Bhutan, and held leadership roles in Mermaid Beach Country Women's Association. Joan was instrumental in helping to establish the Nursing Mothers Association (now Breastfeeding Australia) in a country town. Joan's volunteer contributions are remarkable in both scale and impact.

Cait Wildman
Community builder

For nearly two decades, through her role at Communify Qld, Cait Wildman has helped countless refugees and migrants build new lives and a genuine sense of belonging in Australia.

From conversation classes and knitting groups to weekly community meals, Cait has helped people learn English, find employment, gain confidence and form lasting friendships through her work at her local community centre at Brisbane's Kelvin Grove.

Cait led the development of an innovative literacy intervention program for people from refugee and migrant backgrounds called I Belong. The program helps open the door to citizenship for those with low literacy and few digital skills.

Cait, 79, attracts many volunteers from diverse backgrounds to join her in transforming the lives of new Australians. Together, they are building a stronger, more inclusive community.

2027 YOUNG AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR QUEENSLAND – NOMINEE BIOS

Ruby Allen
Founder, Kids of Purple

By creating Kids of Purple at just 15 years old, Ruby Allen has transformed support for children and young people impacted by domestic and family violence.

Motivated by her own childhood experience and the absence of youth-appropriate information, Ruby built a platform offering relatable resources, guidance on legal processes and a reminder that victims are not alone.

In 2024, Ruby addressed the Queensland Family and Child Commission Youth Summit, prompting the Queensland Police Service to embed her presentation into officer training. Ruby secured funding to expand Kids of Purple's digital resources and collaborated with Queensland Housing and community organisations on child protection.

In 2025, Kids of Purple partnered with RightByYou to co-create a national online resource, now promoted on Snapchat and TikTok.

At just 19, Ruby is elevating youth voices and reshaping how children and young people – the often-silent victims of domestic violence – are supported.

Ava Costa
Disability support advocate

At age 14, Ava Costa was a rising star on Australia's National Gymnastics Team preparing for the 2024 Olympics. Then, a catastrophic spinal cord injury in 2023 changed her life. Now aged 18, Ava refuses to let quadriplegia define her future and is one of Australia's most inspiring young leaders.

After experiencing first-hand the difficulty families face in sourcing essential mobility equipment, Ava and her family established the Sharing Shed Foundation. The Sharing Shed is a volunteer-run charity connecting donated disability and medical equipment with people who urgently need it.

The charity has become a trusted referral pathway for hospitals, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and community organisations. Patients can leave hospital sooner thanks to the Sharing Shed's work in providing mobility equipment often faster than traditional pathways can.

Ava, now 18, has transformed personal loss into a force for enduring social impact. Already, more than 200 families have been supported through her efforts.

Gout Gout
Sprint sensation

Queensland teenager Gout Gout is mesmerising the world in his quest to become one of athletics' global greats.

At the 2024 Australian All Schools Athletics Championship, Gout ran the 200m in just 20.04 seconds, becoming the fastest 16-year-old in history and beating Usain Bolt's record at the same age. After a successful debut in Europe in 2025, Gout broke his Australian record and the World Junior record with a time of 19.67 seconds in April 2026.

Born in Ipswich, after his parents migrated to Australia from South Sudan two years earlier, Gout is one of seven children. At Ipswich Grammar School he spent his early sporting years playing football, before being discovered at the age of 14 by his coach. With training, Gout's performance skyrocketed.

Gout, 18, dreams of running in the LA Olympics in 2028 and of course in the Brisbane 2032 Olympic Games in his hometown. His talent has ignited international interest in Australian athletics, demonstrating that greatness can be achieved without expensive equipment: just a pair of shoes combined with natural talent, training and focus.

Byron Waller
Record-breaking pilot

At 14 years old, Byron Waller became the youngest person to circumnavigate Australia in a supported light aircraft. Then at age 15, Byron completed a 67-day, 45,000-kilometre flight around the world across 19 countries and five continents.

Byron's achievements are especially remarkable given a childhood marked by serious medical challenges and a diagnosis of Crohn's disease that brings uncertainty and disrupts schooling.

