

MEDIA RELEASE

TUESDAY 25 OCTOBER 2022

VICTORIA 2023 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS NOMINEES ANNOUNCED

Nominees for the 2023 Victoria Australian of the Year Awards include a man restoring and protecting wetland areas, a psychologist leading the way in disaster recovery, an advocate for improving health outcomes for Aboriginal prisoners and a woman using her own experience to help families of missing people.

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

The 2023 Victoria award nominees are:

Victoria Australian of the Year

Meredith Allan – Disability advocate and lecturer (Surrey Hills)
Maree Clarke – Multi-disciplinary artist and curator (Yarraville)
Dr Angraj Khillan – Paediatrician and co-founder, Health Awareness Society of Australia (Essendon)
Loren O’Keeffe – Founder, Missing Persons Advocacy Network (Richmond)

Victoria Senior Australian of the Year

Dr Peter Rob Gordon OAM – Clinical psychologist and disaster recovery pioneer (Yarra Glen)
Robert Lytzki – Founder, Foundation 61 (Geelong)
David Martin OAM – Vietnam veteran and administrator/CEO, Murray Valley Centre (Wodonga)
Professor Frank Oberklaid AM – Paediatrician, founding director, Centre for Community Child Health (South Yarra)

Victoria Young Australian of the Year

Molly Fergus – Foster carer and foster care advocate (Frankston)
Noel Lim – Co-founder, Anika Legal (Coburg)
Darcy McGauley-Bartlett – Advocate for Indigenous health care in prisons (Bendigo)
Mohamed Semra – Anti-racism campaigner and co-founder, Endeavour Youth Australia (Maidstone)

Victoria Local Hero

Mark Bachmann – Ecologist and founder, Nature Glenelg Trust (Mumbannar)
Joanne Blake – Wildlife and animal companion volunteer (Sale)
Jack Levitt – Founder, Flynn’s Walk (Melbourne)
Belinda Young – Founder, Mums of the Hills (Sassafras)

**see bios on following pages*

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

The four award recipients from Victoria will be announced on the evening of Tuesday 8 November 2022 in a ceremony at Victoria Government House in Melbourne, which will also be available to watch via ABC iView from 6pm (local VIC 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 Victorian nominees are a diverse group of achievers and community contributors,” said Karlie.

“Their endeavours remind us of the power we all have to make a difference.”

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.

Victorian recipients of Australia's Local Hero include:

- 2017 Vicki Jellie – Community fundraising champion, bringing cancer services to SW Victoria
- 2014 Tim Conolan – Children's charity founder
- 2008 Jonathon Welch AM – Choral conductor
- 2007 Shanaka Fernando – Social challenger

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/80jmpi7zlr897j4p3w1hl/h?dl=0&rlkey=7677id2rukbtogte5fk3xj0pb>

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VICTORIA AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR – NOMINEE BIOS

Meredith Allan

Disability advocate and lecturer

Meredith Allan has a disability that has affected her mobility and speech since she was a child. For nearly 50 years she has spoken using augmentative and alternative communication.

She has worked with national and international NGOs for most of her life to improve the lives of children and adults with complex communication needs.

Meredith balanced this work with a demanding career with the Australian public service for nearly 30 years.

She served as President of the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication and has spoken at the United Nations. She was also appointed to the National Disability Insurance Australia Board in 2022.

When Meredith was in school, a teacher told her father that she had unrealistic expectations for wanting to go to university. Meredith, 62, now lectures at several universities on her lived experience as a person with a disability.

Maree Clarke

Multi-disciplinary artist and curator

Maree Clarke has produced many public works in her 30-plus years as an artist, including the *Possum Skin Cloaks* worn at the Melbourne Commonwealth Games in 2006 and *The Line Wide* artwork for five stations in Melbourne's new underground rail loop.

Based on her study of objects held in museums in Australia and around the world, Maree's pieces pass on cultural knowledge and traditional art practices. They encourage conversation, provide space to mourn, and are a connection between people and cultures lost, forgotten or laying dormant.

Maree meticulously records the materials she collects for each work so future generations can study and appreciate them. She also teaches the practices she has learned to her family and 'mob' groups.

