

MEDIA RELEASE

THURSDAY 27 OCTOBER 2022

ACT 2023 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS NOMINEES ANNOUNCED

Nominees for the 2023 ACT Australian of the Year Awards include a man launching space rockets from Australia, a hip-hop musician, an insect farmer, human rights advocates and a woman whose sewing is changing lives.

They are just some of the 16 people in the running to be named the ACT Australian of the Year, ACT Senior Australian of the Year, ACT Young Australian of the Year and ACT Local Hero.

The 2023 ACT award nominees are:

ACT Australian of the Year

Mikaela Jade – Founder, Indigital (Phillip)
Scott Wallis – Founder, Equatorial Launch Australia, Arnhem Space Centre (Garran)
Olympia Yarger – Insect farming pioneer and founder, Goterra (Canberra)
Heidi Yates – Human rights lawyer and community advocate (Canberra)

ACT Senior Australian of the Year

Mohammed Ali – Founder and president, HelpingACT (Franklin)
Professor Tom Calma AO – Human rights and social justice advocate, consultant and volunteer (Chapman)
Robert Cook – ACT Children's Court Magistrate and Warrumbul Court Magistrate (Canberra)
Brian Triglone OAM – Founder and conductor, Alchemy Chorus (Torrens)

ACT Young Australian of the Year

Bryce Cronin – Engineer, designer and founder, Access3D (Belconnen)
Kofi Owusu-Ansah – Award-winning performer and songwriter (Canberra)
Camille Schloeffel – Founder, The Stop Campaign (Ainslie)
Hillary Swann – Teacher and founder, EMPOWER (Rivett)

ACT Local Hero

Nazmul Hasan – Multicultural community champion (Holder)
Gaurav Malhotra – Founder, Garry Malhotra - Ken Behrens Helping Hands (Denman Prospect)
Carol Mead – Founder, Sew For Change (Gordon)
Dr Shamaruh Mirza – Scientist and co-founder, SiTara's Story (Waramanga)

**see bios on following pages*

The ACT nominees are among 130 people being recognised across all states and territories.

The four award recipients from the ACT will be announced on Wednesday 9 November 2022 in a ceremony at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, which will also be available to watch via ABC iView from 12:15pm (local ACT time).

They will then join the other state and territory recipients as national finalists for the national awards announcement on 25 January 2023 in Canberra.

National Australia Day Council CEO Karlie Brand congratulated the nominees on their recognition.

“The 2023 ACT nominees remind us what an extraordinarily active community the territory is home to,” said Karlie.

“Whether it’s world-leading breakthroughs, local community development or leadership on matters of social significance, the ACT nominees are making a mark.”

20 Years Of Local Heroes

The 2023 Awards also mark 20 years of the Local Hero category.

Introduced in 2003, the award acknowledges extraordinary contributions made by Australians in their local community. There is yet to be an ACT person awarded Australia’s Local Hero.... could 2023 be the year?

ENDS.

Nominee [bios on the following pages](#) and can also be viewed from australianoftheyear.org.au.

Nominee [photos can be downloaded](#) from this link (note all photos provided by nominees):

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/i5uikvikt21gm8ehav768/h?dl=0&rlkey=hp11dntt8dpfrplf3siqn7h03>

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ACT AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR – NOMINEE BIOS

Mikaela Jade

Founder, Indigital

When Mikaela Jade, a Cabrogal woman from the Dharug-speaking nation, first saw augmented reality (AR) demonstrated at a university event, she recognised almost immediately how it could be used to share Indigenous stories and histories – especially in her park ranger role where significant cultural sites lacked meaningful storytelling.

Despite having no idea what she was doing, Mikaela began researching and cold-calling digital technology pioneers globally to learn about AR. Two years later, in 2014, she launched Indigital, Australia's first Indigenous edu-tech company specialising in AR.

As founder and CEO, 43-year-old Mikaela's priority has been delivering digital skills programs to help close the digital divide for Indigenous people. Indigital provides training in augmented and mixed realities, AI, machine learning, the internet of things and geospatial technologies.

Mikaela developed Indigital's flagship program – Indigital Schools – for primary- and high-school students in which they learn from local Elders as they develop digital skills for the future.

