

Media Release

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Eden stalwart named 2025 South Coast Volunteer of the Year

Long-standing Eden volunteer Maree O'Neill has been awarded the 2025 South Coast Volunteer of the Year for her unwavering support over many years and across numerous community-focused organisations.

Maree was recognised today at the 2025 NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards at Club Sapphire Merimbula.

The NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards are hosted by The Centre for Volunteering to help promote and support volunteering across NSW. They are now in their 19th year and celebrate the work of thousands of individuals and volunteer teams from a diverse range of organisations across the state.

Recipients of other individual and team awards were also announced today, including the inaugural Emergency Volunteer of the Year:

South Coast Young Volunteer of the Year: Laura Hefill from Nowra

Laura led the development of the peer-led project 4 Me 4 You, to make mental health support easier for young people. She volunteers with South Coast-based Sonder Youth which helps young people build mental health resilience and make positive contributions.

She leads team-building activities, runs camp programs and provides strong support to camp participants.

South Coast Adult Volunteer of the Year: Samarah McGovern from Lochiel

Through Sam's dedication, care and hard work over 20 years, the tradition of the Debutante Ball has been kept alive in the South Coast town of Merimbula and the surrounding area.

Sam gives her time through Far South Coast Legacy, where she liaises with young people and their families on the Debutante Ball, organises dance classes and event logistics.

South Coast Senior Volunteer of the Year: Maree O'Neill from Eden

Maree gives her time across many community-led groups and programs to help bring people together, build resilience and make the Eden community stronger.

She volunteers with Eden Recovery & Resilience Alliance, Eden Log Cabin, Eden Chamber of Commerce, the Eden Community Access Centre, Eden and Sapphire Coast Soccer Club, and numerous others.

South Coast Emergency Volunteer of the Year: Lynette McFadden from Ulladulla

Lyn volunteers at the Ulladulla SES, where she helps lead, mentor and train a team of volunteers dedicated to keeping the local community safe during storms and incidents.

She has built up an accomplished knowledge base, covering logistics, communications, mapping and navigation, land search and rescue, first aid and mental health. She has also given her time with Marine Rescue NSW and is now the Ulladulla SES Deputy Unit Commander.

South Coast Volunteer Team of the Year: Y Drive Volunteer Team Moruya

The volunteer crew at Y Drive has helped around 50 young people get their driver's licence, providing them with practical skills, confidence, and safe driving techniques.

The team provides driving lessons to enable learners to clock their compulsory day and night hours, helping people facing significant challenges, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, individuals from CALD communities, people living with mental health conditions or disabilities, those at risk of homelessness, experiencing financial hardship, and young people without parental support.

The Centre for Volunteering CEO Gemma Rygate said in difficult times, volunteers often come forward to meet a crisis with compassion.

"Volunteers are the quiet force, whether helping ease cost of living pressures, supporting those in crisis or responding on the front line of floods, fires and emergencies," Ms Rygate said.

"Their dedication isn't just admirable; it underpins a more resilient and compassionate society. These exceptional individuals give selflessly - often while juggling careers, study, and family life - yet they still choose to show up for others when it matters most."

The NSW Minister with responsibility for Volunteering, Jodie Harrison said:

"Congratulations to the recipients of the South Coast Volunteer of the Year Awards. You've been recognised as heroes by the people in your communities who know you best.

"Thank you for your ongoing contributions, which make New South Wales the best state to live and work in. These awards are an important way we recognise your passion and dedication to your local communities.

"The NSW Government is continuing to work with The Centre for Volunteering to build a more diverse and inclusive volunteering sector so that all our volunteers feel respected and acknowledged for their work."

South Coast volunteer award recipients will be invited to represent their region at the Gala State Ceremony at the end of the year, where the NSW Volunteer of the Year is announced across each category.



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About the NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards

The NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards are in their 19th year and have grown to become one of the largest celebrations of volunteering across Australia.

They are an annual program run by The Centre for Volunteering to recognise the outstanding work of volunteers and Leaders of Volunteers in every region across NSW.

Individuals or teams can be nominated in one of seven award categories:

- Young Volunteer of the Year – sponsored by the Minister for Youth – Hon Rose Jackson
- Adult Volunteer of the Year
- Senior Volunteer of the Year
- Volunteer Team of the Year
- Emergency Volunteer of the Year – sponsored by the Minister for Emergency Services – Hon Jihad Dib
- Not-for-Profit Voluntary Governance Award
- Volunteer Leader of the Year

Twenty-five regional ceremonies are held in towns and suburbs throughout NSW from mid-August until November.

The regional finalists will be invited to a Gala State ceremony in December in Sydney where the NSW Volunteer of Year is announced. Recipients for the NSW Volunteer of the Year are also announced across the seven categories.

The Awards are run by the Centre for Volunteering. The NSW Government are the principal partners for the awards.



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