

MEDIA RELEASE

9:30PM AEDT, SATURDAY 25 JANUARY 2025

2025 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS ANNOUNCED

2025 Australian of the Year - Neale Daniher AO (VIC)
2025 Senior Australian of the Year - Brother Thomas Oliver Pickett AM (WA)
2025 Young Australian of the Year - Dr Katrina Wruck (QLD)
2025 Australia's Local Heroes - Vanessa Brettell and Hannah Costello (ACT)

9:30pm AEDT, Canberra: An AFL legend fighting motor neurone disease; a man dedicated to providing children around the world with life-changing wheelchairs; a young scientist using the power of STEM to give back to remote communities; and two women giving vulnerable migrants a pathway to belonging have been named as the 2025 Australians of the Year.

The Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese MP, announced the 2025 Australian of the Year, Senior Australian of the Year, Young Australian of the Year and Australia's Local Heroes in a ceremony at the National Arboretum in Canberra this evening.

The award recipients were presented with a handcrafted trophy, a traditional Indigenous coolamon and clap sticks.

The 2025 Australian of the Year is Co-founder of FightMND and former Australian rules footballer, Neale Daniher AO.

Neale Daniher AO is a co-founder of FightMND, a charity that's raised and invested over \$100 million into medical research to find a cure for motor neurone disease (MND).

Since his diagnosis in 2013, Neale and his family have been battling the effects of the disease, but he remains a tireless campaigner for a cure and is always raising awareness of MND.

Neale has lived his condition very publicly, even in the advanced stages of the disease. He's often front and centre at FightMND's Big Freeze charity event held annually.

A former AFL player with Essendon FC who went on to coach the Melbourne Demons, Neale's implemented his team-based football experience to galvanise community and corporate support for the cause.

The now 63-year-old has lived with the debilitating disease for more than 10 years, defying the average life expectancy of just 27 months. With amazing courage and relentless drive, he's dedicated his life to helping prevent the suffering of those who'll be diagnosed in the future.

The 2025 Senior Australian of the Year is Brother Thomas Oliver Pickett AM, Co-founder of Wheelchairs For Kids.

Brother Thomas Oliver (Olly) Pickett AM co-founded Wheelchairs For Kids in 1996 to provide adjustable wheelchairs and occupational therapy expertise for children in developing countries, free of charge.

Since then, more than 60,000 custom-built wheelchairs have been gifted to children in over 80 countries. With over 250 retiree workshop volunteers, Wheelchairs For Kids is one of Western Australia's largest (and with an average age of 74, one of Australia's oldest) volunteer-led charities.

A further 550 people from aged care and community groups sew covers for wheelchair soft supports, and crochet rugs and soft toys.

Olly also spearheaded the development of an innovative, low-cost wheelchair design to World Health Organization standards that grows as the children do – a world first.

Wheelchairs For Kids is just one way that Olly has improved the lives of others. For 26 continuous years, 84-year-old Olly's life-changing community service has ignited a ripple effect of kindness and generosity.

The 2025 Young Australian of the Year is Scientist, Dr Katrina Wruck.

Dr Katrina Wruck's research is giving back to remote communities. Based on her research, Katrina has set up a profit-for-purpose business, Nguki Kula Green Labs, which is poised to transform the consumer goods sector by harnessing the power of green chemistry, while inspiring others to step into STEM.

Katrina's method of converting mining by-products to zeolite LTA – which can remove contaminants from water that cause hardness – will be commercialised.

Her postdoctoral research examines how to break down dangerous 'forever chemicals' into benign ones. Altogether, Katrina's work is a possible foundation for reducing global contamination.

A proud Mabuigilaig and Goemulgal woman who has long advocated for First Nations knowledge, 30-year-old Katrina also participates in community engagement programs.

She is frequently told by the students she speaks to that she's the first Indigenous scientist they've met. Her work has been recognised with several awards and she is already well known in her field.

Australia's Local Heroes for 2025 are Vanessa Brettell and Hannah Costello, Co-founders of Cafe Stepping Stone.

Vanessa Brettell (31) and Hannah Costello (32) are harnessing the power of hospitality to lift and empower those most vulnerable in their community.

Their business, Cafe Stepping Stone, operates as a social enterprise, employing women mostly from migrant and refugee backgrounds and others who experience significant barriers to employment.

The sustainable vegetarian café has two locations which offer culturally and linguistically diverse women employment pathways, on-the-job training and qualifications through partnerships with registered training organisations.

Hannah and Vanessa's inclusive employment practices involve targeting female workers who are the sole income earners in their household, new arrivals to Australia, those with limited English or minimal employment history, and those experiencing homelessness.

The employees are supported to gain skills and experience, facilitating their entry or return to the workforce. Hannah and Vanessa also run a range of events through Stepping Stone, creating a welcoming hub for community to grow, with a focus on social justice and connection.

Chair of the National Australia Day Council John Foreman AM congratulated the 2025 Australian of the Year Award recipients.

"The 2025 Australians of the Year are amazing Australians doing extraordinary things," said Mr Foreman.

