

MEDIA RELEASE: MONDAY 18 MAY 2026

Phil Smith of Mackay Wins “Queensland New Volunteer Award” in Queensland Volunteer of the Year Awards 2026

Grief turned into life-saving advocacy following wife Leah’s asbestos-related death

BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND – *Advocacy Australia* and its *Asbestos Education Committee* are proud to announce that Mackay volunteer Phil Smith, has been named the recipient of Volunteering Queensland’s “*Queensland New Volunteer Award 2026*”.

Presented by the Governor of Queensland, Her Excellency the Honourable Dr Jeannette Young AC PSM, at Brisbane City Hall on 15 May, the award recognises an individual having demonstrated exceptional dedication and making a significant positive impact through their volunteering work with between six months and three years of volunteering service to the community.

Phil was recognised for creating and leading *Ride In Shorts For Leah*, a grassroots asbestos awareness and fundraising initiative established in honour of his late wife, Leah Smith, who tragically died from an asbestos-related cancer in August 2024, after unknowingly being exposed to asbestos fibres as a three-year-old when her parents built their family’s home.

Just eight months and one day after her diagnosis, Leah was just 49 years-of-age when she succumbed to malignant mesothelioma.

With no experience or training in awareness campaigning or fundraising, Phil began his volunteering journey just 12 weeks after Leah’s passing, transforming personal grief into a powerful national awareness movement to help prevent other families from suffering the same avoidable, devastating loss.

Since commencing with *Advocacy Australia* in November 2024, Phil has contributed more than 1,200 volunteer hours and helped raise over \$47,000 for asbestos education and disease prevention initiatives.

Phil’s significant efforts have also been the subject of more than 155 media stories across Queensland and nationally, helping educate millions of Australians about the dangers of exposure to asbestos fibres and the importance of safe renovation practices.

Ride In Shorts For Leah began as a simple idea to encourage horse riders and communities to wear shorts while riding on what would have been Leah’s 50th birthday, sparking conversations about asbestos awareness and prevention.

The initiative has since expanded nationally with participation across every Australian state and territory.

Phil Smith said the award was dedicated to Leah and to every family impacted by asbestos-related diseases including malignant mesothelioma, lung cancer and asbestosis.

“Leah wanted people to be warned about the dangers of asbestos and how easily exposure can happen when asbestos-containing materials that remain in 1-in-3 Australian homes are disturbed during renovations, maintenance and demolition.

“I made a promise to Leah that I would share our story and if it helps prevent even one family from going through this heartbreak, then everything we’ve done will have been worth it,” Mr Smith said.

“This award doesn’t just acknowledge my efforts. It belongs to Leah, our sons, supporters and volunteers, especially Jade Flack and Stephanie Wood who supported me through the toughest time of my life and continue to support our *Ride In Shorts For Leah* fundraising and awareness activities.

“The riders, donors and every person who’s helped raise awareness and funds to support asbestos education across the community; this award belongs to them all,” Mr Smith said.

Clare Collins, Advocacy Australia chair and chair of the Asbestos Education Committee said, “Phil embodies everything volunteering is about – courage, compassion, leadership and service to others.

“What makes Phil’s contribution so remarkable is that his advocacy for asbestos awareness was founded on profound personal loss.

“And yet despite his grief, Phil continues to relive his loss publicly to keep a promise he made to his beloved wife Leah - to protect other Australians from exposure to asbestos fibres that can kill,” she said.

“Through *Ride In Shorts For Leah*, Phil has not only honoured Leah’s legacy but created a powerful and growing grassroots movement that is helping save lives through awareness and education about asbestos risks,” said Ms Collins.

Phil and his *Ride In Shorts For Leah* initiative have significantly increased engagement with **asbestosawareness.com.au** from Queensland audiences and strengthened community understanding about the dangers associated with disturbing asbestos during renovations, demolition and maintenance.

“With asbestos-containing materials remaining in one third of Australian homes built or renovated before 1990, the dedication of Phil Smith and *Ride In Shorts For Leah* is saving lives.” Ms Collins said.

“We are deeply grateful to the Queensland Volunteering Awards that celebrate the significant contribution volunteers make to their communities across the state, for recognising the outstanding volunteering work of Phil Smith and *Ride In Shorts For Leah*,” she said.

Although Australia formally banned asbestos on 31st December 2003, more than 4,000 Australians lose their lives to an asbestos-related disease every year – that’s three times the national road toll, so it’s vital that people visit www.asbestosawareness.com.au to learn how to manage asbestos safely.

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INTERVIEW REQUESTS

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IMAGES, GRAPHICS & FOOTAGE

DETAILED ASBESTOS JOURNALIST NOTES: <https://asbestosawareness.box.com/v/media-releases>

IMAGES & GRAPHICS:

- ♦ **Phil & Leah Smith Photographs** - <https://asbestosawareness.box.com/v/Ride-In-Shorts>
- ♦ **Asbestos-Containing Materials**
 - **IMAGES & GRAPHICS:** <https://asbestosawareness.box.com/v/AsbestosAwarenessImages>
 - **FOOTAGE:** <https://asbestosawareness.box.com/v/Asbestos-Footage>

JOURNALIST NOTES

About Phil Smith & Ride In Shorts For Leah

Phil Smith is a Mackay-based volunteer advocate, former mining workshop supervisor and founder of *Ride In Shorts For Leah*, a national asbestos awareness and fundraising initiative established in memory of his late wife, Leah Smith, who died from malignant mesothelioma in 2024 following asbestos exposure as a three-year-old.

Beginning his volunteering journey just weeks after Leah's passing, Phil transformed personal grief into purpose, creating *Ride In Shorts For Leah* to raise awareness about the dangers of asbestos exposure and support asbestos education and prevention initiatives across Australia.

What began as a grassroots community awareness activity encouraging horse riders and communities to wear shorts while riding on Leah's birthday has grown into a national movement involving riders, clubs, volunteers and supporters across every Australian state and territory.

Through community events, fundraising, media advocacy and public education, Phil has become a leading grassroots advocate for asbestos awareness and asbestos-related disease prevention. Through his volunteering with Advocacy Australia's Asbestos Education Committee, Phil has contributed more than 1,200 volunteer hours and helped raise over \$47,000 to support life-saving asbestos awareness initiatives.

About the Asbestos Education Committee

The Asbestos Education Committee (AEC) is a volunteer-led committee of Advocacy Australia dedicated to preventing asbestos-related diseases through awareness, education and community engagement. The AEC delivers national public health initiatives including National Asbestos Awareness Month and manages asbestosawareness.com.au, providing free evidence-based information and resources to help Australians identify, manage and safely deal with asbestos risks in homes, workplaces and communities.

About Volunteering Queensland

Volunteering Queensland is the peak body for volunteering in Queensland and works to advance volunteering through advocacy, education, training and support for volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations. The organisation promotes the social, cultural and economic value of volunteering and supports communities across Queensland to build strong and connected volunteer programmes.

About the Queensland Volunteering Awards

The Queensland Volunteering Awards recognise and celebrate the outstanding contribution volunteers, volunteer managers, organisations and initiatives make to communities throughout Queensland. Presented annually by Volunteering Queensland, the awards highlight excellence, innovation and leadership in volunteering and community service across the state. (awards.volunteeringqld.org.au). 2026 marks the second year of the New To Volunteering Award.