Determined to not let illness define his future, 17-year-old Byron has become an advocate for resilience, aviation and STEM education, speaking at schools, hospitals, community groups, national conferences and major international aviation events.

Byron continues to support young patients at Queensland Children's Hospital, returning not only as a former patient but as proof that a diagnosis need not limit a child's dreams. He also founded the Teen Pilot Foundation to create opportunities for young people facing illness or disadvantage to discover confidence, purpose and pathways into aviation, STEM and leadership.

2027 AUSTRALIA'S LOCAL HERO FOR QUEENSLAND – NOMINEE BIOS

Noel Brown
First Nations hospital greeter

Noel Brown, 65, is the specialist First Nations greeter at Cairns Hospital, a role that has transformed the healthcare experience of local First Nations people.

Hospitals can be clinical, intimidating and alienating – especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients who are hospitalised at higher rates yet often feel unseen or unwelcome. Noel changes that the moment people arrive at the hospital. His presence is not simply a greeting; it is a cultural intervention. By offering safety, familiarity and genuine human connection, Noel dismantles fear, reduces anxiety and helps people stay engaged with the care they need.

Through everyday conversation and deep empathy, Noel ensures First Nations patients feel respected, valued and safe. His work proves that cultural safety is as essential as clinical treatment, and that you don't need a medical degree to save lives. Noel sets a national benchmark for culturally grounded care, showing what every major hospital in Australia could aspire to.

Jenny Jenner
Founder, Kalbar Sunflower Festival

Each year, Jenny Jenner hosts the popular Kalbar Sunflower Festival, where she grows acres of sunflowers to raise funds to buy cuddle beds. These large purpose-built hospital beds enable dying patients to lie beside loved ones and family members, experiencing the comfort of touch and closeness.

After Jenny's late husband Russell received a terminal cancer diagnosis, he spent his last days receiving palliative care at their local hospital. During his stay, Jenny learnt about cuddle beds. Jenny now raises money in memory of Russell and so far, has funded nine beds across south-east Queensland.

Jenny, 60, has a resilience that defines everything she does. When gripped by drought and unable to grow their usual crops, Jenny proposed growing water-friendly sunflowers instead. Today, the Kalbar Sunflower Festival attracts thousands of tourists each year, injecting much needed spending into the local economy. For Jenny, sunflowers are a symbol of hope and the opportunity to brighten the lives of others.

Mark Skinner
Founder, Surf for Kids

For 23 years, Mark Skinner has been raising funds to support children with serious disabilities, helping around 100 Sunshine Coast families each year.

It all started when Mark and two mates put on a surf competition to raise funds so that a friend's son, who has Down Syndrome, could compete at an international swimming event. The following year, they registered their surf competition as a charity and, since then, Surf for Kids has raised $8 million for specialised wheelchairs, mobility equipment, assessments, therapy and respite care.

Surf for Kids recently funded 10 wheelchair-fitted vehicles to enable families to attend vital medical appointments, therapy, school and community activities. Surf for Kids stays with each family, providing support until their child becomes an adult.

Under Mark's leadership, the volunteer-run organisation has become one of the region's most respected charities. Through his determination, 72-year-old Mark has mobilised thousands to rally around the culture of generosity he has created.

Terry Summerell
Community volunteer

For more than 20 years, Terry Summerell has been a cornerstone of the Port Douglas Neighbourhood Centre, where his cooking and kindness have become part of the community's weekly rhythm.

What began as helping to organise a carnival float turned into a weekly commitment. For the past decade, Terry has been the familiar face behind the barbecue, preparing meals for the community pantry and cooking the men's breakfast – attracting dozens of people seeking food, connection and camaraderie. Terry also takes care of handyman tasks at the Neighbourhood Centre.

A full-time volunteer, 67-year-old Terry has spent 10 years supporting Mossman Hospital's cardiac rehabilitation program, offering peer encouragement to patients recovering from stents and bypasses.

His generosity has become a lifeline for many. His extraordinary hands-on efforts earned him the 2026 Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service Volunteer of the Year Award and the 2026 Douglas Shire Volunteer of the Year.