“Neale’s dedication to changing the outcomes for people diagnosed with motor neurone disease while dealing with his own health is truly inspirational. His efforts today are giving people hope for tomorrow.

“Brother Olly’s compassion and energy are the driving forces which have brought mobility and freedom to countless children around the globe. He reminds us that, through volunteerism, you can truly impact the lives of others.

“Katrina is forging new futures for our planet and for industry. Her achievements and community work show other young people that they, too, have opportunities in the world of science and technology.

“Vanessa and Hannah are empowering migrant women to find identity, education and employment in a new country. Their empathy and ideas are creating bright futures and connection within communities.”

AWARD RECIPIENTS ON AUSTRALIA DAY

Brother Thomas Oliver Pickett AM, Dr Katrina Wruck, Vanessa Brettell and Hannah Costello will attend the National Australia Day Citizenship and Flag Raising Ceremony in Canberra on Australia Day morning, Sunday 26 January 2025. Neale will travel home to Melbourne on the afternoon of 26 January, while Olly, Katrina, Vanessa and Hannah will travel to Sydney for the evening’s Australia Day events.

Nominations for the 2026 Australian of the Year Awards are now open. If there's someone you think should be considered, you can nominate them now at australianoftheyear.org.au.

ENDS.

Bio details for recipients attached with this media release – [see following pages](#)

For further media information on the 2025 Australian of the Year Awards, please contact:

Nicole Browne nicole@mediaapps.com.au 0414 673 762 (text messages preferred 25 & 26 January)

BROADCAST VISION: ABCTV will provide an ABC bugged digital feed of the Awards event for news reporting purposes - available live from 7.30pm via ABCTV on Saturday 25 January 2025 - please contact Master Control at ABCTV Sydney on 02 8333 1620 with any queries.

PHOTOS: Photos of the 2025 Awards at this link: [AWARDS ANNOUNCEMENT PHOTOS](#)

Please credit NADC/Salty Dingo

SPEECHES: At this link: [SPEECHES](#)

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AWARD RECIPIENT INTERVIEWS ON 26 JANUARY:

Interview access during 26 January 2025 will be limited due to travel and functions.

2025 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR



NAME:	NEALE DANIHER AO
Date of birth:	15 February 1961
Lives:	Melbourne, Victoria
Place of birth:	West Wyalong, NSW
Education:	Assumption College Kilmore (1978) RMIT (1983)
Occupation:	Patron and Vice Chairman, FightMND
Career:	<p>From 1979 to 1990, Neale played for Essendon Football Club, earning recognition as one of its most iconic figures. At the age of 20, he was named the club's youngest-ever captain, a testament to his leadership and dedication. Part of the famous Daniher football dynasty—four brothers from the bush who played a combined 752 VFL/AFL games—Neale's promising career was cut short by injuries, but the resilience he developed through facing those challenges proved invaluable later in life. He has been inducted into the Hall of Fame at both Essendon and Melbourne Football Clubs, reflecting his immense contribution to the sport.</p> <p>Neale transitioned to coaching, leading Melbourne FC as senior coach from 1998 to 2007</p>
Volunteering:	FightMND
Useful links:	https://fightmnd.org.au/

2025 SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR



NAME:	BROTHER THOMAS OLIVER PICKETT AM
Date of birth:	2 January 1941
Lives:	Perth, Western Australia
Place of birth:	Melbourne, Victoria
Occupation:	Co-Founder, Wheelchairs For Kids
Education:	Parade College, East Melbourne (1959)
Order:	Christian Brothers
Volunteering:	Wheelchairs For Kids
Useful links:	https://wheelchairsforkids.org/

2025 YOUNG AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR



NAME:	DR KATRINA WRUCK
Date of birth:	14 October 1994
Lives:	Logan, Queensland
Place of birth:	Gold Coast, Queensland
Occupation:	Research fellow in industrial chemistry and Lecturer at the School of Chemistry and Physics in the Faculty of Science Scientist, Queensland University of Technology
Education:	Varsity College (2011) QUT (2023)
Volunteering:	Deadly Science Inspiring Australia QLD STEM Professionals in Schools CSIRO Australian Academy of Science Science and Technology Australia
Languages:	Learning Kala Lagaw Ya (language of Western Torres Straits)
Useful links:	https://www.qut.edu.au/research/katrina-wruck

2025 AUSTRALIA'S LOCAL HEROES



NAME:	VANESSA BRETTELL AND HANNAH COSTELLO	
Date of birth:	Vanessa	24 June 1993
	Hannah	16 December 1992
Live:	Canberra, ACT	
Place of birth:	Vanessa	Sydney, NSW
	Hannah	Canberra, ACT
Occupation:	Co-Founders, Stepping Stone Social Enterprise Limited	
Education:	Vanessa	Narrabundah College (2011) Australian National University (2014)
	Hannah	Mount Saint Joseph, Milperra (2010) JMC Academy (2013)
Volunteering:	Vanessa	Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum
Languages:	Spanish	
Useful links:	https://www.cafesteppingstone.com/about	