In addition to creating her own work, 61-year-old Maree – who is a Mutti Mutti, Yorta Yorta and Boon Wurrung/Wemba Wemba woman – has been instrumental in supporting fellow Aboriginal people and artists mentoring others who are interested in learning about culture and practices.

Dr Anraj Khillan

Paediatrician and co-founder Health Awareness Society of Australia

Dr Anraj Khillan sold offerings outside a temple as a student in India to fund his medical books. Today, the paediatrician changes lives by delivering healthcare and health education to culturally diverse communities in Australia.

Anraj co-founded the Health Awareness Society of Australia (HASA) in 2018 to dispel taboos, myths and misinformation about health. Its volunteers deliver forums and virtual sessions in English, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu and Arabic on topics from mental health to COVID-19 vaccinations.

But HASA is just one way he's made a difference. The beloved 'Dr Raj' energised and extended the fly-in fly-out paediatric service for Aboriginal children in remote communities after migrating to Australia in 2004 and becoming the Royal Darwin Hospital's paediatrician.

The 56-year-old has worked to raise awareness of domestic violence and dowry abuse since moving to Melbourne in 2010, raising funds for philanthropy in India, East Timor, Australia and much more.

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Loren O’Keeffe

Founder, Missing Persons Advocacy Network

On average, 145 Australians are reported missing every day. Loren O’Keeffe founded the Missing Persons Advocacy Network (MPAN) to humanise missing people and alleviate the practical and emotional impact on their loved ones left behind.

Loren launched a social media campaign in 2011 when her brother Dan went missing that was the largest of its kind at the time. Having identified the gap in support, she established MPAN in 2013 after connecting with other families like hers.

People with a missing loved one live in a state of ambiguity, simultaneously hopeful and grieving. MPAN provides resources to steer them through both the practical tasks and emotional challenges.

Loren, a former communications consultant, finds innovative ways to humanise those who are missing, from billboards to coffee cups, podcasts to social media campaigns. By getting these stories out, 38-year-old Loren and MPAN mobilise the public and assist families and friends of missing Australians.

VICTORIA SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR – NOMINEE BIOS

Dr Peter Rob Gordon OAM

Clinical psychologist and disaster recovery pioneer

Clinical psychologist Dr Peter Rob Gordon OAM (Rob) has dedicated his career since the terrible Ash Wednesday fires of 1983 to helping traumatised communities and emergency service workers recover after disaster.

Little was known about the lasting effects of trauma on communities before Rob started this work. He has built a body of knowledge to fill that gap. His person-centred, trauma-informed approach has shaped the way organisations such as the Australian Red Cross, government agencies and other groups work with traumatised communities after disaster and loss.

Rob has supported communities through the Port Arthur massacre, the Bali bombings, the Christchurch earthquakes and major floods, cyclones and fires.

The 76-year-old conducts information sessions and professional development, plus he provides free, individual consults to those who have suffered significant personal loss after a disaster.

Rob’s kindness, generosity and expertise were recognised with a Medal of the Order of Australia in 2021.

Robert Lytzki

Founder, Foundation 61

Robert Lytzki understands how insidious addiction is after battling it for 30 years. But he turned his life around – and now helps others do the same.

In 2005, Robert founded Foundation 61, Geelong’s first men’s residential rehabilitation centre. The not-for-profit offers men affected by addiction a six-month live-in program, helping them recover and reconnect with their loved ones.

Now 65, Robert has built strong community relationships to ensure financial support for the centre. He has also spent the past six-plus years setting up Foundation 61 – House of Hope for women. The eight-bed home is under construction and includes spaces for two women with children.

Leaving school in Year 8 and eventually overcoming his own addiction, he obtained several certifications and diplomas and a Graduate Diploma in Counselling and Therapy. Robert’s dedication, honesty and care has helped hundreds of individuals get their lives back.

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David Martin OAM

Vietnam veteran and administrator/CEO, Murray Valley Centre

Vietnam veteran David Martin OAM served in the Australian Army for 21 years and has been Administrator/CEO of the Murray Valley Centre since 1985. The day training centre helps people with disabilities live independently in the community and find employment.

