

MEDIA RELEASE
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2027 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS: NORTHERN TERRITORY NOMINEES ANNOUNCED

People making an impact across youth mentorship, education, First Nations culture and leadership, volunteering, community advocacy and healthcare are among the Northern Territory nominees announced today for the 2027 Australian of the Year Awards.

Seventeen people from the territory have been named as nominees for the 2027 Australian of the Year Awards for the Northern Territory, with nominees recognised in each of the Australian of the Year, Senior Australian of the Year, Young Australian of the Year and Local Hero categories.

Among this year's nominees are a man transforming young lives through boxing, volunteers on the frontline of emergencies, a doctor who helped establish the international standard for health records, an educator who transformed tertiary education for women in the Territory, an academic preserving Indigenous languages and knowledge, and two flying chaplains.

The nominees are:

2027 Australian of the Year for Northern Territory

Byron Davis - First Nations employment advocate (Palmerston)
Helen Lamech - Diabetes educator (Desert Springs)
Dr Joel Liddle - Indigenous language waymaker (East Side)
Jason Lord - Founder, Arrernte Community Boxing Academy (Alice Springs)

2027 Senior Australian of the Year for Northern Territory

Joyce Chin - Pioneering female educator (Darwin)
Charles Gunabarra OAM - Aboriginal health leader (Maningrida)
Dr Samuel Heard OAM - Health record innovator (Darwin)
Patricia King - Volunteer chaplain (Casuarina)

2027 Young Australian of the Year for Northern Territory

Naomi Destacamento - Youth health and wellbeing advocate (Alice Springs)
Jules Gabor - Youth advocate (Darwin)
Taitt Green - Volunteer first responder (Katherine)
Elise Thornthwaite - Early childhood educator (Milikapiti)

2027 Australia's Local Hero for Northern Territory

Jason Bonson - First Nations men's health leader (Wagaman)
Majors Niall and Michelle Gibson - Rural and remote chaplains (Katherine)
Ben Hockey - Community leader (East Side)
Trent de With - Community leader (Katherine/East Side)

**Detailed nominee biographies follow.*

The Northern Territory nominees are among 130 people being recognised across all states and territories in the 2027 Australian of the Year Awards.

National Australia Day Council CEO Carrie Leeson said the nominees for the Northern Territory shared a commitment to people and community.

"Among the Northern Territory nominees there is a common thread of caring for others. Whether they are supporting people directly, or using their skills and knowledge, these inspiring nominees are creating real change in their communities," said Ms Leeson.

The 2027 Northern Territory award recipients will be announced on Monday 9 November in Darwin. The ceremony will also be available to watch via livestream at australianoftheyear.org.au

The Northern Territory award recipients will then join recipients from the other states and territories as finalists for the national Australian of the Year Awards, announced in Canberra on 25 January 2027.

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Detailed nominee **biographies** follow and are also available at australianoftheyear.org.au.

Photos for download: Photos provided by the nominees for editorial use can be downloaded from here: [NT Nominee Photos - supplied by nominees](#) (please use photo credits where noted on file names)

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2027 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR NORTHERN TERRITORY – NOMINEE BIOS

Byron Davis

First Nations employment advocate

Byron Davis, 56, is a proud Kalkadoon Wanyyi man and respected leader who has dedicated more than 30 years to advancing opportunities, inclusion and equity for First Nations Australians. Throughout his career, he has worked across community development, education, justice, employment and advocacy, creating pathways that empower individuals, strengthen communities and improve long-term outcomes.

Through his leadership, Byron has championed culturally-safe workplaces, expanded employment and career opportunities, and fostered greater understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Drawing on both professional expertise and lived experience, he is recognised for driving meaningful and lasting change.

A published author and thought leader, Byron has contributed to national conversations on reconciliation, cultural safety and sustainable Indigenous participation. Beyond his professional achievements, he is a mentor, community advocate and role model who uses his influence to inspire others, break down barriers and help create stronger, more inclusive communities for future generations.

Helen Lamech

Diabetes educator

Helen Lamech, 60, is a nurse whose education leadership has transformed diabetes care in Central Australia. Dedicating more than 30 years to nursing in the Northern Territory and the last decade to diabetes education, Helen has improved health outcomes for over 2000 people facing significant cultural and geographical barriers.

Helen established the region's first nurse-led type 1 diabetes clinic and has mentored more than 30 diabetes educators and over 300 health professionals. Her trauma-informed, culturally-responsive approach has reduced hospital admissions, improved safety and equipped families to manage diabetes with confidence.

