

MEDIA RELEASE
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2026 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS
NOMINEES FOR ACT ANNOUNCED

Nominees for the 2026 Australian of the Year Awards for the ACT include a champion for better end-of-life experience, a men's 'downunder' health advocate, a basketball legend helping at-risk kids, mental health advocates, a perinatal bereavement advocate and a cartoonist celebrating diversity.

The nominees are:

2026 Australian of the Year for ACT

Lauren Cannell - Advocate and humanitarian (Bruce)
Sarah McGoram OAM - Cancer patient advocate (Canberra)
Professor Rose McGready - Migrant and refugee health expert (Thailand)
Karen Schlage - Maternity care advocate and volunteer (Spence)

2026 Senior Australian of the Year for ACT

Marion Lê AM - Refugee advocate (Fraser)
Calvin Bruton OAM - Basketball legend (Gungahlin)
Heather Reid AM - Football pioneer (Keils Mountain)
Dr Adele Stevens - Palliative care advocate (Rivett)

2026 Young Australian of the Year for ACT

Liam Adams - Author and cartoonist (Canberra)
Howard Maclean - Housing advocate (Kingston)
Sita Sargeant - Historian and guide (Canberra)
Anjali Sharma - Climate change campaigner (Canberra)

2026 Local Hero for ACT

Ben Alexander - Mental health advocate (Forrest)
Bradley Butt - Men's health advocate (Fyshwick)
Michael Phelan - Youth mentor (Canberra)
Raffy Sgroi - Inclusive employment champion (Weston Creek)

**see detailed bios on following pages*

The nominees for ACT are among 134 people being recognised across all states and territories.

The ACT award recipients will be announced on Monday 17 November 2025 in a ceremony at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, which will also be available to watch online at australianoftheyear.org.au.

They will then join other state and territory recipients as finalists for the national awards announcement on 25 January 2026 in Canberra.

National Australia Day Council CEO Mark Fraser AO CVO congratulated the nominees for the ACT awards.

"The nominees for the ACT awards are extraordinary people making life better for others," said Mark.

"Drawing on their own life experiences or responding to a need they've identified, they are working to educate, generate awareness, create opportunities and improve lives."

ENDS.

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

Nominees have supplied **photos** which can be downloaded from this link: [ACT NOMINEE PHOTOS](#)

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2026 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR ACT – NOMINEE BIOS

Lauren Cannell

Advocate and humanitarian

Lauren Cannell is a changemaker dedicated to building inclusive and compassionate communities.

Lauren founded Educación Diversa, a not-for-profit community of international volunteers who design art-based programs that teach human rights, sexual and reproductive health and conflict resolution. She also founded ArtFullness, an organisation that harnesses creativity for healing, connection and mental health prevention.

Lauren, 43, serves on the board of Build Like a Girl and is a member of the Policy Advisory Committee for Women with Disabilities ACT. She initiated the Period Poverty, Period Dignity project to place free sanitary products in public toilets. Her grassroots effort contributed to the Australian Capital Territory becoming the first Australian jurisdiction to legislate the provision of free period products.

Living with a chronic heart condition, Lauren is dedicating her life to meaningful impact. She hopes to be remembered not for what she has, but for how she used her privilege to uplift others.

Sarah McGoram OAM

Cancer patient advocate

Sarah McGoram overcame the challenges of living with cancer to raise awareness about the difficulties faced by people living with rare cancers.

Diagnosed with gastrointestinal stromal tumours at a young age and given only months to live, she defied the prognosis to raise a family, sustain a 20-year teaching career, and is a powerful voice for others living with a rare cancer.

Sarah, 47, has supported and campaigned on behalf of cancer patients, including for Rare Cancers Australia (RCA), highlighting systemic inequities in access to treatment, support, and information. She successfully led efforts to secure access to a life-saving cancer therapy, extending many patients' lives over the past four years. Sarah also advocates and fundraises for multiple charities, including climbing Mount Kosciuszko in the RCA Kosi Challenge while undergoing treatment.

Sarah's resilience and courage highlight how one person can overcome adversity to make a genuine difference in advocating for change.

Professor Rose McGready

Migrant and refugee health expert

Professor Rose McGready, 61, has spent three decades providing health services to displaced people in the border region between Thailand and Myanmar.

Arriving as a young doctor, Rose discovered that refugees who had fled persecution in Myanmar had difficulty accessing medical assistance in Thailand. In response, Rose established training for local staff to focus on services for expectant mothers and in the critical period of childbirth. Over the past 31 years, she has built a network of locally run clinics and out-patient services which have saved thousands of lives.

Rose's research has also led to new treatments being developed to tackle maternal malaria. Her findings have been adopted by the World Health Organisation as the global standard for combatting the disease, helping to treat millions of women around the world.

Rose's commitment, compassion and clinical expertise provide life-saving aid to some of the most vulnerable communities in the world.

Karen Schlage

Maternity care advocate and volunteer

Karen Schlage's own experience of pregnancy loss was the catalyst for her to advocate for better support for grieving families experiencing perinatal loss.