David has been an active member of the RSL since 1969. He received life membership in 2004 and was awarded the RSL Meritorious Service Medal in 2016.

A member and three-time president of the Rutherglen RSL sub-branch since 1985, David has been a driving force behind the local memorial gardens, which tells the story of the community's service and sacrifice through Australia's conflicts.

David dedicated 20 years to Legacy Clubs around Australia that care for military widows and children as well as veteran families. Now 73, he was named Citizen of the Year on Australia Day 2022 by the city of Wodonga, recognising his selfless work for veterans and people with disabilities.

Professor Frank Oberklaid AM

Paediatrician and founding director, Centre for Community Child Health

Professor Frank Oberklaid AM is an internationally recognised authority and advocate for children's health.

The paediatrician was director of the Centre for Community Child Health at The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne for 25 years and is co-group leader of Child Health Policy, Equity and Translation at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

Frank has focused on helping children with developmental and behavioural problems through research-based programs.

He recently developed the Mental Health in Primary Schools Program, which upskills experienced teachers to become mental health and wellbeing coordinators. The aim is to reduce children's mental health issues through prevention and early intervention in the school setting. The program is now in more than 100 Victorian schools.

Frank also helped develop the parenting website raisingchildren.net.au, which receives one million visits each week. At 76, he is an Honorary Professor of Paediatrics at the University of Melbourne, a sought-after speaker and winner of many prestigious awards.

VICTORIA YOUNG AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR – NOMINEE BIOS

Molly Fergus

Foster carer and foster care advocate

Molly Fergus sacrificed many of the fun things her peers were doing at the age of 22 to become a foster mother to kids with complex needs.

She's fostered 36 vulnerable children in the six years since, from newborns to teenagers to high-need infants, and is having a significant effect on their lives.

Often juggling more than one child, Molly even takes on emergency care of children with little or no warning. Molly became a foster mum while working full-time as an early childhood education and disability carer. She began with kids in respite and hospital-in-the-home programs, providing help at the most challenging times, including palliative care, seizure support and resuscitation.

She resigned from this work in late 2022 to focus her care on a foster child requiring around-the-clock help. Previously a volunteer for the state's Country Fire Authority, 28-year-old Molly is currently studying nursing and is a volunteer for Victoria's State Emergency Service.

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Noel Lim

Co-founder, Anika Legal

Noel Lim was a law student when he stumbled across '80,000 hours', a global movement asking people to consider the hours they work as their greatest opportunity to improve the world.

Noel immediately dedicated his 80,000 hours to doing the most 'good' possible.

He knew that each year more than 600,000 Australians are left to handle legal problems on their own because they can't afford a lawyer but aren't eligible for legal aid.

So Noel and some friends launched Anika Legal, a free online legal service designed to meet that need. The not-for-profit had helped more than 560 people by mid-2022.

The service also provides practical experience for law students through an internship program supervised by lawyers and funded by universities. After four years, Anika has four staff and 60 volunteers providing services Australia-wide.

At 30, Noel's vision is global not national, and for a world in which everyone can access justice.

Darcy McGauley-Bartlett

Advocate for Indigenous health care in prisons

Proud Gunaikurnai man Darcy McGauley-Bartlett had a difficult start to life, growing up in a dysfunctional environment that caused him to struggle through his schooling and his teens.

Determined to overcome his challenges, he's emerged as a role model and advocate for better prison health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

As a member of Victoria Police, Darcy was instrumental in changing policy to ensure fewer Indigenous people entered the justice system and didn't stay there if they did.

As a result, 24-year-old Darcy has been able to implement and run the State's first Aboriginal Youth Cautioning Program to ensure all young Indigenous people are eligible for a caution when coming into contact with the justice system for the first time.

Working with Corrections Victoria, he has helped establish the State's first Aboriginal Custodial Health team to improve health outcomes for Indigenous prisoners.

Mohamed Semra

Anti-racism campaigner and co-founder, Endeavour Youth Australia

Mohamed Semra was 16 years old in 2015 when he and five of his African Australian friends were stopped from entering an Apple store in Melbourne because they might 'steal something'.

