



Westfield

Local Heroes

2018

Westfield Local Heroes were nominated and voted for by their communities, with the three successful Westfield Local Heroes per centre each awarded a \$10,000 grant to support their affiliated organisation's work, programs or activities.



Westfield

Local Heroes

In the first year of the Westfield Local Heroes program, we received an overwhelming response and many heart-warming stories after asking the local community to nominate individuals who promote wellbeing and harmony in their communities.

We congratulate every one of our nominees and recognise the important contribution they make to their local community.



Westfield

AIRPORT WEST

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Marisa Debattista Second Chance Animal Rescue

Inspirational, Proactive, Dedicated

The pet project Marisa launched from her lounge room

As a young girl, Marisa Debattista's connection with animals was obvious to everyone around her. But few could have guessed she would go on to launch an organisation from her lounge room that would support thousands of pet owners to continue to care for their dogs and cats in times of hardship.

Marisa set up SCAR (Second Chance Animal Rescue) nearly 10 years ago, inspired by her work as a veterinary nurse and volunteering at the local animal shelter.

"I was able to see firsthand how many animals and their owners needed help versus the limited resources that were available to them," she says.

Her pet project is an Outreach Program which helps financially stressed and underprivileged owners access free veterinary care and food for their furry companions.

In the past year, SCAR has helped 79 families in the Moonee Valley community.

Today, SCAR, and its network of volunteers, foster carers and adopters have saved the lives of close to 10,000 abandoned, injured, sick or abused cats and dogs.

The services SCAR provides include animal de-sexing, resources to

encourage responsible pet ownership, veterinary services and pet food.

The owners' gratitude is something that gives Marisa goosebumps. "If you saw how much some of the outreach participants absolutely love their pets you would understand what this assistance means to them," she says.

Marisa is honoured to be voted a Westfield Local Hero but she struggles to see herself in that light.

"I don't see myself as a hero. But I do know that my team and I have done great things and are committed to continuing our life-saving work, no matter what obstacles we face."

She is thrilled with the \$10,000 Westfield grant awarded to SCAR. It will go directly to the Outreach Program, providing food and veterinary services to assist more than 200 pet owners for another six to seven months.



Katie Koullas Yellow Ladybugs

Passionate, Inspiring, Bright

Katie's ladybugs are a beautiful way for girls with autism to connect

To Katie Koullas yellow ladybugs are as beautiful as they are rare. And when they gather together it's lovely.

And just as it's harder to spot a yellow ladybug than a red ladybug, so too is it harder to spot girls on the autism spectrum than boys.

Katie saw a need to cater for girls when she noticed how many of the therapy groups are dominated by boys.

She formed Yellow Ladybugs in 2015 as a volunteer group and works hard to run events in the local community to help the girls connect with one another, while also offering support to parents and raising awareness that girls can be autistic.

"I simply wanted to help unite girls on the spectrum and create a community that celebrated, nurtured and supported our tribe," she says.

Over a relatively short period, the group has connected thousands of autistic girls and women, both in person and via its Facebook page.

Its positive impact goes deep into the community, touching extended families, school networks and health professionals.

This is one parent's touching description of her daughter's introduction to the club: "She realised she was not alone in the world. She saw girls with headphones and oral sensory necklaces, girls playing parallel and quietly. I saw her shoulders relax and the light return to her eyes; she was not alone."

Despite having a fulltime job and demanding family responsibilities, Katie has an unwavering commitment to the club and always finds time to focus on the members and advocacy for girls and women with autism.

Katie is overwhelmed and humbled to be voted a Westfield Local Hero, but says the title belongs to the whole committee of dedicated Mums who help deliver the programs.

Yellow Ladybugs will use its \$10,000 Westfield grant to pay for four fun sensory-friendly events for autistic girls in the northern suburbs of Melbourne and their families and carers.



Veronica O'Brien
Roxburgh Rise Primary School

Passionate, Devoted, Caring

Treatment of refugees ignites Veronica's caring spirit

Veronica O'Brien's passion for refugee advocacy was ignited years ago in response to the way in which asylum seekers who travel by boat are treated.

It lit a fire in her that led to her working with refugees in a number of volunteer roles before finding what she describes as a "dream job" with the Roxburgh Rise Primary School.

"It's just such a wonderful way I can continue to offer support, welcome and a safe space to those who have come to Australia, having survived terrible experiences and are now rebuilding a new life for their families," Veronica says.

