



Game changer

Story: Frances O'Shea, Photography: Neil Zanardi

Former footballer Peter Sleep is still kicking goals, but now it's for his community - raising \$1000s for those in need.

The 'everyday hero' tag doesn't sit easily with Peter Sleep, but in the eyes of many in the Newcastle community and beyond he is just that. Since 2010 the former South Newcastle first-grade footballer has been responsible for changing the lives of cancer sufferers and those struggling with adversity.

It was that year when a personal cancer diagnosis changed Peter's life forever and set him on the path of giving back. From humble beginnings Sleepy's Day began, with around 50 people supporting a fundraiser at a South Newcastle home game and raising around \$15,000.

As they prepare for their 10th anniversary next year, Peter and his small band of helpers still find it hard to accept

recognition for the hundreds of lives they have touched. Fundraising efforts nearing an astounding \$1million paved the way for cancer sufferers, young and old, to receive a helping hand from the Sleepy's Day crew.

A holiday, financial assistance, fulfilling a dream, or completing renovations are just some of the ways Sleepy's Day has changed lives of not only cancer sufferers but others facing tough times. While their annual beneficiaries include the Mater Hospital and Leukemia Foundation, most of their funds go directly to the people battling cancer. And the tentacles have spread wider in recent years, with recipients coming from the Newcastle and Hunter areas and also North West NSW and beyond.

Sleepy's Day in 2018 was a far cry from the inaugural function, with a crowd in excess of 2000 making it the biggest day yet and fundraising exceeding \$200,000.

Accepting credit doesn't come easily to Peter, who would rather praise the joint efforts of their small committee made up of his wife Robyn, and former South Newcastle player Dave Fleming. "When I was diagnosed with throat cancer in 2009 the South Newcastle football community got behind me," he said.

"It was an extremely difficult time, but they organised a fundraiser to help me get back on my feet and it made a huge difference. From that time on I wanted to give back, to help other people going through similar battles with cancer."

"The community has really got behind Sleepy's Day and it has grown so much."

"We're not only handing out cheques on that day, we hold money back so we can provide assistance to other requests we get throughout the year."

There is hardly a dry eye in the house when Peter Sleep makes his annual appearance on stage for the cheque presentations, welcoming the recipients, one by one. Their personal story is explained to the large crowd and those able to, often speak of their experiences and what the assistance of the Sleepy's Day team has meant to them.

One of this year's recipients was two-year-old Tamworth girl Chloe Cross, who was given just a 20 percent chance to live after being diagnosed with a stage four cancer just months earlier. With Chloe in their arms, parents Barry and Shiralee accepted \$5000 in cash and a \$6000 holiday for the family and were overwhelmed by the generosity. Less than a month later Chloe passed away, devastating her family, friends and the Sleepy's Day community.

"It is always so hard when we lose one of our angels; that is the toughest part," Peter said. "I was playing peek-a-boo with Chloe on Sleepy's Day and then she's gone. But to think we might have made a small difference to their lives keeps us going. We are starting to get a fair bit of traction and that helps with our fundraising efforts. People see the raw emotion on the night and most can't help but be affected and want to help where they can."



Former South Newcastle first-grade footballer Peter Sleep has been changing the lives of cancer sufferers since 2008.

Peter says people are also starting to reach out to them, which is very satisfying. Next year will be the 10th Sleepy's Day and the team want it to be the best yet. Peter says: "We are so grateful for the help we receive from our volunteers, sponsors and people who come along and part with their hard-earned cash. Without the help of the community we would not have been able to support our very special beneficiaries and that is what we are all about." ◇

Sleepy's Day will be held in August 2019. For more information and to make a donation please contact Peter Sleep on 04 2395 6756, via email admin@sleepysday.com.au or through their webpage www.sleepysday.com.au.

