

MEDIA RELEASE
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2026 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS NOMINEES FOR QUEENSLAND ANNOUNCED

Nominees for the 2026 Australian of the Year Awards for Queensland include a doctor at the heart of a mobile health clinic, a PTSD recovery leader, the founder of a homeless charity, a conservationist building community through environmental protection, a champion for volunteers and a young man collecting containers to create jobs and inclusion for people with disabilities.

The nominees are:

2026 Australian of the Year for Queensland

Nicole Dyson - Entrepreneurial educator (Teneriffe)
Mark Forbes and Gayle Forbes - Eating disorder recovery (Montville, Sunshine Coast)
Dr Rolf Gomes - Mobile health pioneer (Kenmore Hills)
Distinguished Professor Ben Mathews - Child abuse researcher (New Farm)

2026 Senior Australian of the Year for Queensland

Gerald Garard - PTSD recovery supporter (Corinda)
Cheryl Harris OAM - Champion for volunteers (Sunshine Coast)
Habib Mahomed Jamal - Multiculturalism advocate (Main Beach, Gold Coast)
Karyn Walsh AM - Social justice campaigner (West End)

2026 Young Australian of the Year for Queensland

Jarib Branfield-Bradshaw - Youth worker and mentor (Cunnamulla)
Katura Halleday - Education equality champion (Tallai)
Kurt Jones - Conservationist and community builder (Caloundra)
Thomas Pirie - Recycling entrepreneur (Gold Coast)

2026 Local Hero for Queensland

Ross Blanch - Rural Lifeline counsellor (Lower Mt Walker)
Ian Gay - Disabled surfing volunteer (Parkwood, Gold Coast)
Vanessa Seekee OAM and Arthur Liberty Seekee - WWII historians (Horn Island, Torres Strait)
Helen Youngberry - Homelessness charity worker (Goodna)

**see detailed bios on following pages*

The nominees for Queensland are among 134 people being recognised across all states and territories.

The Queensland award recipients will be announced on Wednesday 12 November 2025 in a ceremony at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre which will also be available to watch online at australianoftheyear.org.au.

They will then join other state and territory recipients as finalists for the national awards announcement on 25 January 2026 in Canberra.

National Australia Day Council CEO Mark Fraser AO CVO congratulated the Queensland nominees on their contributions.

"The nominees for the Queensland awards care for people, community and futures," said Mark.

"By drawing on personal experience to help others, advocating for people in need, uniting people in a worthy cause or breaking down barriers, they show us what caring can achieve."

ENDS.

Nominee bios on the following [pages](#) and can also be viewed from australianoftheyear.org.au.
Nominees have supplied **photos** which can be downloaded from this link: [QLD Nominee Photos](#)

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2026 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR QUEENSLAND – NOMINEE BIOS

Nicole Dyson

Entrepreneurial educator

Nicole Dyson is the driving force behind the award-winning educational provider, Future Anything. Through in-curriculum programs, student workshops, and teacher professional development, Future Anything nurtures the passion, potential and agency within every young person.

Each year the flagship Future Anything program, Activate, supports primary and secondary school students tackle real-world problems using entrepreneurial skills. The program culminates in a Grand Final where students from around Australia pitch their ideas to win a share in \$100,000 in funding and support to launch their ideas in the real world.

The program has been adopted by hundreds of schools across Queensland and Australia and Activate is one of the largest youth innovation and enterprise competitions in the southern hemisphere.

A former teacher, 41-year-old Nicole's vision and commitment to reimagining how entrepreneurial skills are taught in schools has engaged over 100,000 students and teachers in reimagining classroom learning to bring about meaningful change for the future.

Mark Forbes and Gayle Forbes

Eating disorder recovery

Mark Forbes (68) and Gayle Forbes (57) have dedicated their lives to helping families and individuals impacted by eating disorders. They are the founders of endED, a not-for-profit organisation that provides grassroots support, education and advocacy for people in eating disorder recovery.

