ANDREW HESLOP – Founder, Neighbour Day
NSW Volunteer of the Year Award speech
NSW Leagues Club, Sydney
Wednesday 5th December 2012

Acceptance

Minister for Citizenship and Communities, and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Hon Victor Dominello; Valerie Hoogstad – Chair, Lynne Dalton – CEO and awards organiser Kristin Sinclair from the Centre for Volunteering; fellow award winners, other distinguished guests who are also volunteers; ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you to Premier Barry O’Farrell and the NSW Government for sponsoring this award, and to Clubs NSW for your support of your local communities, who are ably represented by the very capable volunteers in this room today.
Congratulations to all of the people who have stood at this spot before me this morning – your contributions, your sacrifices, your collective enthusiasm clearly is making a significant difference in suburbs and towns right across New South Wales.

You are all leaders, highly deserving of the recognition you have received.

In Neighbour Day’s 10th year I am honoured and delighted to accept this award, especially on International Volunteer Day.

I especially want to thank Minister Dominello for being here because it’s absolutely vital that government not only supports, but is seen to actively support, the volunteers who keep vital services and programs running in our communities.

The Macquarie Dictionary defines a volunteer to be “someone who enters in to any service of their own free will, or who offers himself or herself for any service or undertaking”.

But stop someone in the street and ask them if they are a volunteer and chances are they’ll say no.

But walking the neighbour’s kids to school ... or doing the sports run on weekends with a car load of kids ... or taking the latest Freddo Frog fundraising drive in to the office to raise money to build a new library or buy new computers ... well that’s volunteering.
Volunteerism is a core part of my family’s heritage. My grandmother was active with Australian Red Cross during the Second World War and continued her passion right up to her death. My mother also followed in her footsteps and then when I went to school she progressed to the tuck shop, school fundraisers and teaching reading classes.

In his excellent book ‘Disconnected’, former professor of economics Dr Andrew Leigh, now the Federal Member for Fraser, observes childhood experiences are key to involvement as an adult – there is a 43% chance that you will undertake voluntary work if you observed your parents doing so.

If they did not, there is only a 23% chance you will.

My family experience led me to joining Junior Red Cross at eight; becoming a Red Cross Calling volunteer at secondary school in Adelaide; helping to set up an on-campus radio station with a federal grant during International Youth Year and then, through the recommendation and encouragement of my school principal, participating in the local council’s Youth Council.

It’s led to my lifetime of volunteering.

I was delighted to be an Outreach Partner for this year’s first Volunteering Video Competition for Young People – an initiative by the Prime Minister to get young Australians thinking about how they can enhance their community as a volunteer.
The Australian Government’s National Volunteering Strategy recently revealed we are a nation of more than six million volunteers who give more than 700 million hours each year.

The good news is more people are volunteering, but for sadly less time. The overall rate of volunteering grew from 24% in 1995 to 36% in 2010.

The upside is that rates of volunteering have grown - in sport, religion and education - but concerningly have declined in community services and emergency management.

Leading by example is absolutely critical. Stepping up to help, to make our communities a better place, really does begin at home.

I’m proud to stand before you today to accept this award because since 2003 neighbours across Australia have volunteered on the last Sunday in March to celebrate their community.

People in the city and the bush - with no incentive other than a shared belief in safe, resilient and sustainable communities – have willingly and enthusiastically participated in this national day.

Neighbour Day has evolved organically to become Australia’s annual celebration of community ... because it’s all about building connections between residents wherever we choose to call home.
Councils, shires, resident committees, tenancy associations and other groups organise festivals, open days and community activities in parks and other public spaces.

But how you celebrate is entirely up to you and your neighbours – it could be a street party or barbecue, or it could be as simple as a cup of tea and a slice of cake ... or a cold beer.

Why should we care about the people next door, across the street or on the next farm?

Well knowing our neighbours creates safe, inclusive and sustainable communities.

Not only does that help to break down the barriers of loneliness and isolation but it provides reassurance there is someone to call upon during a local emergency or disaster.

Here’s a question – if there was an emergency or disaster where you live today, could you contact your neighbours quickly to warn them ... or get help?

Last week a Sydney woman made headlines around the globe for being a great neighbour to an older woman who lived alone. For 33 years barrister Beatrice Gray and her husband Robert helped their elderly neighbour by taking out her wheelie bin, changing light bulbs, registering her car and paying her bills.
Doing exactly what I’d like to think millions of Australians do ... and what Neighbour Day has advocated since 2003 when an elderly Melbourne woman was found dead in her home, two years after she had passed away ... looking out for our neighbours.

That beautiful relationship of care and concern was surprisingly rewarded when their neighbour left the Gray’s her $12.5 million estate in her will.

In accepting this award I’d like to thank the people and organisations who have helped me grow Neighbour Day over the past ten years –

1. The love of my life, Fabian Sanchez Navarro, who can’t be here today;
2. Thank you to my nominator Jenny Wheeler, and to the judges, for considering what I believe are the basic responsibilities of living in a community - great relationships between neighbours which promote tolerance, respect and understanding - are significant enough to qualify for this award;
3. Thank you to Paul Wade, Ubaldo Formica and my Sydney neighbours Danielle Griffin, Gary McGregor, Sancia de Jersey, Robert Bromwich, Hamish Cumming and Judy Ryan;
4. Bob Osburn and Martin Beesley from News Limited who, with their colleagues from interstate, have literally printed thousands and thousands of positive stories about neighbours caring for each other to promote Neighbour Day in suburban newspapers in six cities;
5. Ripefruit, who hosts the website;
6. David Leckie, David Gyngell, Kim Williams, Mark Scott, Angelos Frangopoulos, Geoff Dixon and Alan Joyce from Qantas who have given valuable, often prime time, air time to broadcast the television commercials made for free by Saatchi & Saatchi and Traffic Films;

7. Vicki Marr from ARN;

8. Nick Abrahams and the team from Norton Rose;

9. My supporting publicist Libby Fordham;

10. And the millions of Australians who have heard, read or watched the Neighbour Day message and have responded with ‘yes, I can do that’.

I am proud to be the NSW Volunteer of The Year and I dedicate this award to the memory of Mrs Elsie Brown, whose lonely death in 2001 led me to write the Letter to the Editor of The Age in 2003 suggesting the last Sunday in March as the day to check up on our elderly neighbours;

and the late Clive Tayler, who along with his partner Joan Nicholas, ably demonstrated to me what it meant to be great neighbours.

In closing, the untold story behind Neighbour Day is that – despite its phenomenal growth – it has never received any government, corporate, philanthropic or public funding.

It’s been driven entirely by in-kind support, work after hours and on weekends plus the most amazing positive editorial media coverage.
So ... if you happen to know a philanthropist or benefactor who would like to actively assist the evolution of a national event that stretches into every home in the country please let me know, my bank account will love you for it.

Self-funding a national event entirely from my own resources for ten years has been a big financial challenge!

Recently I came across a Facebook post from the Dalai Lama.

It read –

When we have inner peace, we can be at peace with those around us. When our community is in a state of peace, it can share that peace with neighbouring communities and so on. When we feel love and kindness toward others, it not only makes others feel loved and cared for, but it helps us also to develop inner happiness and peace.

I think he’s right.

ENDS