Karen, now 48, lost her only children, Charlie and Sophia, during the second trimester of each pregnancy. Through these experiences, she has become a passionate, empathetic and effective advocate for others facing pregnancy loss. Karen's presentation to an inquiry into maternity care led to important changes in the Australian Capital Territory health system including the opening of a dedicated early pregnancy loss unit at the Centenary Hospital for Women and Children.

Karen's advocacy has significantly contributed to policy development in maternity care, locally and nationally. Based on Karen's Churchill Fellowship recommendations, an in-hospital perinatal bereavement companion program is being implemented.

Karen's understanding and empathy have driven essential and meaningful change in how the health system provides care and support across Australia to families facing such heartbreaking loss.

2026 SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR ACT – NOMINEE BIOS

Marion Lê AM

Refugee advocate

Marion Lê has spent five decades advocating for the rights of migrants and refugees in Australia. Her work has had a profound effect on Australia's humanitarian response to refugee crises, starting with the arrival of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s.

Marion has provided expert advice and guidance to thousands of migrants and refugees who come to her for help to navigate immigration requirements. Her professionalism in handling complex visa issues and citizenship matters has been instrumental in helping many families find sanctuary.

Marion, 78, is a powerful advocate for multicultural inclusion, working with several migrant communities to ensure equal opportunities for all. She is a stalwart champion of social equity, consistently arguing against punitive and discriminatory elements in Australian immigration policy and standing up for the rights of asylum seekers.

Marion's expertise, generosity and determination to help those seeking safety has helped countless people find a new life in Australia.

Calvin Bruton OAM

Basketball legend

Calvin Bruton is well-known to basketball fans around the country as a player and coach who has made an outstanding contribution to the development of the game in Australia.

Calvin founded the Bruton Basketball Foundation to help young people develop not just basketball skills but also the skills they need to succeed in life. The Basketball Lessons 4Life program mentors disadvantaged and at-risk high school students to help them build confidence, set goals and forge a better life.

Calvin, 71, draws on his own life experiences to show how sport can empower young people and open doors for opportunities in education and employment. Through the program, young people learn to set goals, work as a team and engage positively with peers and family.

Calvin has had a huge impact on Australian sporting culture and is now making as big a difference to the lives of young Australians.

Heather Reid AM

Football pioneer

Heather Reid has made it possible for thousands of women to play football, both in the Australian Capital Territory and around Australia.

Heather was instrumental in establishing the Australian National University Women's Soccer Club in 1978 and the Australian Capital Territory Women's Soccer Association a year later. As the first female CEO of Capital Football in 2004, she brought together four associations into a single peak body and secured Canberra United's inclusion in the national W-League, helping to promote the game to a wider audience.

Heather, 69, has continued to support and mentor players, coaches and administrators, both locally and internationally. She set up the Heather Reid AM Bursary to help pay the registration fees of players in need of assistance, ensuring that financial hardship is not a barrier to participation.

Heather's vision and dedication to inclusion and equality have opened pathways for thousands of women to take part in sport.

Dr Adele Stevens

Palliative care advocate

Dr Adele Stevens has dedicated her life to ensuring better healthcare and consumer empowerment in health services. For over 10 years, she has advocated for improved palliative services for patients in palliative care and the right to choice about end of life.

After a long career in health services, Adele joined the Health Care Consumers Association in 2003 and was president from 2008 to 2012. She continues her volunteer work with the association as chair of the Health of Older People Consumer Reference Group, focusing on healthcare and opportunities for older people. Adele is an active member of the Council on the Ageing ACT as a member of its board and having previously advised on policy. Adele also co-chairs the ACT consumer reference group for end of life and palliative care.

Adele, 82, is a trusted and respected health consumer advocate with a strong commitment to improving access to palliative care.

2026 YOUNG AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR ACT – NOMINEE BIOS

Liam Adams

Author and cartoonist

Liam Adams is challenging perceptions about autism and living with intellectual disability through his self-publishing business, Everyone Needs a Liam.

Liam has published eight books through Everyone Needs a Liam, combining science fiction, fantasy and comedy, illustrating each book cover with his own cartoons. Liam launched the business to show what people living with intellectual disabilities and autism could achieve, challenging preconceptions about neurodiversity and celebrating difference.

Liam, 22, has spoken at events, including the Adelaide Fringe Festival 2024, where he won a Week 4 Weekly Award for Emerging Artist. Through his writing, speaking appearances and cartoons, Liam is a role model for other neurodivergent and disabled artists across Australia, showing what can be achieved with support and self-belief.

The success of his business highlights the contribution that people living with intellectual disabilities and autism can make in the creative arts, helping to further a more inclusive society.

Howard Maclean

Housing advocate

Howard Maclean's campaign for housing policy reform has had a significant impact on how future housing developments will be planned and built in Canberra.

Howard is the founding convenor of Greater Canberra, a community-based advocacy organisation that campaigns for more affordable housing, liveable suburbs and environmentally sustainable planning. Under his guidance, Greater Canberra has become an important grassroots voice advocating for changes to the Australian Capital Territory's planning laws.