Scott Wallis

Founder, Equatorial Launch Australia, Arnhem Space Centre

Scott Wallis has spent the past decade working with NASA, the NT Government and local Indigenous people to establish Australia's first commercial spaceport.

After a successful career with the Australian Department of Defence, Scott founded Equatorial Launch Australia (ELA), the developer, owner and operator of the Arnhem Space Centre. His vision was and is to rejuvenate Australia's space industry while working together with Australia's Indigenous people.

Scott joined the Royal Australian Air Force in 1978 and advanced to its senior ranks. The 64-year-old's career includes international postings to the USA and UK, and in March he won a Lifetime Achievement award from the Australian space industry.

For years it was obvious to Scott sovereign space launch would foster space exploration and position Australia at the forefront of global technology, while also enhancing national security.

In July, ELA successfully completed launching three rockets for NASA, helping astronomers measure our Milky Way galaxy.

Olympia Yarger

Insect farming pioneer and founder, Goterra

Olympia Yarger is a climate action warrior, a maggot farmer and founder of the Insect Protein Association of Australia. She even had a fly named after her by the CSIRO (*Hermetia Olympea*, a soldier fly species from the Daintree rainforest).

The founder of agritech start-up Goterra, Olympia is an insect farming pioneer and has developed an innovative waste management system that uses maggots to process food waste and reduce greenhouse gases.

Her 'Maggot Robot' system houses larvae of the black soldier fly inside portable units. Food waste is fed to the maggots and, similar to a worm farm, the larvae's excretions become fertiliser. The maggots themselves become protein-rich feed for livestock and aquaculture.

It's already being used by Woolworths and in Sydney's Barangaroo precinct. So far, 47-year-old Olympia's system has processed more than 35,000 tonnes of waste and saved more than 66,000 tonnes of carbon emissions.

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Heidi Yates

Human rights lawyer and community advocate

Heidi Yates is a human rights lawyer and activist whose work has improved the lives of vulnerable people across the community.

Over 18 years, she has advocated for better outcomes for women, elder Australians, people living with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and survivors of violence.

Heidi graduated from the ANU College of Law in 2004 and worked for the next 18 years at Legal Aid ACT, the Women's Legal Centre and the ACT Human Rights Commission, currently serving as the Victims of Crime Commissioner. The 42-year-old commits her time to assisting community legal services and community organisations, and volunteering.

Heidi has pursued legal changes with far-reaching impacts. She was instrumental in the ACT's ground-breaking move to recognise a nonbinary sex category, and in removing discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people in areas such as parenting, civil partnerships and birth certificates.

Her wins have inspired other communities to demand similar positive change.

ACT SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR – NOMINEE BIOS**Mohammed Ali**

Founder and president, HelpingACT

While teaching in Africa in the 1980s, Mohammed Ali saw the devastating effects of poverty up close. He recognised the same struggles in his birth country, Pakistan, and across the Asian sub-continent.

So, when Mohammed retired in 2018 after a long career as a biochemist and university lecturer, he launched HelpingACT to help people in need.

The charity provides food, clothing and household items to vulnerable Canberrans including migrants and refugees, international students, people affected by domestic violence disability and the homeless.

Demands for food tripled during COVID-19 and the organisation was active across Canberra.

During the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-20, Mohammed donated goods to fire-affected areas and prepared meals for families at evacuation centres.

The 70-year-old and his volunteers also support other organisations, including Companion House, Havelock Housing, the Early Morning Centre homelessness hub, Woden Community Service, Community Services #1 and several local street pantries.

Professor Tom Calma AO

Human rights and social justice advocate, consultant and volunteer

Professor Tom Calma AO is one of Australia's most respected human rights and social justice campaigners.

The Kungarakan Elder has worked for more than 45 years at local, community, state and international levels championing the rights, responsibilities and welfare of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

His call for Australia to address the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples was the catalyst for the Close the Gap Campaign. He was instrumental in establishing the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples; has led the Tackling Indigenous Smoking program; co-chaired Reconciliation Australia for over a decade; and co-led the co-design of a Voice to Parliament initiative.

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Currently Chancellor of the University of Canberra, 68-year-old Tom is an active volunteer, consultant and the first Indigenous Australian inducted as a fellow of the Australian Academy of Science.

Tom believes education is the key to advancing Indigenous peoples and says his father remains his inspiration behind his life's work.

