

Kilkivan identity honoured

By Liam Hauser

Kilkivan District Community Care Association Incorporated president and co-founder Rosie Fitzgerald was awarded the illustrious Everald Compton Community Champion Medal last week.

Ms Fitzgerald was presented the award at a National Seniors Australia dinner at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre on Wednesday 10 June, following nominations from all around Australia.

Associate Professor Sophie Andrews from the University of the Sunshine Coast nominated Ms Fitzgerald for the award, due to the KDCCAI president's work in improving the experience of ageing residents in Kilkivan and the surrounding community.

Ms Fitzgerald said she was "genuinely astonished to win" and was "almost speechless but not quite".

"I really admire Everald Compton as a fantastic role model for ageing in a very productive way, and this win also helps us to draw attention to what KDCCAI members are doing with our Rise and Shine Ageing-in-Place project," she said.

The Everald Compton Community Champion Medal was in just its second year, with Mr Compton attending the awards night.

The Minister for Health and Aged Care, Mark Butler, delivered the keynote address before the Federal Member for Blair, Shayne Neumann, delivered the closing remarks.

"Rosie, and all nominees, are shining examples of the difference older Australians make to their communities through humble, selfless and inspirational work," Mr Compton said.

In presenting the medal, Mr Compton said, "We all play a role to help change negative attitudes about older Australians by acknowledging them as community builders who have the wisdom and ability to turn 'grey into gold' throughout Australia in the manner so ably demonstrated by Rosie."

Upon receiving the medal, Ms Fitzgerald said she was deeply honoured and proud to be recognised for the work she does and deeply loves.

"I am so grateful to have won this accolade so I can shine a light on the additional challenges seniors and their families face in rural areas such as Kilkivan," Ms Fitzgerald said.

"Challenges such as transport, care, support, and appropriate accommodation are better and more cost-effectively tackled at the source, rather than expecting less-than-fully-independent seniors to relocate, in their most vulnerable years, from their homes or home areas to access basic options.

"It's cruel to expect seniors who have often lived and volunteered for their entire lives in a community to end up as a hospital bed-block statistic or in a facility a long way from their social networks.

"I sincerely thank my local community for so strongly supporting our Rise and Shine Ageing-in-Place vision, and especially my friend and KDCCAI member/treasurer Lynda Sempf - without her wisdom and commitment over the years we would not have got this far."

In a follow-up discussion with Burnett Today, Ms Fitzgerald said it was lovely to have Professor



The Everald Compton Community Champion Medal recipient Rosie Fitzgerald, with Everald Compton at a dinner in Brisbane last week when the award was presented. (Supplied)

Andrews and her colleagues from the Thompson Institute at UniSC attending the dinner.

"I think the award also recognises the whole of our Ageing-in-Place project, so I want to acknowledge that this medal is recognition of the hard work and commitment of all KDCCAI members over seven years and also the wonderful broader community support we've experienced," Ms Fitzgerald said.

"I am just the president who couldn't do any of this without the team I work with."

Ms Fitzgerald said hopefully funding would come to help "generate some age-friendly downsizing accommodation in Kilkivan so that seniors who wish to remain local even after they are no longer fully independent can remain in their home area."

"Attachment to place is so very strong for country people, especially those who have lived their entire lives in the same area, and many are currently living in large homes on large blocks which are difficult to maintain as one ages," she said.

"A relatively modest funding injection to fill the accommodation gaps we've identified could potentially yield significant benefits to locals of all ages.

"I think it's a no-brainer just waiting to be demonstrated and proved!"

Having grown up on a farm at Oakview outside Kilkivan, Ms Fitzgerald attended school in Kilkivan and Murgon before leaving the region and then returning in 1999.

"My experience as a carer for a person with dementia for eight years in Kilkivan has informed our concept because it's far more challenging to support someone in a rural context than in larger population centres," she said.

"What I discovered is that it is easier, and cheaper, depending on the particular type of dementia, to keep someone living well in a rural setting than we perhaps imagine - but adequate, informed support and apt infrastructure is vital.

"And moving people against their will from their established social networks often results in adverse outcomes."

Ms Fitzgerald paid tribute to the people who donated to KDCCAI, saying the donations "have allowed us to keep implementing the vision we outlined to a large public meeting in February 2020, and we are proud to now own outright the former Catholic Church in Kilkivan because of generous contributions from the former Kilkivan Masonic Lodge, other local organisations, and individuals, including many from far away with no vested interest in our success".

"Everyone I know here wants to stay in their home or home area for as long as possible and we believe they deserve the opportunity to do that with dignity," she said.

"It's more cost-effective to address challenges right at their source, especially when current levels of hospital bed-blocking and the lack of adequate aged care facility beds are factored in.

"We believe it's time for governments and funding bodies to try other solutions for our rural context - and we know if it works in our area, it will probably work in other regional areas."

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