Howard, 30, played a leadership role in the Missing Middle Canberra campaign launched by Greater Canberra which argued for increasing medium density housing in suburbs to address housing shortages in a sustainable manner. He was a key figure in the campaign, working to mobilise support and build a community consensus.

Howard's advocacy, strategic thinking and expertise has helped transform attitudes to urban development and recognise the need for more sustainable housing, not just in Canberra but in metropolitan areas across Australia.

Sita Sargeant

Historian and guide

Sita Sargeant is forging a distinctive approach to storytelling and historical research, highlighting little-known women's stories and their impact on towns and cities across Australia.

She is the founder of She Shapes History, a historical tourism company and social enterprise dedicated to uncovering the often-overlooked stories of women who have shaped Australia in ways that receive little or no recognition. Through walking tours, digital content, and partnerships with cultural institutions and historic sites, 27-year-old Sita reveals how women's contributions have long been ignored by mainstream history.

Having taken more than 10,000 people on tours, She Shapes History has expanded to Sydney and Melbourne with a team of dedicated guides. Sita has also published a book spotlighting the stories of more than 250 women who have shaped history in 31 towns and cities across Australia.

Her passion, energy, and storytelling prowess are helping Australians see the full picture of their history, creating a richer, more inclusive understanding of the nation's identity

Anjali Sharma

Climate change campaigner

Anjali Sharma started campaigning for climate action as a 14-year-old, organising school strikes in Melbourne to urge governments to address greenhouse gas emissions.

While still at school, she was the lead litigant in a landmark civil action case against the Australian Government, arguing that it had a duty of care to protect future generations when considering fossil fuel projects.

Now studying law at the Australian National University, 21-year-old Anjali is campaigning for a proposed amendment to the Climate Change Act, known as the Duty of Care Bill. This would make it a statutory requirement that any climate-related government decisions will take the health and wellbeing of future generations into consideration.

Anjali's leadership and determination highlight how young people have an important stake in challenging policy on climate change. Her grassroots action demonstrates how anybody can be a voice for change, regardless of age.

2026 LOCAL HERO FOR ACT – NOMINEE BIOS

Ben Alexander

Mental health advocate

Ben Alexander is well known in Canberra for his rugby career with the Brumbies and Wallabies.

Since retiring, he has turned his focus to mental health, co-founding Running for Resilience (R4R) with Matt Breen to help make Canberra suicide-free by 2033.

R4R helps people overcome personal struggles by exercising and connecting with others. Every week, hundreds join free runs and walks across Canberra to boost their physical and mental health.

Through podcasts, newsletters and community events, Ben shares practical ways to connect, manage energy and support others. Open about his own challenges after rugby, 40-year-old Ben now uses that experience to help others find connection, purpose and hope. His work is building a stronger, more supportive community where no one feels they have to face tough times alone.

Bradley Butt

Men's health advocate

Bradley Butt is dedicated to making it easier for men to take an active interest in their urological health.

The Canberra-based pharmacist acknowledges that it's a topic men may find awkward or embarrassing to discuss, so he's breaking down barriers and starting conversations. Bradley founded Men's Health Downunder, a specialised service that provides advice and treatment to men about their urological conditions in a supportive environment.

Starting in Canberra, the service now extends to a network of pharmacists around the country who recommend treatment solutions and give guidance on how to implement them. Bradley has also taken Men's Health Downunder on the road, travelling around Australia to visit pharmacists and hold consultations to give remote communities access to the same treatments.

Bradley, 42, is committed to the role that local pharmacists play in the community, providing health advice and treatment options via one-on-one conversations with customers.

Michael Phelan

Youth mentor

A proud Barunggam and Gunggari man, Michael Phelan grounds his work in culture, connection and community. His cultural values guide the way he mentors and supports young people.

Through the Reconnect mentoring program he established and runs at the Bimberi Youth Justice Centre, Michael is making a lasting difference to young people's lives. The program imparts valuable vocational and life skills that build confidence, self-belief and pride in work.

During the program, Michael teaches barista and hospitality skills, but the true strength of his work lies in helping each participant recognise their own value and potential. The benefits often continue well beyond the program, with many participants securing long-term employment after returning to their communities.

Michael, 34, is deeply committed to breaking the cycle of reoffending by showing young people a different path to walk. He delivers his program with empathy, cultural awareness and trauma-informed practice to ensure each participant feels respected, supported and seen.

Raffy Sgroi

Inclusive employment champion

Raffy Sgroi is committed to boosting inclusivity in what has traditionally been a predominantly male environment – automotive workshops.

Raffy and her husband Charlie run Canberra's Car Mechanical Services auto workshop where they create training and employment opportunities for women, people living with neurodivergence and disabilities, and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Raffy's self-funded 12-week My Career Portfolio program teaches young people the skills they need to transition to the workforce. Since the program started three years ago, Raffy has mentored 186 students and is focused on giving opportunities to those who may fall through the cracks.

Raffy, 48, has long championed inclusive employment and sustainability in automotive services, putting into practice her belief that inclusion and diversity help to build stronger communities. Raffy loves seeing people succeed. She is a regular participant in school career expos, encouraging young people to explore opportunities for growth and skills development in the automotive trades.