

Leading the way on safety at work

The AEU Health and Safety Representative of the Year Award celebrates HSRs, who work hard to advocate for health and safety in our workplaces. Congratulations to the 2017 joint award-winners, Justin Harris and Des MacCurtain! Here's what they have to say about the role.

JUSTIN HARRIS Geelong High School

It's a representative role

You're making sure that employees' interests are considered in anything that will affect their working conditions or their health and safety. There are challenges in trying to do that in a way that doesn't put people offside, but also being forthright enough to make demands and achieve gains.

Communication, negotiation, organisation

These are the important skills. A passion for supporting your colleagues is crucial. You have to know what you're talking about, be well briefed in terms of the legislation and employees' rights, and be able to maintain reasonable relations despite different points of view.

OHS is a union matter

We can make lots of gains in terms of working conditions, which is the bread-and-butter of unions, through health and safety, because a safe workplace and good conditions are closely tied together.

I'm also a union rep

The roles are interconnected. Workload, and being able to do the work required to produce good educational outcomes, are the big issues for schools members, and also big OHS issues, because stress is one of the main problems or injuries people suffer and a lot of that comes through workload.

I urge others to be a HSR

Especially where that role doesn't exist – so, in workplaces where staff are not taking advantage of the legislated

benefits we've got through the OHS Act. Make sure you have an OHS rep, a functioning OHS committee, and that OHS is on the agenda in their workplace.

DES MACCURTAIN Parkdale Secondary

If staff feel uncertain they come to me

My role is to take up the issue with the principal on their behalf. First, I'll let the staff member know if it's an issue under the OHS Act, then I'll represent them and try to resolve it.

Be a good listener

Try to keep everyone on the same side and bring everyone along with you. The main thing is not to put anyone offside; just explain that it is an OHS issue and so it has to be fixed.

Work with both sides

I never settle and take 'no' for an answer. I'll take another avenue, maybe go back with a different argument. You have to just keep nibbling away at it.

Strong union members

We do have that at Parkdale SC. It's one of our successes; we have very strong union members and reps, so I feel that I'm not working on my own. I can run ideas past them and get their thoughts. The secret of being a good HSR: you have the back-up of your union reps.

It's a fulfilling role

I feel supported in the school and by the union reps. When I won the award, everyone was congratulating me and thanking me for the job I do for the school. You really feel like you're achieving something.

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