

## Media Release

26 January 2024

### Celebrating excellence and citizenship in Central Australia

Alice Springs Town Council's 2024 Australia Day celebrations today were marked by the recognition of a group of inspiring Centralians for their steadfast contributions to Alice Springs, alongside the warm welcome of new citizens hailing from diverse global corners.

A total of 48 new Australians were welcomed as citizens from a range of diverse countries including Philippines, Italy, India, New Zealand, Republic of South Sudan, Argentina, Peru, Bangladesh, Russia, Fiji, Mauritius, United Kingdom, Scotland, Japan, China, United States and South Africa.

"It's an honour to welcome 48 new Australians to our community and confer citizenship on them," Mayor Matt Paterson said.

"It's easy to take for granted the freedoms and joys that come with being an Australian, but seeing the pure joy on the faces of our new citizens really helps emphasise that. We truly are lucky to be in such a wonderful country, and I warmly welcome our new Australians to our community,"

Following the Citizenship Ceremony, Mayor Paterson announced the winners of the 2024 Centralian Awards. The 2024 award recipients are:

**2023 Centralian Citizenship Awards recipients (bios on following pages):**

**Centralian Citizen of the Year** – Neil Ross

**Centralian Senior Citizen of the Year** – Roger Thompson

**Centralian Young Citizen of the Year** – Apajok Biar

**Centralian Event of the Year** –2023 Bangtail Muster Parade

"Selecting the Centralian Award recipients is always a difficult task as we have so many inspiring community members that make Alice Springs a wonderful community," Mayor Paterson said.

"The 2024 winners are the epitome of that. They truly put the community before themselves and make Alice Springs a better place each and every day. I want to offer my sincere congratulations to all winners and say thank you for everything that they do.

"It's also important to recognise and say thank you to everyone that was nominated across all categories."

**For further information contact:**

- Anthony Geppa (Marketing and Communications Coordinator): 0439 815 315

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### 2023 Centralian Awards – Recipients’ Biographies

#### **Centralian Citizen of the Year – Neil Ross**

Neil Ross is a true Territorian having been born and raised in Alice Springs. Neil was a shareholder and director of Ross Engineering since 1983 until its recent sale and his retirement. Ross Engineering had been in his family since 1967 and provides steel fabrication, mechanical services and allied products throughout much of the NT. He was committed to the continuing development of the NT and in particular Central Australia.

Neil has always had a strong sense of community service. He was part of the Centralian executive of the Northern Territory Chamber of Commerce and Industry for over 10 years, serving three of those years as Chair. He was a member of the Charles Darwin Council from 2004-2010 and was on the University's Finance Risk and Review committee and then the Finance and Infrastructure Development Committee.

Neil was chair of the Alice Springs Economic Development Committee and has served on the board of Footprints Forward which preceded the Aboriginal Employment Strategy. Originally a member of Rotaract, Neil has been a member of the Rotary Club of Alice Springs since 1995. During this time he has held many voluntary positions including Club President, Treasurer, Foundation Chair and Board Member. A measure of the respect that he is held in is that he was appointed Assistant Area Governor and has been awarded the Paul Harris Award.

The Rotary Club of Alice Springs and the people of Alice Springs have benefited greatly from his dedication to community service. Neil has been Commodore of the Rotary Henley-On-Todd Regatta, assisted with multiple Rotary Club of Alice Springs Bangtail Muster Parades and Rotary Club of Alice Springs Melbourne Cup Sweeps. The sweeps are the fundraiser for The Rotary Club of Alice Springs John Hawkins and Bill Van Dijk Scholarships.

Mr Ross can be heard playing the bagpipes on many Anzac Day memorials and he has piped quite a few residents to their eternal rest. I think that ANZAC Day is a recurring event in his calendar and would not be missed. Mr Ross and his wife Julie have supported Rotary Youth Exchange Programs both supporting and hosting.

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### Centralian Senior Citizen of the Year – Roger Thompson

Roger was born in Canada but went looking for somewhere warmer, settling in Australia three months before his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in 1971.

Roger travelled around Australia and the world for many years, finally ending up in Adelaide. There Roger met his partner, Sue Richter, and went to University, gaining a Bachelor Degree in Agricultural Science.

While he was gaining his degree, he earned his living by driving taxis and by making crossword puzzles for Messenger Press (the Adelaide company that owned all the suburban newspapers in Adelaide). In 1991 he came to Alice Springs because his partner had a three-month contract with CAAMA. Like many others that come to Alice Springs on a short-term contract, once the contract was finished they stayed in town and have been here ever since.