The incident attracted international headlines and Apple CEO Tim Cook reportedly made the decision to retrain every Apple store employee in the world on inclusion.

That experience was the catalyst for Mohamed's fight against systemic and casual racism. Almost overnight, the Sudanese-born and Melbourne-raised refugee became a human rights advocate, using the racism he'd endured as an opportunity to train others.

Mohamed co-founded Endeavour Youth Australia to help culturally and linguistically diverse students feel empowered. In 2022 alone, the organisation delivered more than 100 hours of workshops.

Now 24, Mohamed has worked closely with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, as well as the Department of Education and Training, to support students and staff on cultural competency and conversations on racism.

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VICTORIA LOCAL HERO – NOMINEE BIOS

Mark Bachmann

Ecologist and founder, Nature Glenelg Trust

Ecologist Mark Bachmann left his secure government job in 2012 with an audacious plan – to restore wetlands in a region that once had one of the Southern Hemisphere’s greatest concentration of marshes.

He founded the Nature Glenelg Trust (NGT) to bring science-based thinking to the challenge of wetland restoration. Mark has helped restore more than 50 wetlands to their former natural glory across south-eastern Australia since NGT’s inception. NGT now also owns and manages eight diverse and special reserves that will be protected forever.

Mark has personally donated bush properties to NGT, without any public acknowledgement. He has tackled highly complex projects, restoring damaged lands to healthy, productive landscapes alive with a rich diversity of animals, frogs, plants and waterbirds.

At 45, Mark devotes much of his time to educating the public about the importance of wetlands, and works closely with Aboriginal communities, farmers and government to help save some of the most threatened ecosystems on the planet.

Joanne Blake

Wildlife and animal companion volunteer

Emergency nurse and animal lover Joanne Blake is a volunteer for wildlife and companion animals in Gippsland and beyond. She rescued animals in Gippsland during the Black Summer bushfires then the floods, as well as delivering food to pets of people in isolation during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Joanne volunteers with the Animal Rescue Cooperative (ARC), coordinating and distributing food and medical supplies to wildlife shelters, dog and cat rescue groups, council animal shelters and people in need throughout Gippsland and country Victoria.

Her experience, support and advice helped volunteers working with ARC in the 2022 floods in northern New South Wales. Joanne, 50, also works with the Office of the Governor of Tonga to provide ongoing food and medical supplies for animals affected by the island nation’s January 2022 tsunami.

Joanne’s amazing efforts have saved the lives of many vulnerable animals affected by crisis, disaster, injury or abandonment.

Jack Levitt

Founder, Flynn’s Walk

Jack Levitt lost his friend Dr Flynn Hargreaves to suicide in 2018. Flynn was a caring, compassionate vet. Research has shown that veterinarians are four times more likely to die by suicide when compared to the general population.

Jack created the Flynn’s Walk event initially as a memorial to Flynn and his grieving family and friends.

After the first walk in Melbourne, Jack decided to continue it as a memorial and to encourage vets to seek support. He also hoped to educate animal owners about the challenges vets and their staff face.

Flynn’s Walk initially fundraised for ‘RUOK?’ and ‘Love Your Pet? Love Your Vet’. It is now a standalone charity that has expanded to four major cities across Australia.

Through Flynn’s Walk, 32-year-old Jack hopes to provide awareness and education about mental health to the community and encouragement to vets everywhere.

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Belinda Young

Founder, Mums of the Hills

Belinda Young founded the Mums of the Hills Facebook group in 2015 to help mothers connect online and face-to-face in the Yarra and Dandenong ranges. The group, over 5,000 members, is recommended by local mother and baby services to new mothers.

Belinda has provided a steady source of practical support after recent natural disasters – from organising insurance, bushfire preparedness and chainsaw workshops, to coordinating storm-related information so it's easier to access.

She has advocated for better NBN, infrastructure and childcare services, and collaborated with key agencies, organisations and groups to help her community respond to and recover from natural disasters.

Belinda, 46, voluntarily created and shared resources and communications during the 2020 and 2021 pandemic lockdowns for local businesses, including mental health and food resource directories.

She has supported mothers escaping domestic violence and others facing financial struggles, boosting the sense of community and care in the region.

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