A major initiative of endED is the pioneering Wandi Nerida residential recovery centre for eating disorders. Mark and Gayle worked tirelessly to enlist the support of local businesses and community organisations on the Sunshine Coast to fund and build this purpose-designed facility. Here, people recovering from eating disorders can find support, education and treatment in a caring environment.

Mark and Gayle have used their lived experience of eating disorders in their family as the impetus to address this critical illness, determined to create positive change for people in recovery. Their fundraising, counselling and education activities have had a direct impact on the lives of many people in South East Queensland and around Australia.

Dr Rolf Gomes

Mobile health pioneer

When Dr Rolf Gomes, 52, was confronted with how differently cardiac patients were treated in rural and remote Australia, he decided to do something about it. He designed and launched the first Heart of Australia mobile 'Heart Trucks' to visit remote communities.

Today the Heart Trucks bring regular specialist clinics to over 30 towns in rural Australia, providing early diagnostic services that would otherwise be out of reach. Since 2014, the trucks have treated more than 20,000 patients and saved countless lives. The truck fleet will expand to 11 trucks by 2027 to provide services nationally, adding new diagnostic services for a wide range of early intervention health screenings, including for lung cancer.

Rolf's vision, ingenuity and tenacity have had a far-reaching impact on rural health and medicine in Australia, helping to save lives and ensure that rural patients have access to clinical services without having to travel long distances.

Distinguished Professor Ben Mathews

Child abuse researcher

Distinguished Professor Ben Mathews, 53, is regarded as one of Australia's leading experts on how to prevent, detect and respond to child abuse and neglect. Through his work at Queensland University of Technology he has presented groundbreaking research into child maltreatment in Australia.

Ben led the research team behind the pioneering Australian Child Maltreatment Study in 2023 that interviewed 8,500 Australians about their childhood experiences of maltreatment. The project identified how many Australians had been exposed to abuse and neglect, and the consequences for them and society at large.

Ben's research has played a vital role in determining how governments and legal systems can best identify and combat child abuse. His work has influenced major reform of legislation, policy and practice in multiple jurisdictions in Australia and overseas.

Ben's invaluable research and expertise continue to offer a guiding light to help navigate discussions about child abuse in Australia.

2026 SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR QUEENSLAND – NOMINEE BIOS

Gerald Garard

PTSD recovery supporter

Gerald ‘Gerry’ Garard is helping Australian military and first responder personnel recover from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and related mental health issues. It’s the latest project in a lifelong dedication to community service.

Gerry is the co-founder of the 4 Aussie Heroes Foundation which supports anybody from the military, police, fire and emergency services and correctional services, past or present, who may be experiencing the debilitating effects of PTSD. The foundation hosts 11-day Triumph over Trauma residential courses for participants and their families, delivering guided support programs to help with recovery.

Gerry was instrumental in raising more than \$7 million to build a permanent rural retreat called Camp Courage, which will host future Triumph over Trauma courses. He also project-managed the building of the facility.

Gerry’s commitment and drive – even into his eighties – is undiminished, continuing to devote all his time and energy to helping others.

Cheryl Harris OAM

Champion for volunteers

Cheryl Harris has been instrumental in driving volunteer engagement and championing the important work that volunteers perform on the Sunshine Coast.

Cheryl’s passion for helping community began when she was just 20 years old. Her advocacy and strong relationships throughout the Sunshine Coast community has seen volunteering in the region increase significantly. Today, thousands of volunteers actively support the Sunshine Coast community in various roles from charity work to disaster relief. As former CEO at Volunteering Sunshine Coast, Cheryl and her team collaborated with her community networks to initiate the innovative Pathways to Employment program, which helps people seeking paid employment to update their skills and build self-esteem through volunteering.

Cheryl is the current chair/president of Healthy Ageing Partnerships, which aims to empower older Australians to make informed decisions about their health through knowledge sharing.

Cheryl’s contribution to community service highlights her selfless dedication to helping others in a manner that is always compassionate, informed and caring.

Habib Mahomed Jamal

Multiculturalism advocate

Habib Jamal, 71, has dedicated over two decades to promoting multicultural harmony, interfaith collaboration and social justice. His work brings together diverse and underrepresented groups in society to give them a voice.