Veronica runs two programs at the school – an inclusive playgroup for refugee and migrant families and a women's leadership group for mothers.

The weekly session for the women's group is called, Sawt Al Nissa, which means Women's Voices in Arabic. It aims to build self-confidence and helps the women gain important knowledge about the education and health systems in Australia.

Veronica says the women have embodied the essence of the school's generous spirit with their kindness, taking on board its "learning for life" motto.

She's pleased to be voted a Westfield Local Hero, but says the real heroes are the women and children she works with, "who despite all manner of challenges have the courage to turn up and connect with others, show a genuine thirst for knowledge and learning, and share an incredible generosity of spirit".

"I get to see how much the children admire their parents when I present them with their certificate at the end of the year – these women are showing their children that even as adults you can always be learning and stretching yourself, being so courageous in doing new things," she says.

The school will use its \$10,000 Westfield grant to buy toys and equipment for the playgroup program and to fund childcare while mothers attend the Women's Voices group.

Your 2018 Finalists

Sarah Akamo | Grace: West Melbourne Families Against Domestic Violence Inc

Friendly, Humble, Humanitarian

Sarah is the founder of Grace: West Melbourne Families Against Domestic Violence (WMFAD), an organisation that supports and empowers women and their children affected by domestic violence through programs and workshops. Through her work, Sarah created the Grace Care Package initiative, providing non-perishable/long-life pantry items, toiletries and sanitary items to women, with 20 care packages distributed each fortnight.

Gareth Hanlon | Westmeadows Football Club

Courageous, Altruistic, Dedicated

For the past two years, Gareth has been the President of the Westmeadows Football Club and in this time, has shown passion and commitment to ensuring the club promotes values of respect, inclusion and diversity. A strong believer in gender equality, Gareth oversaw the introduction of the first women's teams into the club in 2017, from under 9's through to under 18's. His vision is to create a club where women, people identifying as LGTBIQ, living with a disability or whom are from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds feel safe, positive and welcome.

Ana Mrnjajs | Western Melbourne Volunteer Branch of Make-A-Wish Australia

Welcoming, Nurturing, Motivated

For eight years, Ana has been a valued member of the Western Melbourne Volunteer Branch of Make-A-Wish Australia, an organisation that grants wishes to seriously ill children with life threatening illnesses. Over this time, Ana and her team have granted 79 wishes within the community, with a further 25 currently in progress.

Recognising all of our 2018 Nominees

Sarah AKAMO

Grace: West Melbourne Families
Against Domestic Violence Inc

Kerry ASHBROOK

Port Melbourne Colts Junior
Football Club

Bob CHALMERS

St John's Uniting Church,
Essendon, Friendship Club

Julie CHITSOS

Taylors Lakes Football Club

Christine CRAIK

Project Respect

Marisa DEBATTISTA

Second Chance Animal Rescue

Enza GROSSO

Training Employment
Accommodation Mentoring Inc
(TEAM Inc)

Gareth HANLON

Westmeadows Football Club

Lachlan HEADLAM

Barwon Child, Youth & Family

Katie KOULLAS

Yellow Ladybugs

Peter LABBAD

Tullamarine Football Club

Jesse James LONGO

J Square Bros

Anne-Marie MASON

Hillside Football Club

Jade McKENZIE

The Social Studio

Natalie MOORE

Be Moore

Ana MRNJAUS

Western Melbourne Volunteer
Branch of Make-A-Wish Australia

Veronica O'BRIEN

Roxburgh Rise Primary School

Patrick PAGE

Niddrie Traders Association

Annette SAX

Yarn Strong Sista

Angela SCAFFIDI

Challenge Supporting Kids
with Cancer

Megan STAPLETON

Moonee Valley Brass

Margaret TORPY

Moorabbin Kangaroos
Football Club

Liz TRIPODI

Vocal Art Studios

Graeme WALKER

Moonee Valley Cricket Club
Incorporated

Alice WOJCIK

Refugee Migrant Children Centre



If you or anyone you know would like more information on what support is available:

AUSTRALIA

Lifeline: 13 11 14

Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800

MensLine: 1300 78 99 78

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636

1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732

NEW ZEALAND

Lifeline: 0800 543 354

Suicide Crisis Helpline: 0508 828 865

Kidsline: 0800 54 37 54

Depression Helpline: 0800 111 757

Samaritans: 0800 726 666

Family Violence Information Line: 0800 456 450



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