



PAT AND KEITH SUTTON SA FAMILY CARER WINNERS (DUAL WINNERS WITH MAUREEN BROWN)

Pat and Keith Sutton along with Maureen Brown have been selected as dual Family Carer winners in the South Australian finals of the National Carer Awards.

Pat and Keith's story

For more than 20 years, Pat and Keith have provided additional support to their two sons, now in their forties, who live with severe and enduring mental illness with associated psycho-social disabilities.

Both young men were diagnosed in their late teens, the older being hospitalised following a violent incident where he sustained serious injuries, and the younger becoming suddenly unwell and quickly progressing to treatment due to the family's early insights regarding his symptoms.

Although the boys have lived away from home at times, both require daily care and support and have limited social networks, no financial independence, and limited interests or work opportunities. For Pat and Keith their constant focus is on helping and encouraging their sons to participate in meaningful activities so they can find some enjoyment in their lives.

Pat says that the support services are limited and that increases the difficulty in being a carer.

"When there is a diagnosis of mental illness, the grief and trauma for the family is exacerbated by the lack of appropriate support and the discrimination associated with living with these challenges."

Keith retired early from his job to provide the practical support their sons needed and to assist them with their daily routines. After many years of juggling work and their care, they needed more time to liaise with the various service providers and coordinate aspects of their care, so Keith became more involved in this. Both parents continuously invest a lot of time to attend appointments with the boys.

Pat has been involved in mental health advocacy for the past twenty years, and has shared her personal experiences in public forums and with other carers who have similar circumstances, constantly striving for improved services and equity of access.

To share her knowledge, Pat began volunteering with the Schizophrenia Fellowship, and gave talks to Police, schools and community groups, as well as to other NGOs. Passionate

about helping other families, she left her job as a visual arts coordinator to find work in the mental health sector.

Pat took on a number of part time paid roles including as the Community representative on the guardianship board, she was the first carer consultant with the SA Health Mental Health Unit, and she worked in Glenside Intensive Care in the psychiatric ward. She also volunteered with Carers Australia as the Mental Health Care representative on their National consumer carer forum for six years.

Pat says she feels privileged to have working alongside and learnt from some fantastic people at local, state and national levels.

She also worked with the former Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes to share their family story to assist in lobbying for people living with mental illness to be included in the NDIS.

As carers, their lives have changed significantly and the impact has been huge - financially, socially, emotionally and physically.

Pat said they know their situation is not unique and there are over 400,000 people living with mental illness. She says although it is difficult to speak out about their lives, she is driven by a desire to reduce discrimination and find more support for people who are so socially isolated.