

MEDIA RELEASE
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2026 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS NOMINEES FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIA ANNOUNCED

Nominees for the 2026 Australian of the Year Awards for Western Australia include a doctor developing medicines for Australia's rarest diseases, a choir director, a construction boss creating opportunities for Mob, a wellness platform founder and a physiotherapist flying healthcare to remote communities.

The nominees are:

2026 Australian of the Year for Western Australia

Dr Gareth Baynam - Clinical geneticist (Kensington)
Kennedy Lay - Founder, Fly2Health Group (Jandakot)
Dr Daniela Vecchio - Digital addiction and gaming disorder specialist (Parklands)
Dr Tracy Westerman AM - Indigenous mental health pioneer (Nedlands)

2026 Senior Australian of the Year for Western Australia

Esme Bowen - Disability changemaker (Trigg)
Professor Kingsley Dixon AO - World-leading botanist (Waroonna)
Martin Meader - Born To Sing choir director (Beaconsfield)
Griff Morris - Sustainable housing designer (Mount Hawthorn)

2026 Young Australian of the Year for Western Australia

Alexis McDonald - Wellness platform founder (Bunbury)
Brooke McIntosh - Mental health fundraiser (Darlington)
Rodrigues Niyongere - Community football coach (Wanneroo)
Dr Haseeb Riaz and Gareth Shanthikumar - Positive masculinity educators (Peppermint Grove & City Beach)

2026 Local Hero for Western Australia

Bronwyn Bate - Founder, Mettle Women Inc (Trigg)
Frank Mitchell - Indigenous construction leader (Coolbellup)
Holden Sheppard - Award-winning author (Perth)
Dr Lara Shur - Paediatric audiologist (Wanneroo)

*[*see detailed bios on following pages](#)*

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

The Western Australia award recipients will be announced on Thursday 13 November 2025 in a ceremony at Government House in Perth 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 Western Australia awards.

"The nominees for the Western Australia awards are extraordinary people," said Mark.

"They are entrepreneurial in their approach to helping others, changing public perceptions, creating positive futures and bringing people together."

ENDS.

Nominee bios on the following [pages](#) and can also be viewed from australianoftheyear.org.au.
Nominees have supplied **photos** which can be downloaded from this link: [WA NOMINEE PHOTOS](#)

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2026 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIA – NOMINEE BIOS

Dr Gareth Baynam

Clinical geneticist

Dr Gareth Baynam is developing precision medicines for Australia's rarest and trickiest diseases.

Collectively common and affecting around 500,000 Australian children, rare diseases are the leading cause of child deaths in developed countries, with 95% of the 7,000 known rare diseases having no approved therapy. Gareth is working to change this through his work as a clinical geneticist, genomic policy advisor, clinician scientist and advocate.

Gareth, 50, is the Medical Director of the Rare Care Centre at Perth Children's Hospital and its remote region hub in the Pilbara. He also founded the Undiagnosed Diseases Program to find answers for families without a diagnosis. Through his role at Rare Voices Australia, Gareth contributed to the development of Australia's first National Strategic Action Plan for Rare Diseases.

His collaborative work has improved diagnosis, health delivery, research and community understanding of rare diseases, while also helping position Australia as a global leader in rare disease innovation and care.

Kennedy Lay

Founder, Fly2Health Group

Kennedy Lay is combining aviation and healthcare to bring quality allied health services to rural and remote Australia. A first-generation Australian, Kennedy draws on the resilience and entrepreneurial spirit instilled in him by his single mother. In 2020, Kennedy, a physiotherapist, took the opportunity to pursue a commercial pilot's licence.

Using his new-found skill, Kennedy flew to Narrogin, a town almost 200 km from Perth, to deliver physiotherapy services. Founding Fly2Health Group, Kennedy added new locations and services including psychology, speech therapy, occupational therapy and general medicine.

Today Kennedy's team of 145 professionals help 6,000 families in over 95 rural and remote communities across Australia, including four Aboriginal communities. This means clients can stay in their communities rather than drive hundreds of kilometres for care.

Kennedy, 30, shows how empathy, ingenuity and commitment can rewrite the rules of what's possible and advance healthcare equity.

Dr Daniela Vecchio

Digital addiction and gaming disorder specialist

Dr Daniela Vecchio is head of mental health and addiction services at Fiona Stanley Hospital. She is the pioneer in establishing the first publicly funded gaming disorder clinic in Australia in 2022.

She has seen increasing numbers of young people with addiction to video games and social media and was quick to recognise the distress and harms caused to them and their families. The clinic is unique worldwide, in providing early detection and intervention in an acute hospital setting.

Daniela, 57, has driven the development of holistic assessments and a wide range of personalised treatments for her clients. She has fostered extensive collaborations, including internationally with Korea, Germany and Dubai, nationally with experts in the field, and locally with health, education and police services.

As a director of the Australian Gaming and Screens Alliance, she is promoting education and research into harmful online use and influencing national policy.

Dr Tracy Westerman AM

Indigenous mental health pioneer

Dr Tracy Westerman, 55, is a multi-award-winning psychologist who has transformed mental health outcomes for Aboriginal communities.

As the first Aboriginal person to earn a master's and PhD in clinical psychology, she founded Indigenous Psychological Services, funding Australian-first programs and assessments including the only culturally and clinically valid screening tool for at-risk Aboriginal youth.

Her groundbreaking work includes publishing the first Indigenous youth mental health and suicide behaviours clinical database, the validation of culture-bound syndromes, and Indigenous suicide prevention programs with measured whole community outcomes. She has trained over 50,000 practitioners ensuring exponential reach into Australia's highest risk communities.

