

MEDIA RELEASE

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**NSW NOMINEES FOR
2022 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS ANNOUNCED**

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Nominees for the 2022 NSW Australian of the Year Awards include a woman teaching kids with autism to swim, a street side medic, a man who started a job board in COVID, a choir creator, a mum helping vulnerable families with what they need most, a mentor for Aboriginal children, a scientist turning waste into green materials and a 102 year old walking to help veterans.

They are among 16 NSW residents in the running to be named the NSW Local Hero, Young Australian, Senior Australian or Australian of the Year.

The 2022 NSW award nominees are:

NSW Australian of the Year

Erika Gleeson - Founder and CEO of Autism Swim (Port Macquarie)

June Riemer - Disability advocate and deputy CEO of First Peoples Disability Network (Nambucca Heads)

Professor Veena Sahajwalla - Founding Director, Centre for Sustainable Materials Research and Technology at UNSW (Kensington, Sydney)

Lyn Williams AM - Founder and Artistic Director of Gondwana Choirs (Dulwich Hill, Sydney)

NSW Young Australian of the Year

Dr Michael Mohammed Ahmad - Author and Founding Director of Sweatshop Literacy Movement (Birrong, Sydney)

Isaiah Dawe - Founder and CEO of ID. Know Yourself (Darlington/Gadigal Country)

Amelia Munday - STEM and disability advocate (Berkeley Vale)

Daniel Nour - Founder of Street Side Medics (Sylvania Waters, Sydney)

NSW Senior Australian of the Year

Roger Dive - Former Magistrate and Senior Judge, Drug Court of NSW (Ku-ring-gai Sydney)

Sergeant Bert Le-Merton - World War II veteran and fundraiser for veterans

Abla Kadous - President of Islamic Women's Welfare Association (Sydney)

Associate Professor Lynette Riley - Academic and education trailblazer (Kogarah, Sydney)

NSW Local Hero

Anthony Cohen - Founder of Project Displaced (Sydney)

Samantha Payne - Co-founder and CEO of Pink Elephants (Botany, Sydney)

Carmen Platt - Co-founder and CEO of The Generous and The Grateful (Ryde, Sydney)

Shanna Whan - Founder and CEO of Sober in the Country (Narrabri)

**see bios on following pages*

The nominees are among 129 people being recognised across all states and territories as part of the program, which began in 1960.

The four award recipients from NSW will be announced in a ceremony on the evening of Monday 15 November 2021 at Luna Park, Sydney which will also be available to watch online via livestream.

They will then join the other state and territory recipients as national finalists for the national awards announcement on 25 January 2022.

National Australia Day Council CEO Karlie Brand congratulated the NSW nominees on being recognised by their communities.

“The NSW nominees are an extraordinary group of people,” said Ms Brand.

“Scientific technology, advocacy for vulnerable people, grassroots programs which have grown to national status and lifetimes of giving and helping others – they are all to be admired and celebrated.”

For more information on the Australian of the Year Awards visit australianoftheyear.org.au.

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/sh/ug8h6rexe7l8jcm/AABNWJeZ3tkVPkFmf6obLtRya?dl=0>

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NSW AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR – NOMINEE BIOS

Erika Gleeson

Founder and CEO of Autism Swim

In 2016, Senior Behaviour and Disability Specialist Erika Gleeson founded Autism Swim to mitigate the risk of drowning for children on the autism spectrum.

Children on the autism spectrum are 160 times more likely to drown than their peers. Many of them gravitate towards bodies of water because they associate water with alleviating their sensory needs. However, they often have limited ability to perceive its risks and dangers.

With a world-first and best-standard certification program, Autism Swim now operates in 20 countries, with thousands of individuals benefiting from specialised water safety, learn-to-swim programs and water therapy. Erika also consults to the New South Wales Police Rescue Team on how to prevent and respond to wandering and potential drowning situations, is on the boards of multiple disability organisations, and is the leading world expert on wandering and drowning prevention for those with other abilities.

Through Autism Swim, 33 year old Erika's passion and commitment to the cause is improving and saving the lives of many children with autism.

June Riemer

Disability advocate and deputy CEO of First Peoples Disability Network

Dunghutti woman June Riemer is the Deputy CEO of First Peoples Disability Network (FPDN). She's worked in the sector for over 40 years, leading and inspiring her team as they navigate the changes in the national disability sector.

