

Media Release

Embargoed until 3pm Thursday 9 October 2025

Goonellabah football coach takes out 2025 Northern Rivers Volunteer of the Year

Goonellabah football coach and Rainbow Roos founder Brad Ambridge has been awarded the 2025 Northern Rivers Volunteer of the Year, for his work building a safe and anxiety free place on the field for hundreds of children with additional needs or disabilities across the region.

Brad was recognised today at the 2025 NSW Volunteer of the Year Awards at Twins Towns in Tweed Heads.

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:

Northern Rivers Young Volunteer of the Year: Ella Vivian-Kay from Byron Bay

Ella gives her time at the Byron Community Centre where she prepares, cooks and serves breakfast to people in need or without a home throughout the region. Her volunteering provides a nutritious start to the day for community members, but also reinforces the feeling of being valued and respected.

Northern Rivers Adult Volunteer of the Year: Brad Ambridge from Goonellabah

Qualified soccer coach Brad Ambridge founded the Rainbow Roos just over 12 months ago, and it is now providing a safe, inclusive and anxiety free place for hundreds of children to play football while building confidence and friendships.

Rainbow Roos caters for children with additional needs and disabilities to learn and play football in their own way at holiday camps, weekly training sessions, school programs and community events. Brad's hard work is now helping more than 500 children learn new ball skills – but more importantly, life skills, kindness, empathy, compassion, and that everybody is different.

Northern Rivers Senior Volunteer of the Year: Steve Cooke from Lismore

Steve helps manage the Tool Library for Resilient Lismore, ensuring that people can access the safe and reliable equipment needed to rebuild their homes after the devastating 2022 floods.

Each week, he checks, tags and stores electrical equipment and white goods to make sure they are safe for people to borrow and use. His volunteering efforts have supported hundreds of families to rebuild their lives.

Northern Rivers Emergency Volunteer of the Year: Vicki Surwald from Lismore

Vicki gives her time at Resilient Lismore where she is the lead volunteer at the Tool Library, providing a vital role in supporting flood-affected communities to repair, rebuild and restore their homes and lives.

She coordinates the day-to-day operations of the Tool Library, manages stock and data systems, and supports and mentors other volunteers.

Northern Rivers Volunteer Team of the Year: Livable Palliative Care Team Grafton

The seven members of the Livable Palliative Care Team give their time to provide end-of-life care and support to people and their families around the Grafton region.

The team provides assistance with daily tasks and respite care, a listening ear, and comfort and dignity during a very emotionally difficult time.

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 Northern Rivers 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.”

Northern Rivers 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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