

## PROFILE

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Geelong Mums' new chief executive Ruth Holdaway is a champion of gender equality. Photo: Ginger + Mint

# EQUAL TO THE TASK

THE NEW CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF GEELONG MUMS HAS LOFTY GOALS FOR THE COMMUNITY ORGANISATION THAT IS ALREADY HELPING THOUSANDS, WRITES CAM WARD

GENDER quality is dear to the heart of Ruth Holdaway. A career of championing the cause has led her around the world to land now as the new chief executive of Geelong Mums' parent organisation, which also encompasses St Kilda Mums and Eureka Mums in Ballarat.

Her road to Geelong Mums' bustling headquarters on a cul-de-sac at the end of Balliang St in South Geelong continues a legacy instilled into her growing up in a home in England brimming with the spirit of wanting to do something to help others.

Her retired parents were teachers – her dad a university professor – and her three brothers work in public or voluntary sectors.

The university campaigner, who threw herself into student politics with the aim of “wanting to create a better society for all of us”, cut her teeth on a management training scheme in the UK's National Health Service, before landing at

Breakthrough Breast Cancer. She discovered that doing something positive for people's lives was a “good way to spend my time”.

Along the way there were posts with Women's Aid and Women in Sport in the UK, and an MBE for services to equality in sport in 2019. She would go on to become a director of the English Sport Development Trust and a non-executive director of the London Football Association.

Ruth currently also volunteers as a director of Women Sport Australia and as a member of Arise Leadership Circle, the first ever global fund directly supporting women-led emergency response and preparedness.

“I've always had a sense of being in service and wanting to give back,” Ruth says.

“Gender equality was the issue that I was drawn to. What I've been able to do is balance a career that's been about, hopefully, the wellness sector; I've worked in health, I've worked in sport

but it's all about being healthy and well and combining that with campaigning for gender equality across society, which I see as being critical for our future."

Ruth came to Geelong Mums via a two-year stint as chief executive of Tennis Victoria, which she moved to Australia for in 2019.

She knows first hand the empowering lift sport can have on girls.

Her own love of tennis goes back to her mum, with whom she would always watch Wimbledon. Ruth had always played tennis, but was not good enough for university teams and that divide was amplified by the fact that she went to school with the likes of Michael Vaughan, who would later go on to captain England in Test cricket.

It wasn't until Ruth discovered surfing in her 20s in Cornwall that she understood how life-changing sport can be in terms of physical and mental health.



*Ruth Holdaway aims for Geelong Mums and its sister organisations to reach "every baby and child that needs us". Photos: Ginger + Mint and Hails & Shine (top left)*

"When I joined Women in Sport I was not coming from a sport background, I was coming from the background that I empathise with women for whom trying to make time to have some kind of physical activity in your life can be a challenge, particularly if you had a bad experience with sport when you were younger, or were not particularly good at sport," Ruth says.

"I'm bigger, I'm not naturally athletic and sporty. I was in an environment with other people who were and that was really hard. It's really hard when there are people who are brilliant at sport and go on to represent their country and you're not good at it basically."



Ruth also sees Geelong Mums and Tennis Victoria having a lot in common. Both are involved at the grassroots level and reliant upon armies of volunteers, which she says is "one of the very special things" about Geelong Mums.

How the organisation gets to spread more of the work its volunteers do is the big task now confronting Ruth.

By her reckoning, Geelong, St Kilda and Eureka Mums are meeting around 10-20 per cent of the need across Victoria at the moment. Addressing that has been hampered by Covid.

"There's definitely a need and we're really good at meeting that need. But there's so much

more that we can do," Ruth says.

"We also need to make social services and the health sector aware of what we do, and we could be working with more social services, more child health services. So we need to work with local councils and local agencies across the state to understand what their needs are and then work to meet their needs in the best way possible.

"There's a lot more that we can do. That's the goal now: to reach every baby and child that needs us."

*To volunteer or donate to Geelong Mums, book drop-offs, head to [geelongmums.org](http://geelongmums.org)*