June has led multiple national conferences and training workshops. Her goal is to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people don't get left behind and have culturally appropriate access to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

She's also an adviser to multiple boards and reference groups where she ensures the rights and culture of her people are represented, respected and protected. June has been a representative at the United Nations in both New York and Geneva.

An accomplished speaker, 63 year old June is respected for telling it like it is. She shares real insights based on her extensive work and travel within Australia's Aboriginal communities, particularly in rural and remote areas.

June's vision and leadership has helped FPDN become a national organisation that's making a difference.

Professor Veena Sahajwalla

Founding Director of the Centre for Sustainable Materials Research and Technology at the University of New South Wales

A materials scientist, engineer and inventor, 56 year old Professor Veena Sahajwalla pioneers research into waste – turning it into a new generation of green materials and products. She does this as the Founding Director of the Centre for Sustainable Materials Research and Technology at the University of New South Wales.

Veena is most well known for her invention of Polymer Injection Technology, or 'Green Steel'. In 2018, she launched the first of many MICROfactories.

She leads two national research and industrial transformation hubs, the ARC Microrecycling Research Hub and the National Environmental Science Program Sustainable Communities and Waste Hub. Veena collaborates with leading universities and institutions, plus industry and community groups, to develop and apply new recycling science into real-world environmental and economic benefits.

Veena is a judge on ABC TV's *The New Inventors* and has appeared on *Q+A*, *The Drum*, *War on Waste* and *Australian Story*. She's been instrumental in raising the profile of STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) in Australia, enhancing public understanding of its importance.

Lyn Williams AM

Founder and Artistic Director of Gondwana Choirs

For more than three decades, Lyn Williams has made significant contributions to musical performance and development in Australia.

As the founder and Artistic Director of Gondwana Choirs, Lyn commissions original works – many of which speak to the connection between the traditional owners and their land.

In recent times, many arts organisations have struggled through the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Lyn has led Gondwana Choirs through the challenges. She's continued its inspiring ensemble work, giving young people access to the choral community both remotely and in person. In doing so, the 58 year old has provided a lifeline to hundreds of young people who come together to connect, learn and thrive through song, as well as to the families and communities they are part of.

Lyn's choirs have shaped the course of thousands of lives, with former choristers becoming future performing artists and composers. She nurtures the talents of music lovers who then share their learning with others.

NSW YOUNG AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR – NOMINEE BIOS

Dr Michael Mohammed Ahmad

Author and Founding Director of Sweatshop Literacy Movement

Coming from a disadvantaged background and experiencing difficulties in high school, Dr Michael Mohammed Ahmad was inspired to change the attitudes of young people through the written word.

He established the Sweatshop Literacy Movement in Western Sydney, to empower culturally and linguistically diverse communities through reading, writing and critical thinking. The organisation provides mentoring to young people who come from often-disadvantaged backgrounds, helping them express their frustrations and find solutions for change.

Mohammed has a PhD in creative writing and has written several novels about life in culturally diverse Western Sydney. His novel, *The Lebs*, was shortlisted for the 2019 Miles Franklin Award. He also edited *After Australia* – an anthology from a diverse mix of Indigenous writers and writers of colour.

Thanks to his leadership skills and powerful written voice, 35 year old Mohammed has become an important role model for disenchanted young people in Western Sydney. He helps them harness their energy and engage constructively with the wider community, using the written word as a tool.

Isaiah Dawe

Founder and CEO of ID. Know Yourself

A Butchulla and Gawara saltwater man, Isaiah Dawe has overcome plenty of barriers in life to inspire young Aboriginal people in and out of home care across New South Wales.

Isaiah drew from his experiences growing up in the care system to inspire positive change. Isaiah founded ID. Know Yourself – an Aboriginal mentoring organisation to support Aboriginal young people in and out of home care and in contact with the Juvenile Justice System.

There are thousands of Aboriginal children who live in care without their parents every single day. ID. Know Yourself provides a platform to create love, hope and family in their lives. It seeks to break the inter-generational trauma by establishing belonging, helping individuals discover their purpose and empowering them to make positive choices.

Through his leadership and determination, 27 year old Isaiah has helped countless Aboriginal children in and out of home care to reconnect with culture and family in country. He's given them a sense of their origins, belonging and identity and a deeper connection to community.

Amelia Munday

STEM and disability advocate

Academically gifted from a young age, 16 year old Amelia Munday has used her talents to promote STEM education to young girls, while also developing technology to improve the lives of people with a disability.

