

Australia Day 2015: Hunter honours list celebrates community role models

By MICHAEL MCGOWAN
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Kevin Berger, from Newcastle East, the founder and executive director of the St Philips Christian School's DALE program, and now, OAM recipient. Picture: Simone De Peak.

A DOZEN of the Hunter's citizens have been held up as role models to help "define, encourage and reinforce our national aspirations".

The 12 residents join 613 others from across the country being recognised as part of the annual Australia Day Honours. They are commended for everything from professional achievements to community service and volunteering.

Last year, the Hunter's recipients were littered with the local contingent of London Olympics stars such as gold-medal winning sailors Nathan Outteridge, Iain Jensen and Tom Slingsby.

This year's award list contains less household names, but all 12 of the new Order of Australia members have made significant contributions to the Hunter Region.

Like Kevin Berger, from Newcastle East, the founder and executive director of the St Philips Christian School's DALE program.

The program, founded at the urging of Mr Berger in 1997, supports at-risk and special needs youth to remain at school and continue their education.

The school also offers a separate program for young mothers seeking to complete the high school certificate.

"One of the biggest changes you see in the kids is confidence," Mr Berger said.

"Often they're coming from a situation where they've had a lot of negativity directed their way, and often an encouraging environment opens up a lot of gifts and skills that weren't being noticed before."