Habib has worked on many advisory bodies advocating for social cohesion, interfaith unity and inclusion. He previously served as president of the Islamic Council of Queensland and is currently president of Queensland Muslims Inc., which represents 45 organisations promoting social justice, inclusivity and diversity.

Within the Muslim community, Habib has worked to overcome the stigma associated with mental health. He is also active in raising support in times of need, whether it’s a bushfire emergency or the COVID pandemic.

Habib’s leadership has empowered Queensland’s diverse multicultural communities and inspired social change. To mark this achievement, the Queensland Human Rights Commission recently named a room at its new premises after him in recognition of his contribution to inclusivity and diversity.

Karyn Walsh AM

Social justice campaigner

Karyn Walsh is a dedicated advocate working to eliminate social inequality in Queensland by supporting people experiencing homelessness and marginalisation.

As CEO and co-founder of Micah Projects, she has led delivery of housing, healthcare and social supports addressing homelessness and related issues including domestic violence, mental illness and substance use. Karyn has contributed to policy and sector leadership through roles on advisory bodies, including serving as president of the Queensland Council of Social Services.

Her four decades of service have been recognised by the University of Queensland with an honorary Doctor of Social Work and Nursing in 2016 and an honorary Professorship of Social Work in 2025.

Known for empathy, strategic thinking and principled leadership, 68-year-old Karyn has driven practical, compassionate solutions that break down barriers and create more equitable pathways to housing, health and social inclusion for vulnerable Queenslanders.

2026 YOUNG AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR QUEENSLAND – NOMINEE BIOS

Jarib Branfield-Bradshaw

Youth worker and mentor

Jarib Branfield-Bradshaw, a proud Kooma man and youth worker, has made a huge difference to the town of Cunnamulla by opening a youth neighbourhood centre. As a local himself, Jarib knows what it's like to live in a quiet town where there's not a lot for young people to do outside the home.

At the heart of Jarib's project is showing young people in places like Cunnamulla, that their stories matter. Since Jarib founded the centre two years ago, almost every young person in town has come through its doors seeking support, food and connection. Jarib, 21, draws on his own lived experience to ensure they feel safe and seen and he has personally case managed 200 young people. It is a place where they can be themselves and receive the support they need to manage complex and traumatic situations in their lives.

Jarib's ability to listen, guide and offer hope is making a genuine difference to young people in Cunnamulla.

Katura Halleday

Education equality champion

As a young teenager, Katura Halleday visited Mozambique and witnessed the challenges that girls faced accessing education. That sparked her interest in educational equality, inspiring her to start the 8x8 to Educate program to provide long-term support and vital school supplies.

8x8 to Educate raises funds to provide scholarships to girls in Mozambique and Tanzania who might otherwise miss out on educational opportunities. The fund has supported 15 girls through high school to graduation and recently celebrated its first university graduate, Celia, who completed a nursing degree. Katura has expanded the program to provide manufacturing opportunities for girls to make reusable menstrual pads, so girls no longer miss school due to a lack of sanitary products, and has launched a girls literacy program.

Katura, 20, also serves her community as an active member of the Lions Club and has advocated for educational equality at the United Nations and global youth forums.

Kurt Jones

Conservationist and community builder

Kurt Jones is the driving force behind the youth-led movement Co-Exist Australia, which connects people through environmental conservation.

Kurt originally developed the idea for Co-Exist while he was at school as a way of bringing together young people to participate in community action. Today, the movement is active in six states and engages with thousands of young Australians every month through 11 local collectives. Each Co-Exist collective hosts conservation events such as bush regeneration and beach clean ups as well as social activities such as hiking and campouts, encouraging participants to connect through nature.

In three years, Co-Exist Australia collectives have planted more than 25,000 trees, and removed 3.2 tonnes of rubbish over 300 community events.

Kurt, 22, is actively spreading the message to get young people involved in conservation, speaking at conferences and schools and giving a voice to young people.