Working alongside Aboriginal health workers, elders and schools, Helen co-designs programs that honour culture, build trust and create community-led pathways to better diabetes management. Helen delivers care flexibly in clinics, homes, schools and community spaces, to ensure people feel safe, respected and in control of their health.

Through proactive education and early intervention, Helen has dramatically enhanced the safety and wellbeing of thousands across the Territory.

Dr Joel Liddle

Indigenous language waymaker

Dr Joel Liddle, 42, is an Arrernte Australian academic, researcher and language advocate whose work has made profound contributions to Indigenous wellbeing and Indigenous language visibility.

Working on the frontline of language and knowledge revitalisation in Central Australia, Joel addresses a problem with far-reaching consequences: the loss of Indigenous knowledge systems and the dilution of the languages that carry

them. He builds the tools to reverse it, digital platforms like Indigemoji, and community projects like the Arrernte street signs, promoting language literacy, maintenance and transmission.

In 2023, Joel published the first peer reviewed academic journal article written entirely in an Australian Indigenous language, an Arrernte translation of his co-authored research. His doctoral research found that the loss of Indigenous knowledge negatively impacts Indigenous mental health and wellbeing, and the consequences affect all Australians.

His work now extends across the region: supporting language initiatives, repatriating knowledge held in ethnographic archives, and ensuring that Central Australia's languages, and the intimate knowledge of this landscape they carry, remain strong, so that all Australians can come to appreciate the complexity, depth and richness of Indigenous societies.

Jason Lord

Founder, Arrernte Community Boxing Academy

Jason Lord, 50, is an Arrernte man, a respected mentor and boxing coach of Alice Springs, who has transformed his own life to help change the future of at-risk young people.

Once a troubled teenager, he found balance, discipline and hope through boxing. Jason now leads the Arrernte Community Boxing Academy, a safe space for Indigenous youth in Central Australia.

The academy welcomes people of all ages, backgrounds and cultures, and is grounded in three pillars: culture, care and control. Under Jason's leadership, the academy has become a lifeline, offering mentorship, emotional support and a sense of belonging that keeps young people connected and out of harm's way.

Working with school kids on the streets and remote communities, Jason uses the boxing ring to teach resilience, cultural pride and emotional regulation. His mission is to give others the second chance that once saved him.

2027 SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR NORTHERN TERRITORY– NOMINEE BIOS

Joyce Chin

Pioneering female educator

Born in Pine Creek in 1940, Joyce Chin (nee Ah Toy) pursued higher education in the face of parental opposition, leaving home at age 17 to study at Adelaide Teachers' College. After teaching in Northern Territory high schools, Joyce became the Northern Territory's first full-time female adult education teacher.

During her 34-year career at Darwin Community College, Darwin Institute of Technology and Northern Territory University, Joyce rose to Associate Dean.

Joyce introduced the Territory's first award course in fashion, upgraded the qualification to a Diploma, helped graduates establish clothing businesses and was a founding member of the Northern Territory Fashion Awards. She also taught sewing to female prisoners.

After retirement in 2001, Joyce instigated, participated in and promoted fitness classes for seniors, to maintain their strength and mobility. Numerous gyms now offer such classes to our ageing population. Now 86, Joyce's legacy has shaped women's education and cultural life across the Northern Territory.

Charles (Charlie) Gunabarra OAM

Aboriginal health leader

Charles (Charlie) Gunabarra, 70, is a Maningrida man who has served in Aboriginal health care at the Maningrida Health Centre for a remarkable 50 years. In one of the Northern Territory's most impactful careers in remote health care, Charlie has managed major programs including leprosy treatment and men's health.

Charlie played a pivotal role in the 2021 transition of primary health services from Northern Territory Health to community control under Mala'la Health Service. His leadership ensured that community voices guided every step. Charlie's cultural knowledge and wisdom were instrumental in the design of the Manayingkarirra Public Health Unit, which he opened in 2026, where he helped ensure the facility was culturally safe and welcoming.

Charlie continues to mentor the next generation of Aboriginal health workers and now serves on the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory Board, providing Territory-wide leadership in health advocacy and

community engagement. His dedication, stability and cultural authority have strengthened health outcomes across Maningrida and the Northern Territory.

Dr Samuel Heard OAM

Health record innovator

Dr Samuel (Sam) Heard, 71, is a pioneering general practitioner and global health information innovator who has advanced the practice of healthcare.