Amelia has developed several innovations that allow for easier communication and break down language barriers. This includes *Talk to the Hand – Learn Auslan*; *Talk to the Hand – My Bucket’s Full*; Aus-Glove; and AIIA (an Artificial Intelligence Interpreter of Auslan). All of Amelia’s innovations have positively impacted individuals within the deaf community, as well as people with sensory processing dysfunction.

In December 2019, Bravehearts Foundation approached Amelia and asked her to develop an app that would digitise the organisation’s education program for young children. Amelia agreed, working on the project out of her own goodwill.

Amelia also represents Australia in robotics competitions and promotes the Tech Girls Movement Foundation as an ambassador. She provides support and encouragement to girls interested in pursuing STEM as a career.

Daniel Nour

Founder of Street Side Medics

Identifying a gap in the healthcare of vulnerable people in New South Wales, Dr Daniel Nour founded Street Side Medics in August 2020. It’s a not-for-profit, GP-led mobile medical service for people experiencing homelessness.

With 145 volunteers, and four clinics across New South Wales, Street Side Medics has changed the lives of more than 300 patients. It has treated many communicable and non-communicable illnesses, dealt with neglected medical needs, and detected conditions that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. This includes diabetes, thyroid disorders, hepatitis C, HIV, heart disease and cancer.

Despite working full time at Royal North Shore Hospital, 26 year old Daniel has rarely missed a clinic across the four sites since Street Side Medics launched. He volunteers his afternoons to ensure the clinics are run smoothly and patients are receiving the care they deserve.

With his leadership and social consciousness, Daniel is committed to making a real difference to the lives of many Australians. He’s also making significant improvements to society.

NSW SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR – NOMINEE BIOS

Roger Dive

Former Magistrate and Senior Judge, Drug Court of NSW

A former Magistrate, head of the New South Wales Children's Court, and District Court Judge, Roger Dive showed compassion, understanding and dedication to the people who appeared before him in court.

Roger spent 17 years at the head of the specialist Drug Court of New South Wales – an Australian-first when it launched in 1999. The court works with drug-addicted adults who have pleaded guilty, often to serious offences.

Instead of locking them up immediately, they are enrolled in a 12-month rehabilitation program. Roger is still in touch with some of the program's participants, who went on to live ordinary lives without reoffending.

Roger retired in mid-2021 after dedicating 50 years to the Australian justice system. He plans to continue supporting the community by volunteering and helping those who are homeless.

In his personal life, 68 year old Roger has raised two children and fostered 60 more with his wife Linda. Showing great humanity, humility and intelligence, Roger has impacted many lives for the better.

Abla Kadous

President of Islamic Women's Welfare Association

After moving to Australia from Egypt, Abla Kadous helped set up the country's first welfare service for Muslim women – all while raising five children.

Abla overcame financial restraints and other challenges to create the not-for-profit Islamic Women's Welfare Association (IWWA), of which she is currently President. The organisation helps Islamic women feel welcome and participate in their communities. It offers anti-discrimination forums, school-readiness programs, youth camps, cooking classes and events. It also provides food and other essentials to people in need.

Abla leads 50 other volunteers and staff and, despite being in her 70s, is still active in the thriving organisation. Impressively, she raised enough money through sewing, cooking and sourcing items to sell to buy a state-of-the-art function centre for IWWA.

Abla has also helped bridge the gap with other religions by organising inter-faith forums in Western Sydney.

Abla has been volunteering for more than 35 years. Her generosity and energy is a true inspiration to her family, community and country.

Sergeant Bert Le-Merton

World War II veteran and fundraiser for veterans

In 2020, 102-year-old Sergeant Bert Le-Merton saw the devastatingly high rate of suicide within the veteran community. He sought to make a positive difference to the lives of those that have served.

On 15 August, the World War Two veteran took his first steps towards walking an accumulative 96 kilometres, the length of the Kokoda track, in a bid to raise funds for life-changing support services through veteran charity, Soldier On. His fundraising goal was \$10,000.

Quickly surpassing his initial targets and seeing his efforts draw more attention to the conversation of veteran welfare, Sergeant Bert continued his march. He would eventually walk more than 420 kilometres and raise \$116,121.

Sergeant Bert's actions and compassion for his fellow Australians inspired the nation. It led to more than 6,200 people taking a stance on veteran suicide as a part of the 'March On Challenge' – raising over \$1.85 million.

A self-proclaimed 'ordinary bloke', Sergeant Bert has achieved extraordinary things in service of his fellow Australians.