Thomas Pirie

Recycling entrepreneur

Thomas Pirie, known as '10-cent Tom', has turned a simple idea into a powerful social enterprise. What began as collecting bottles and cans for pocket money has grown into 10-cent Tom—a community recycling program that now collects from over 200 local businesses and households. The proceeds fund employment for people living with disabilities, with more than 3.5 million containers recycled and six team members now employed.

Living with an intellectual impairment and overcoming major spinal surgery for scoliosis, 23-year-old Tom has shown extraordinary resilience. His drive, humour, and unwavering enthusiasm have made him a much-loved figure in his community.

Through 10-cent Tom, he is not only reducing waste and promoting sustainability but also creating opportunities and dignity for people with disabilities. Tom's story is one of leadership, inclusion, and determination - an inspiring example of how one person's vision can spark lasting change.

2026 LOCAL HERO FOR QUEENSLAND – NOMINEE BIOS

Ross Blanch

Rural Lifeline counsellor

Ross Blanch has helped many farmers through tough times in his role as the inaugural telephone counsellor on the Farmer to Lifeline Farmer support line.

Ross is a dairy farmer at Lower Mount Walker, west of Brisbane, but he has also volunteered for 27 years with the Ipswich Lifeline Crisis Support Centre.

Out of this grew the Farmer to Lifeline Farmer service, which allows farmers to speak to another farmer when they want to talk to someone or need mental health support. Being a farmer himself, 68-year-old Ross understands many of the issues farmers face and can connect with them by speaking the farmer language.

In addition to telephone support, Ross also visits farmers and rural events to spread the word. Such is the demand for Ross's time that more farmers have been added to the service. Ross's empathy, patience and understanding is bringing hope to those on the land when they need it the most.

Ian Gay

Disabled surfing volunteer

Ian Gay has dedicated more than 20 years to helping people with disabilities enjoy the surf in a fun, safe way. As a volunteer with the Disabled Surfers Association Gold Coast (DSAGC), Ian has held many roles and was branch vice president until 2015 and then branch president from 2015 to present.

The DSAGC now runs six summer events at Flat Rock Beach, Currumbin, supported by a large volunteer group from all walks of life. Under Ian's astute and compassionate leadership, the sophistication and safety of DSAGC events have continually improved, enhancing the quality and reach of the experience for all involved. The DSAGC events have a profound impact on participants and volunteers alike, helping to foster greater community spirit and inclusivity.

Since 2021, 56-year-old Ian has also held the role of national president of the Disabled Surfers Association of Australia, lending his expertise and leadership to disabled surfing branches around the country.

Vanessa Seekee OAM and Arthur Liberty Seekee

WWII historians

Vanessa Seekee (53) and her husband, Arthur Liberty Seekee (53), have spent decades investigating and documenting the role that Horn Island in the Torres Strait played in defending Australia during World War II.

Their research has highlighted the history of the volunteer Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion, Australia's only Indigenous battalion. As a result of their research and lobbying, hundreds of veterans and their families have received government recognition and support in honour of their service.

Thanks to Vanessa and Liberty's endeavours, many World War II historical sites on Horn Island have been preserved, and memorials to the soldiers who served there installed throughout the Torres Strait. Vanessa and Liberty's Torres Strait Heritage Museum and tours have educated thousands of Horn Island visitors about the role the island played during World War II, making a huge contribution to the local community. Their tremendous dedication has not wavered with Vanessa's recent breast cancer diagnosis.

Helen Youngberry

Homelessness charity worker

Helen Youngberry, 62, has been supporting homeless people in the Ipswich region for the past 10 years through her Goodna Street Life charity. This grassroots organisation run by local volunteers provides a wide range of services for people in need including emergency accommodation, a food bank, healthcare, personal hygiene services, skills training, counselling and rehabilitation support.

The organisation also runs an op shop to raise funds, a tool library and recycling centre, and has its own real estate agency that helps homeless people find secure long-term accommodation.

Helen's leadership and energy in fundraising and campaigning on behalf of the homeless has helped deliver essential services to many vulnerable people in her community. She has faced many obstacles, including the threat of closure, but remains committed to helping others, building ties in the local community and delivering positive outcomes to ensure no one is left behind.