Sam's interest in health records began in London in 1984, when he built a patient management and follow-up system on a secondhand computer. Sam led a general practitioner IT cooperative of 80 East London doctors, who together, through health record innovation, achieved London's highest immunisation and cervical screening rates for their low-socioeconomic community.

Returning to Australia, Sam continued his pioneering work in health record innovation, much of it in his own time. He co-authored openEHR, a specification for lifelong health records that can be used with any technology and in any language. In 2026, the OECD and WHO recognised openEHR as the international standard for health records.

Furthermore, to support remote Territorians, Sam invented the H-box; a system that allows patients to receive medical advice and medication even when no health practitioner is physically present.

Patricia King

Volunteer chaplain

Patricia (Pat) King, 74, has spent her life serving others, offering an unwavering commitment to helping people in their most vulnerable moments.

Pat was born in India to missionary parents who had survived a prisoner-of-war camp, instilling in her deep values of care, resilience and service. Moving to Darwin to study nursing, Pat found herself on the frontline of one of the Territory's darkest nights.

As a St John Ambulance volunteer on Christmas Eve 1974, Pat worked through Cyclone Tracy – taking emergency calls, treating the injured, triaging survivors, and helping families stay together during mass evacuations. Pat remained on duty for three days, providing care amid the devastation that left 66 people dead and thousands displaced.

Today, Pat serves as a volunteer chaplain, offering confidential support to police officers. She listens without judgement, encourages storytelling and uses her lived experience to guide others through their most difficult moments

2027 YOUNG AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR NORTHERN TERRITORY – NOMINEE BIOS

Naomi Destacamento

Youth health and wellbeing advocate

Compassionate and driven, Naomi Destacamento is dedicated to creating healthier futures for young people across the Northern Territory. Born and raised in Alice Springs, Naomi has a deep understanding of the challenges young people face when navigating healthcare in regional and remote communities.

These experiences shaped Naomi's passion for health education and guide her advocacy today. As a registered nurse working in the same hospital where she was born, Naomi is committed to empowering young people with the knowledge and confidence to make informed decisions about their wellbeing.

As secretary of the NT Youth Round Table 2026 and a youth ambassador with the Central Youth Advocacy Network, Naomi promotes health literacy, strengthens youth voices and raises awareness of essential support services.

Naomi, 25, is a strong advocate for respectful relationships education in schools, believing young people deserve accurate, age-appropriate information that builds safety, confidence and resilience.

Jules Gabor

Youth advocate

At 21 years old, Jules Gabor is amplifying the voices of young people and shining a light on youth homelessness, identity and mental wellbeing. Jules' work proves that the voices of the Northern Territory's youth are vital and need to be heard.

After moving from the Philippines to Darwin as a child, Jules experienced homelessness, mental health struggles and barriers to belonging. Today she uses her lived experience to advocate for a safer, more inclusive community.

Jules has served on multiple advisory groups where she represents youth interests. These include advocating as a UNICEF Australia Young Ambassador, sitting on the 2023 NT Youth Round Table and joining the City of Darwin Youth Advisory Committee.

Jules is also working with 15 young people to produce the compelling YouTube series, *Heart to Heart: A WhyNot Series*. Here, Jules creates space for the voices, creativity and perspectives of young people to be seen, heard and taken seriously.

Taitt Green

Volunteer first responder

Taitt Green, 18, is a courageous young Territorian who demonstrates remarkable courage during major emergencies. Joining St John Ambulance cadets when he was eight years old, Taitt became the youngest cadet in the Territory to compete individually in the St John NT Youth Competition, where he placed in the top three.

In 2020, Taitt joined the Air Force Cadets, where he mentored and trained younger cadets and led parades. In 2024, Taitt added the NT Fire and Rescue Service and, in 2025, the NT Emergency Services to his volunteer efforts.

When a significant hay shed fire threatened large gas tanks in Katherine in late 2025, Taitt put his life on the line to help extinguish the blaze. Then, in the devastating Katherine floods of 2026, Taitt waded chest-deep through floodwaters to help a woman to safety.

When later deployed to Arnhem Land to help clean up after Tropical Cyclone Neville, Taitt missed his 18th birthday celebrations. His initiative, sacrifice and compassion embody the highest standards of community service.

Elise Thornthwaite

Early childhood educator

Elise Thornthwaite is a proud Gamilaraay woman dedicated to culturally responsive, respectful early childhood education.