Associate Professor Lynette Riley

Academic and education trailblazer

A Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi woman, Associate Professor Lynette Riley has been pivotal in Aboriginal education policy. She has helped change the way Aboriginal studies is taught across New South Wales.

Lynette has raised seven children and completed her PhD in her sixties, while experiencing her third episode of breast cancer. Originally from Dubbo, Lynette has always stayed true to her Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi heritage which has shaped her as an educator. Her groundbreaking work to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives in the study of humanities has changed many people's understanding of Aboriginal worldviews.

Lynette is an expert in translating research findings to deliver practical, positive change for Aboriginal people. These include a community profiling tool to identify needs in western New South Wales and a training tool to analyse resources for cultural bias.

A founding member of the New South Wales Department of Education's Aboriginal Education Unit, 65 year old Lynette currently advises on research design and conducts data collection with Aboriginal staff and families.

NSW LOCAL HERO – NOMINEE BIOS

Anthony Cohen

Founder of Project Displaced

After losing his hospitality job in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 lockdowns, Anthony Cohen's thoughts turned to helping others. He created a central job board with his own funds, connecting people who were stood down in the airline and arts industries to more than 3,000 jobs.

Anthony's efforts attracted attention, drawing other skilled volunteers to the cause. This included recruiters, business mentors, career coaches and mental health professionals, who offered their time and skills to the recently unemployed.

By October 2020, Anthony had more than 60 volunteers helping thousands of Australians with resume writing, identifying their transferable skills, and job-interview coaching.

Now incorporated as a company and a registered charity, 46 year old Anthony's social enterprise, Project Displaced, also offers mindset coaching and crucial mental-health first aid.

Anthony has led Project Displaced with determination to improve others' lives. With passion, he's giving people who've lost their job the tools to cope now – and thrive in the future.

Samantha Payne

Co-founder and CEO of Pink Elephants

In 2015, after losing her baby through miscarriage, Samantha (Sam) Payne reached out to her friend Gabbi Armstrong to share her grief. Realising there was no support for early pregnancy loss or miscarriage available in Australia, the two decided to create it themselves.

Together, they founded the not-for-profit Pink Elephants Support Network. The name took its inspiration from elephants, which are said to form a circle of support with their trunks around a mother elephant if she loses her baby.

The organisation's mission is to ensure no-one walks through pregnancy loss alone. Under 37 year old Sam's direction, it provides a personalised peer support program to help women through pregnancy loss.

With empathy, courage and tenacity, Sam also lobbied the federal government for three years to get more support for early pregnancy loss. This resulted in new legislation to add miscarriage to the compassionate and bereavement leave entitlement.

Sam has received numerous awards including the 2019 Telstra Women in Business – For Purpose award in New South Wales.

Carmen Platt

Co-founder and CEO of The Generous and The Grateful

Carmen Platt helps vulnerable families get back on their feet. As CEO and co-founder of social enterprise The Generous and The Grateful, Carmen works directly with frontline NGOs to connect essential bulky household items to those in need.

In 2016, as an advocate in Mums4Refugees, Carmen realised how many families could rebuild their lives more quickly with basics such as beds, whitegoods, a table and chairs, and a sofa. What began as Carmen and a few volunteers searching Facebook groups and other platforms, has turned into a team of more than 50 volunteers collecting donations from hotels and other generous businesses.

Under 49 year old Carmen's leadership, The Generous and The Grateful helps complete about 12 homes a week. Their recipients include those fleeing domestic violence or persecution, and those recovering from or at high risk of homelessness. She also helped people displaced from their homes in the devastating 2020 bushfires.

Carmen's extraordinary compassion, dedication and care saw her named the 2021 Ryde Citizen of the Year.

Shanna Whan

Founder and CEO of Sober in the Country

Shanna Whan is single-handedly creating radical social impact and change around how we discuss and use alcohol in rural Australia.

When Shanna almost lost her life to alcohol addiction in 2015, giving up drinking was just the start. What began as volunteer work to help others locally, evolved into a grassroots charity called Sober in the Country (SITC) which now has a national reach and offers peer support, powerful broadscale advocacy and education.

Shanna donated about 20,000 hours to the cause and now travels on invitation as the spokesperson for SITC. She has appeared on multiple major national media platforms, in person, in paddocks and at conferences.

She courageously shared her harrowing journey to sobriety on *Australian Story* in 2019. Now, through the national charity, the 47 year old is amplifying the essential, life-saving message and charity campaign that it is always "OK to say no" to booze.