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Campaigner for people with younger onset dementia honoured

A Melbourne man has been recognised for working as a national advocate for thousands of younger Australians living with dementia, while caring for his partner with a devastating brain disease.

Tony Walsh cared for his partner, Paul, for more than a decade until his death last year from Lewy Body Disease (LBD). Patients with LBD exhibit the symptoms of both Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease.

Mr Walsh is among five finalists in the Unsung Hero category of the 2015 HESTA Community Sector Awards. The Awards recognise those in the community sector who've made an exceptional contribution to social justice in Australia, by enhancing the wellbeing of disadvantaged individuals and communities.

There are currently around 25,000 Australians with a diagnosis of younger onset dementia, which refers to anybody diagnosed under age 65.

"When my late partner Paul first became aware of memory issues in 2000 at the age of 57, very few people realised that anyone under 65 could get dementia, and there was virtually nowhere to get support," Mr Walsh said.

"I cared for Paul at home for many years, but when the time came for him to move into care it was difficult to find a facility equipped to cope with his condition. Dealing with dementia at a younger age and issues around sexuality and diversity, more generally, just weren't talked about then."

Working with Alzheimer's Australia Vic, Tony lobbied governments for specific services and programs for people with younger onset dementia and became integral to their success.

"Together, we've been able to implement a program providing individualised information and support to improve the quality of life for people with younger onset dementia. So far, more than a thousand people have been supported from diverse backgrounds," he said.

"Many others have also been helped via an online forum providing round the clock peer-to-peer assistance, which now has 443 members around Australia and overseas.

"Sadly, Paul passed away last year but a part of his legacy is making sure others don't have to go through this alone."

The Unsung Hero Award winner will receive \$5,000 in a **ME EveryDay** Transaction Account and a \$5,000 education grant. There are two other categories — Social Impact and Organisation. The Social Impact winner will also receive \$5,000 in a **ME EveryDay** Transaction Account and a \$5,000 education grant. The Organisation winner will receive a \$10,000 development grant, also courtesy of proud awards sponsor **ME**.

Finalists will be flown to Sydney for the awards dinner on 25 June 2015, where the winners will be revealed.

The HESTA Community Sector Awards are presented in partnership with the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) as part of the ACOSS National Conference 2015 and have been sponsored by ME since they started in 2012.

Learn more about the awards at hestaawards.com.au

MEDIA CONTACT: Luisa Saccotelli 0400 149 901 or Aileen Muldoon 0419 112 503

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