Robert Cook

ACT Children's Court Magistrate and Warrumbul Court Magistrate

Magistrate Robert Cook has drawn on his turbulent childhood to be a passionate advocate for the rehabilitation of young people.

His childhood was filled with violence, significant instability and poverty. But Robert was determined to make something of himself. He joined the Royal Australian Air Force straight from school and spent 22 years in the Defence Force. While in the Air Force, Robert developed a drive to pursue law. Supported by the military, he started legal studies at night through QUT.

He joined the ACT Magistrates Court in 2013 and for three years headed the Children's Court.

As the Children's Court Magistrate, he developed the Warrumbul Court. This court worked with a panel of Elders to assist young Indigenous offenders into rehabilitation pathways, bringing them closer to country and community.

At 67, he remains an advocate for children and youth, victims of domestic violence and for the rehabilitation of those in the prison system.

Brian Triglone OAM

Founder and conductor, Alchemy Chorus

Lifelong music lover and community choir founder Brian Triglone OAM was watching YouTube six years ago when he saw an inspiring American choir for people living with dementia and their partners. So, he decided to start a similar choir in Canberra.

Alchemy Chorus now has around 90 members that 77-year-old Brian hosts once a week. The choir gives its members an opportunity to enjoy music, have social interaction in an understanding environment and perform publicly. In particular, it's a special opportunity for carers to come together and interact with other carers.

Brian's hope is that the choir will help demonstrate the importance and benefits of social inclusion for all those impacted by dementia.

Following the success of this model, a network of similar choirs is developing around the country, including groups in Sydney, Brisbane and on the NSW South Coast.

ACT YOUNG AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR – NOMINEE BIOS

Bryce Cronin

Engineer, designer and founder, Access3D

Bryce Cronin is an award-winning engineer who is harnessing technology for social good. Although he graduated from the University of Canberra in only 2020, he is already recognised as an emerging leader in the Australian technology sector.

Bryce set up Access3D in 2022, when assistive devices for people living with a disability were hit with rising costs and import delays. This volunteer network of 3D-printer experts manufacture simple assistive technologies – including cutlery grips and writing aids – and provides them free to those who need them.

Bryce has been designing 3D-printable accessibility devices and low-cost robotics for classrooms since 2020. He was awarded the Australian Computer Society medal for his design of a 3D-printable COVID-19 face shield for developing nations.

The 23 year-old has won international hackathons with his prototype apps and established hackathons.com.au to promote STEM events nationally, as well as encourage our younger generations to study STEM subjects.

Kofi Owusu-Ansah

Award-winning performer and songwriter

Kofi Owusu-Ansah is a Ghanaian-Australian poet, songwriter and rapper who uses hip-hop music to highlight issues such as racism and depression.

Kofi was born in Ghana in 1998. By the time he was two years old, his family had relocated to Canberra where the family now lives.

As a shy kid, he was attracted to poetry as a means of self-expression and self-exploration. Now, at 24 and on the cusp of an Australian tour with the Black Dog Band under the name of Genesis Owusu, he gets a similar kind of illumination from making music.

His 2021 album, *Smiling With No Teeth*, won four ARIA Awards – Album of the Year, Best Hip Hop Release, Best Independent Release and he shared the Best Cover Art award.

Smiling With No Teeth is a deeply personal record. Throughout, Kofi grapples with two distinct but entwined ‘black dogs’ – racism and depression – to resonant effect.

Camille Schloeffel

Founder, The Stop Campaign

Camille Schloeffel is founder and director of The STOP Campaign, a volunteer-run program that advocates for change in how tertiary institutions respond to sexual violence on campus.

With help from a 2021 YWCA Great Ideas grant, she developed The Safe Response Toolkit to support people wondering ‘what do I do now?’ after an act of sexual violence. The kit has advice on how to safely respond to sexual violence disclosures and how to access support services in Canberra, including legal, medical, crisis and post-crisis services.

Camille is a senior policy officer in the public service, working in criminal justice responses to sexual assault. In 2020, she was awarded the Peter Mitchell Churchill Fellowship to explore ways activists and universities can work together to prevent sexual violence.

In the advocacy space, 25-year-old Camille’s ability to listen with understanding has empowered those who previously have felt silenced and isolated.

