Media Release

12 November 2026

Barunga West Council

Celebrating the Volunteer Behind Port Broughton's Christmas Magic

Behind the much-loved Port Broughton Christmas Festival is a significant contribution from one dedicated community volunteer, with Barunga West Council recognising Ben Ervin for the countless hours, creativity and generosity he has invested in making Christmas special for local families and visitors.

Often affectionately known as 'Ben the Elf' during school visits, Ben has played an instrumental role in creating the Port Broughton Santa Cave, designing and building many of its larger displays and features, including the recently introduced Polar Express.

His contribution extends well beyond the construction of displays, with countless hours spent planning, preparing, installing and transforming the Santa Cave into a festive experience for families to enjoy each year.

Without Ben's ongoing commitment, a significant part of the Christmas Festival, particularly the Santa Cave, would not be possible.

Ben's contribution to the community was formally recognised in 2019 when he received the Port Broughton and Surrounds Citizen of the Year Award. In the same year, the Port Broughton Progress Association was awarded Event of the Year for the Christmas Festival, recognising the collective efforts of the volunteers who helped establish and grow the event.

Mayor Leonie Kerley said Ben's generosity and commitment were greatly appreciated by Council and the wider community.

"Ben gives an extraordinary amount of his own time and energy to creating something truly special for our community. The Santa Cave is a highlight of the Christmas Festival for so many families, and his creativity and dedication are a big part of what makes it possible," Mayor Kerley said.

"From designing and building the displays to welcoming school groups as Ben the Elf, his contribution goes well beyond what anyone could reasonably expect from a volunteer.

"Council is incredibly grateful for everything Ben does, not only for the Christmas Festival but for the many other events he supports throughout the year. His efforts make a real difference to our community, and we are fortunate to have someone so willing to give his time and talents."

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The Port Broughton Christmas celebrations have evolved significantly over the years, shaped by the commitment of local volunteers, community groups and businesses.

Before 2016, the annual celebrations included the Christmas Pageant and Broughton Seaside Markets, traditionally held on the first Sunday of December. The foreshore markets began at 2pm, followed by the pageant at 5pm, commencing near the skate park. A Christmas Tree Festival was also held in the main hall, featuring displays created by local schools, kindergartens, businesses, organisations and community members.

In 2016, the Port Broughton Progress Association began exploring ways to improve the Santa experience, moving Santa from the busy foreshore into the hall to provide a dedicated space for families.

The idea for the Santa Cave came from Ben, who recognised the challenges of having Santa seated outdoors in the summer heat, surrounded by large crowds of children. He saw an opportunity to create a more welcoming Christmas experience that could also become a seasonal attraction for the wider region.

Working alongside the Progress Association, the Men's Shed and other community members, the concept began to take shape. Ben contributed Christmas lights, inflatables and displays, helping transform the hall into a festive Christmas setting.

Following community feedback, the event moved to a Saturday in December in 2017, allowing families to enjoy the celebrations in the evening and encouraging visitors from neighbouring towns to attend.

The program also expanded beyond the traditional markets and pageant into a larger street festival, incorporating food vendors, children's activities, entertainment and a relaxed family atmosphere.

In 2018, the Santa Cave introduced instant family photography, allowing families to take home a printed photograph with Santa and ensuring everyone could be included in the experience.

The Progress Association continued to develop the event, including successfully delivering a COVID-safe Christmas Festival in 2020. The Christmas Tree Festival was last held in the hall that year, with the Santa Cave requiring additional space as it continued to grow.

In 2021, Council established its Tourism and Events Section 41 Committee, continuing the Christmas Festival traditions and community spirit established by the Progress Association.

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Council acknowledges the many Progress Association members and volunteers who contributed to the Christmas celebrations over the years, including Pat Walsh, Lyn Wigzell, Paul O'Donnell, Graham Bowden, Iola Reid, Jodie Webb, Penny Smith, Cheryl Richardson, Julie Arbon, Bev Hewett, Elizabeth Aitchison, Jessica Ervin, Heather Tulloch, Vicky Flowers, Kim Baker, Kim Gregory and Ben Ervin.

A special place in the festival's history is also held by Ben's uncle, Mike Chappell, who spent six years portraying Santa during the pageant and in the Santa Cave. The 2022 festival was Mike's final Christmas in the role before his passing in April 2023. Mike also generously donated his treasured Santa bell, which had travelled from overseas, leaving a lasting part of the tradition for future celebrations.

Ben's generosity and practical support are not limited to the Christmas Festival. He is also a valued contributor to other Council-hosted events, including Feast on the Foreshore, the Port Broughton Classic and Vintage Show N Shine, and the Broughton Seaside Markets.

Whether helping with event preparations, building displays or providing practical assistance behind the scenes, Ben continues to give his time and skills to support events that bring people together and showcase the Barunga West region.

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