

MEDIA RELEASE

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Melbourne advocate for children with disabilities wins national award

A Melbourne woman who founded the first volunteer-supported respite care program, to support children with a disability and their families, has won the Unsung Hero Award at the 2015 HESTA Community Sector Awards.

Maureen Crawford was recognised for establishing the first *Interchange* program in Camberwell to give families who have a child with a disability a regular break, by sharing their care with volunteer host families.

There are now 12 Interchange agencies across Victoria, as well as agencies in South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland, supporting around 4,000 children with a disability, per year.

Ms Crawford said she started the service when her intellectually-disabled son, James, was five years old and the pressure of caring for him became physically and emotionally overwhelming.

"In 1980, I couldn't find even one community body to offer respite care on a regular basis and I realised that other parents in similar situations were also isolated and unable to cope with the heavy, daily pressures of caring for their children with disabilities," Ms Crawford said.

Together with a small group of parents, Ms Crawford opened the first *Interchange* program.

Core services — the Interchange Host and Interchange Recreation programs — offer respite care, peer support, social skills, camps, friendship groups, sibling activities, parent support groups, family activities and events.

"Over the years, the focus has shifted from solely providing respite care for the family, to encouraging entire local communities to be inclusive of families and children with disability," Ms Crawford said.

"While I have gained enormous satisfaction from the challenges of the past 35 years, I couldn't have done any of it without the continuing support of my entire family, including my son, James."

HESTA CEO, Debby Blakey, presented Ms Crawford with her award at the third annual HESTA Community Sector Awards Dinner in Sydney on 25 June 2015.

"We're delighted to pay tribute to Ms Crawford, for her inspirational work in establishing the Interchange program which is now assisting families of children with disabilities in four states across Australia," Ms Blakey said.

Ms Crawford received a \$5,000 **ME** EveryDay Transaction Account and a \$5,000 education grant, courtesy of proud Awards sponsor, **ME**.

Karen Barnett of Port Phillip Housing Association accepted the Social Impact Award, also receiving a \$5,000 ME EveryDay Transaction Account and a \$5,000 education grant. The Organisation Award winner, Mirima Dawang Woollab-gerring Language and Culture Centre from Western Australia, received a \$10,000 development grant, also courtesy of **ME**.

Ms Blakey, said the three winners reflect the important work of those working in the community sector in building stronger, more inclusive communities.

"The work of our winners has significantly improved the lives of individuals and communities often over a long period of time and in difficult circumstances. We are proud to acknowledge their achievements and give them the recognition they deserve," she said.

Learn more about the awards at hestaawards.com.au

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The 2015 HESTA Community Sector Awards is an initiative of HESTA and ACOSS, proudly sponsored by the bank owned by industry super funds, ME.

HESTA is the super fund for health and community services, with more than 800,000 members and \$32 billion in assets.