Hillary Swann

Teacher and founder, EMPOWER

Hillary Swann is the youngest Executive Team Teacher at Caroline Chisholm School in Canberra.

As well as mentoring young educators and helping the school’s leadership focus on the wellbeing of students and teachers, 29-year-old Hillary has launched EMPOWER, a program focused on building confidence, skills and capacity in Year 10 girls.

Some of the girls who have participated in EMPOWER will be the first in their families to finish school, to be granted a HMEF scholarship, to go on to university, to engage in a sport or pursue a career.

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Hillary organises and coordinates all EMPOWER sessions, which include key areas such as physical health and fitness, relationship literacy and future skills.

The impact of these opportunities on Canberra and the wider educational community are significant. Since EMPOWER's launch, other schools in Canberra have contacted Hillary, hoping to embed the program in their schools.

ACT LOCAL HERO – NOMINEE BIOS

Nazmul Hasan

Multicultural community champion

When Canberra went into COVID-19 lockdown in August 2021, Nazmul Hasan realised many people would struggle to make ends meet. He decided to offer free food and essential items to those who needed them – no questions asked.

With only a Facebook page and Google form, Nazmul provided thousands of free halal meals, groceries and even whitegoods.

Also in 2021, Nazmul began helping resettle Afghan refugees. As well as access to essential supplies, Nazmul supports refugees to navigate employment and government services. This work continues through his not-for-profit Rahimoon, which collaborates with the Red Cross.

A passionate voice for unity across the multicultural Muslim and Australian communities, 40-year-old Nazmul organises interfaith and multicultural events in addition to his charitable work.

Nazmul is a role model in serving community needs. He was honoured with the ACT Outstanding Excellence Award for Diversity and Inclusion 2022 and was the winner of the ABC Canberra Community Spirits Award 2022.

Gaurav Malhotra

Founder, Garry Malhotra – Ken Behrens Helping Hands

Gaurav (Garry) Malhotra first put out a message on social media offering free meals to struggling people when he was in a hospital bed recovering from an appendix operation. It was August 2021 and Canberra had just gone into COVID-19 lockdown.

Within a few months, Garry had used \$60,000 of his own savings to provide thousands of nutritious meals to Canberra residents in need, supported by his extended family and many willing volunteers.

Once lockdown ceased, 35-year-old Garry put together food hampers, making them available at four locations around Canberra and containing a week's worth of meals and long-life food. His Canberra meals and hamper charity Garry Malhotra – Ken Behrens Helping Hands was born.

In late 2021, Gary, who is CEO of AIM Institute of Health & Sciences, donated the use of its hospitality venue training facility at Narrabundah golf course to charity. Disadvantaged people in need are always welcome for free meals.

Carol Mead

Founder, Sew For Change

Carol Mead has been making a difference to the lives of vulnerable people in the ACT for decades.

A nurse by profession, 65-year-old Carol has set up sexual health clinics, a medical practice for people with drug and alcohol issues, and an inclusive garden at Pearce Community Centre.

She's been CEO of many Canberra community organisations, but in the past seven years her Sew For Change group has helped women and children in Canberra and further beyond.

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The group meet to sew clothing and make menstrual packs that assist girls around the world to attend school when they have their period, ultimately leading to better life outcomes. The group has now provided thousands of menstrual packs and dresses to girls who needed them.

Sew For Change has also given a sense of community and purpose to Canberra women who are using their sewing skills to change lives.

Dr Shamaruh Mirza

Scientist and co-founder, SiTara's Story

Dr Shamaruh Mirza is a medical scientist, but she knows that feeling connected and having someone to talk to is as important as any medicine for good health.

Originally from Bangladesh, Shamaruh was seeing a lot of women dealing with depression as she did volunteer work among culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups in Canberra.

Wanting to give women of diverse backgrounds a safe space in which to discuss their challenges and gain confidence, she co-founded SiTara's Story in 2017. It would be somewhere women could discuss stigmatised topics without fear, form support networks and empower themselves.

The volunteer-run not-for-profit now organises workshops, talk shops, seminars and creative competitions that support CALD women to discuss mental health, disability, domestic violence, self-care and skill development. In 2021, the organisation was awarded the ACT Mental Health Month award.

Shamaruh, 44, was herself a finalist in the Canberra Community Spirits Award 2021.

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