Currently on maternity leave from her role as an early childhood educator in Milikapiti, on Wulirankuwu Country in the Tiwi Islands, Elise believes learning is rooted in identity, family and culture. Working alongside Tiwi teachers, she embeds Tiwi language, culture and community knowledge into everyday learning through innovative, play-based programs combined with evidence-based literacy and numeracy strategies to strengthen school readiness.

Elise has worked closely with Elders, families and local organisations to support culturally responsive learning and strengthen connections between children, families and community. She has also contributed to wellbeing activities including community yoga and the Happy Box Project.

Alongside education, 26-year-old Elise is an emerging writer developing two young adult manuscripts centred on Aboriginal voices. She believes that when children see their culture reflected in learning, their identity and sense of belonging are strengthened.

2027 AUSTRALIA'S LOCAL HERO FOR NORTHERN TERRITORY – NOMINEE BIOS**Jason Bonson**

First Nations men's health leader

Jason Bonson, a proud father, has worked in research, policy and practice supporting First Nations boys' and men's health for more than three decades, including voluntary community-focused roles.

In 2013–14, Jason co-founded the Darwin Men's Inter-Agency Network, now connecting over 180 members and 30 stakeholders across the Top End.

Jason leads Deadly Male, a national charitable initiative, launched at the National Men's Health Gathering in October 2025. He led and moderated the Gathering's First Nations stream, delivered keynote presentations, and coordinated and facilitated First Nations workshops. He co-led the Northern Territory Men's Health Roundtable with Flinders University.

Across the Northern Territory and Australia, 55-year-old Jason champions men's health through networks that elevate First Nations voices and support practical, community-led solutions. His work strengthens culturally safe environments and trusted connections that enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men to talk, connect and lead healthier, more confident lives.

Majors Niall and Michelle Gibson

Rural and remote chaplains

Majors Niall and Michelle Gibson serve as Salvation Army Flying Padre – rural and remote chaplains supporting some of Australia's most isolated communities across the Northern Territory and Western Australia.

Based in Katherine, Niall and Michelle can spend up to 100 hours in the air each year visiting around 80 remote cattle stations, schools, police stations, health centres and outback towns where internet and phone reception can be patchy.

Known for responding immediately after tragic station accidents, 63-year-old Niall and 61-year-old Michelle offer a listening ear, pastoral care and practical support to people who rarely receive visitors. They also conduct funerals, weddings and bush christenings, along with crisis support during events such as the Katherine floods.

Whether landing on tiny homestead strips or driving long distances, Niall and Michelle provide friendship, counselling and hope – quiet achievers bringing a listening ear and comfort to isolated people across Australia's vast Top End.

Ben Hockey

Community leader

When Katherine faced two major floods in March 2026, local business owner Ben Hockey turned a simple offer of help into an extraordinary community response.

After initially filling and delivering 200 sandbags through his landscaping business, 21-year-old Ben called on residents and businesses to volunteer. Working alongside emergency services, he coordinated sandbagging, deliveries and flood recovery efforts, using social media to connect those needing assistance with people willing to help.

During the first flood, approximately 5,000 sandbags were prepared or distributed. When Tropical Cyclone Narelle threatened further flooding, Ben returned to coordinate another response involving volunteers, emergency services and Defence personnel. A further 18,000 sandbags were prepared, helping protect homes, businesses, schools and critical infrastructure.

Across both emergencies, 800 volunteers contributed to the response, preparing around 23,000 sandbags. Ben's leadership demonstrated the strength of Katherine's community and the extraordinary difference Australians can make through mateship and collective action.

Trent de With

Community leader

Trent de With, 39, is a driving force behind community connection in Katherine, dedicating countless volunteer hours to creating events and initiatives that bring joy and friendship to local families.

Through the Katherine Community Projects Association, Trent unites volunteers and local businesses to deliver inclusive community activities – from Street Eats and Twilight on the Tracks to the Teddy Bears Picnic and Lego Day. The community's landmark event is the Christmas lights display and parade, which requires more than 250 volunteer hours to set up.

Trent donates prizes for raffles supporting children, families and community members in crisis, and coordinates school holiday programs and free Santa photos where every child receives a gift.

During the devastating March 2026 Katherine floods, Trent patrolled the town every two hours, providing updates to business owners. His leadership, generosity and tireless commitment ensure Katherine remains a fun, vibrant, safe and welcoming place for children and families.