

HeadsUp Kippax founder Susan Owen on being an OAM recipient



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HeadsUp Kippax founder Susan Owen OAM is pictured with her granddaughter Maya. Photo supplied.

HeadsUp Kippax founder Susan Owen burst into tears upon learning she was on the King's Birthday Honours List and would receive an Order of Australia Medal.

"I was in shock that someone had put me up for such a prestigious award," she said.

Ms Owen wasn't emotional about the award itself, but the fact that someone thought highly enough of her, to put her up for the honour.

"I love to do what I do. It's something that I absolutely love," she said.

"It's an honour and a privilege to get out bed each day and to be doing what I'm doing. And to really support people in such a way that it turns their life - or their horrible journey - around."

HeadsUp Kippax is a Canberra-based charity that supports women, in particular those suffering hair loss from chemotherapy, permanent alopecia, surgery and radiation.

Ms Owen founded the charity after her own battle with breast cancer in 2005.

"I could see that there was a need when I was going through chemotherapy at Calvary Hospital in Bruce in Canberra," she said.

"I was helping ladies by teaching them how to tie their scarves, and by making turbans look so much more interesting. It came to me when I was talking to the breast cancer nurses and the oncology nurses, that there was a need out there."

At the time Ms Owen was unaware that she had caught the attention of hospital staff.

"Unbeknownst to me they had started to pay attention to me whenever I was in the hospital because I always had something interesting on my head," she said.

"I didn't know that until much, much later."

Ms Owen describes herself as a "problem solver".

"And there was a problem to solve on how to easily obtain headwear when you're going through a really difficult time," she said.

"It did take me a few years to finally get it off the ground but it was the breast cancer nurses who supported me.

"The very first volunteer I had was my old oncology nurse, so I've been very well supported in the medical area, because it does make a difference," Ms Owen said.

Ms Owen said that shopping can be difficult for women who are undergoing treatment for cancer. However, HeadsUp Kippax is a safe environment for them.

"They know they're well supported with us," she said.

"We still wear masks and the ladies value doing some shopping at a time when they really can't go into big areas because of their low immune system."

It's something Ms Owen experienced firsthand.

"I didn't want to go into big shopping malls, and I was constantly in hospital because I kept getting infections each time I had my chemo," she said.

Her prognosis was better than most, however Ms Owen said some of the women who come through the store are not as lucky.

"We do have some ladies who have only got a matter of months," she said.

More than just a store where you can buy hats and headwear, HeadsUp is a community.

"The women love the friendship that they get," Ms Owen said.

"It's not about selling, it's about friendship and guidance. Once they realise that we understand, they are able to truly relax and enjoy."

About 10 volunteers undergo training to work at the store.

"The one thing I can't teach is empathy. And that's what we do have, is so much empathy for the woman and their partners," Ms Owen said.

"To make a difference is so special for us as well. We're not paid, but are paid by the gratitude that people feel. They come in for headwear but they leave with so much more."

Since the store opened some 5000 people have passed through its doors.

"It's less about how many people and more about just knowing that we get on and do what we do without patting ourselves on the back," Ms Owen said.

Ms Owen's husband Frank was overwhelmed to know his wife was on this year's Kings Birthday Honours list for her service to community health.

"My husband is such a sentimental soul and he's extremely proud," Ms Owen said.

"I often think that without his support I wouldn't have been able to even start. He's supremely proud, and very emotional too."

This is turning into a wonderful year for Ms Owen, whose son is in London playing cricket, and whose daughter just gave birth to her first grandchild.

"It's a wonderful year, this Grandy is very proud," she said.

"I have the most beautiful granddaughter that ever was born. My son's first day playing cricket this season in London was 100 runs, two bowled out and one catch. That's special too."

Ms Owen said she was particularly grateful for the spotlight on HeadsUp Kippax.

"Just for people to know that we do exist is really important," she said.

"I'm really grateful."

HeadsUp Kippax will host a champagne and music afternoon tea on Saturday, June 24 from 3pm to 5pm.

It's an open invitation for people to enjoy a relaxing afternoon as a guest of HeadsUp Kippax.

"It's an opportunity to join us in our shop and see the large range of headwear, and discover the service we provide," Ms Owen said.

There will be lucky door gifts and 20 per cent off all full price items at the in-store event at Shop 2, 12-16 Hardwick Crescent, Holt. Phone 6254 4403 or 0416 227 595.