Roger is a long-term volunteer as part of the Alice Springs Public Library's Read, Write Chat program. The program helps largely new residents to improve their English language skills, and has proved an invaluable program. Through volunteering, Roger has met and taught people from all over the world including Columbia, Peru, Kenya, South Sudan, Italy, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.

Roger have been extremely impressed with his learners. They are all very hard workers who are exceptionally keen on improving their English skills. They really keep him on his toes with their incisive questions about English – the answers to most of their questions he did not know. As a result, he had to learn more about English than he has ever known before.

Roger is a truly selfless individual that has dedicated countless hours to help others improve their lives in Central Australia.

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### Young Centralian Citizen of the Year – Apajok Biar

Apajok was born in a refugee camp in Kenya and arrived in Australia with her family as a two-year-old toddler. She is a passionate advocate for gender equality, women, and girls' empowerment as well as advancing refugee youth participation in decision making that affects them.

Apajok is the chairperson and co-founder of South Sudan Voices of Salvation Inc., a not-for profit youth-run and led organisation, that speaks up against all forms of injustice and violations of human rights. Apajok is also the co-founder and member of Angaac women association Australia Inc., a women-led and -run organisation that understands humanitarian aid and supports women in South Sudan as well as Australian based South Sudanese and Angaac community women.

From 2020 to 2023 Apajok was on the board of the Women's Museum of Australia and while there, co-founded the International Women's Day Equal Futures Fair, where we celebrate the amazing contributions that diverse women bring to Alice Springs community. From 2021 to 2023 Apajok was on the board of Central Australia Women's Legal Service where she was a part of an advisory group that founded the youth domestic violence app for young people in Central Australia and Barkly Region. She also fiercely advocated for more support services for multicultural women who experience domestic violence.

Apajok is also a part of the Multicultural Community Services of Central Australia board where she founded and facilitates a South Sudanese women's group that provides a safe space for newly-arrived refugee women, assisting them in feeling less isolated and sharing their culture and language with their children.

She is also part of the Gender Audit team to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and a co-representative of the Refugee Advisory Group to UNHCR on refugee resettlement.

Apajok has been appointed to the Australian Government Refugee Advisory Panel and the NT Government Multicultural Advisory Committee to Multicultural Minister. In 2019/2020, Apajok was the regional focal point for the Asia region to the United Nations major group for children and youth on migration. Apajok was also a finalist for the Australia 'women of the future 2017' award and she was Awarded the 2017 Western Sydney Refugee Youth Award, recognition of outstanding achievement in the field of community leadership.

In 2017, Apajok was the recipient of the MYAN REFUGEE YOUTH SCHOLARSHIP as the Refugee Youth Advocate representative for Australia & New Zealand at UNHCR (Geneva). Apajok has Bachelor of Social Work and is currently undertaking her Masters of Humanitarian Assistance at Deakin University. She is a social worker at Alice Springs Hospital, where she loves to support the patients with empathy and compassion. She is a mother of a beautiful three-year-old girl and three-month old boy. Apajok was the Chair for the Women's, Gender and Diversity working group with the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network from 2021 to 2023.

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### Community Event of the Year – 2023 Bangtail Muster

The first Bangtail Muster Parade was held in 1959 with The Rotary Club of Alice Springs taking it over as a Project in 1961. It was named because after cattle were mustered, cattlemen would cut off the hairy end of the cattle's tails so they could ascertain the number of cattle mustered.

The Rotary Club of Alice Springs Bangtail Muster Parade remembers its historic origins but now acts in a different manner. It brings schools, early childhood centres, sporting and community groups, businesses and tourism together. It is a great community event that brings financial income and community spirit together. It brings a cohesiveness to the town.

Each year has a theme and as the Rotary year theme was *Imagine*, this was incorporated this into the 2023 Parade. Schools, early childhood centres and community groups planned the theme for their float and set about designing and making their floats. Imagination was let loose and floats were very creative.

2023 was the first time for several years that Rotary itself had a float thanks to the assistance of Adrian Long and the team from Alice Kitchens and Cabinets. The Rotary Float demonstrated the seven areas of Rotary focus for sustainable service. They include - Peace and Conflict Prevention/Resolution, Disease Prevention and Treatment, Water and Sanitation, Maternal and Child Health, Basic Education and Literacy, Community Economic Development and Supporting the Environment.