She funded the Dr Tracy Westerman Indigenous Psychology Scholarship, enabling greater access to Indigenous psychologists, and founded her charity, Jilya, which employs her graduated students. Jilya has supported 64 Indigenous psychology students, achieving Australian record graduation rates. She has personally raised over \$9 million and donated 15,000 volunteer hours. Her bestselling, award-winning memoir Jilya, chronicles her journey.

2026 SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIA – NOMINEE BIOS

Esme Bowen

Disability changemaker

Esme Bowen is a passionate leader in the disability, care, road safety and volunteering sectors. For over 35 years, Esme has championed the most vulnerable in our community across public and private sectors.

Previously a spinal orthopaedic nurse, Esme's commitment to volunteering came about following a spinal injury from a car crash. Grateful for her recovery, Esme served from her hospital bed on the Spinal Injury Prevention Board. This kicked off relentless voluntary work advancing the rights of people with disability and their carers.

Esme has contributed to advisory groups including the Minister's Community Volunteering Reference Group, NDIS Transition Governance Advisory Group and the Minister's Plastics Working Group. Esme, 65, has previously served as president of RAC, Wheelchair Sports WA and Wheelchair Sports Australia where she advocated for disability representation and road safety advancements throughout local, national and international organisations.

Professor Kingsley Dixon AO

World-leading botanist

Professor Kingsley Dixon from The University of Western Australia is an internationally recognised botanist whose devotion to science has transformed Australian native plant conservation.

As Foundation Director of Science at Perth's Kings Park and Botanic Garden, Kingsley shaped a small research unit into one of the world's top five botanic garden-based science centres. One of Kingsley's most notable achievements is the 1992 discovery of smoke as a cause for Australian plants to germinate after bushfires.

Kingsley actively educates schools and communities across Western Australia with his engaging 'Attenborough' style. He also works closely with Indigenous people in Broome and the Western Desert to establish native seed programs. Kingsley has spearheaded Western Australia's status as an international hub for mining environmental science, where he leads projects to lift mine rehabilitation standards and community conservation practices.

Kingsley, 71, bridges research and action, advocating both scientific inquiry and environmental stewardship with a commitment to a nature positive world.

Martin Meader

Born To Sing choir director

Martin Meader uses the power of music to unite diverse communities and combat social isolation.

His journey began with the 1997 film *Paradise Road*, which starred Cate Blanchett and Glenn Close. The film told the story of female prisoners of war using song to sustain hope. Inspired by this experience, he founded a choir to promote connection and healing.

For over 25 years, Martin has led weekly rehearsals for Born To Sing community choirs, teaching lively, inclusive songs where everyone is welcome. His work has raised more than \$250,000 for bushfire survivors, cancer patients, and children. In 2023, he launched the Born To Sing 1,000 concert, uniting 1,000 community singers for a sold-out show at Perth Concert Hall.

Through singing, 71-year-old Martin has built stronger communities, helped new Australians make friends, and boosted individual confidence and well-being. His work demonstrates that music is a powerful tool for hope, unity, and positive change.

Griff Morris

Sustainable housing designer

Griff Morris has channelled his interest in the health and wellbeing of the planet and its inhabitants into sustainable housing design.

Griff founded Solar Dwellings in 1991 to create practical, cost-effective passive solar-sustainable designs that incorporate universal access for people of all abilities and prioritise ageing in place.

The proceeds of Solar Dwellings support The Hunger Project, an organisation committed to ending world hunger with a focus on empowering and training women as leaders in Central and South America, Africa, India and Bangladesh. Griff, 73, currently sits on the HIA Environmental Planning Committee, the HIA Technical Advisory Committee, and sat on the Technical Advisory Committee for the second revision of the Commonwealth Government's 'Your Home' guide to environmentally sustainable homes.

Griff, who is a strong believer in thinking locally and acting globally, has worked with The Hunger Project for almost 40 years and is a member of the WA State Development Board.

2026 YOUNG AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIA – NOMINEE BIOS

Alexis McDonald

Wellness platform founder

Alexis McDonald is a Forbes 30 Under 30 entrepreneur, digital creator and founder of HerHelp, an online platform making girlhood and early adulthood feel less lonely.

Alexis faced her own struggle with bullying growing up and didn't know where to find help. Realising she wasn't alone, she developed HerHelp after teaching herself to code in her final year of high school. With a mission to normalise real conversations around mental wellness, self-worth, and navigating life, Alexis has built HerHelp into a community of millions of women who see her as a big sister and trusted voice.

In 2023, she was recognised with the Diana Award for her social impact. Her content blends honesty, humour and vulnerability to empower young women to feel seen, supported, and confident in themselves, and create meaningful change.

As HerHelp continues to grow, 23-year-old Alexis's focus remains on building community, breaking stigmas, and inspiring women to know they are never alone.

Brooke McIntosh

Mental health fundraiser

Brooke McIntosh is creating change, breaking stigmas, and showing real courage by being a voice for others like her, who face mental health challenges.

As a result of childhood trauma, Brooke has grappled with bulimia, anxiety and depression. Following a near-fatal collision with a truck, she realised that she didn't want to die, she just wanted the pain to go away. Brooke turned to running as a form of therapy.

In 2023, Brooke ran 1,600 km from the Pilbara to Perth, raising over \$70,000 for mental health causes. In 2025, she ran 14,200 km around Australia in 204 days, averaging 70 km each day, as the youngest and fastest woman to do so, raising over \$290,000 for the Blue Tree Project in the process.

Brooke, 29, demonstrates that resilience isn't reserved for elite athletes, it's built daily. Her ultra-distance run showcases that resilience. Brooke is encouraging Australians to confront hardship openly and support one another. She believes that just one more conversation may save a life.

Rodrigues Niyongere

Community football coach

Rodrigues Niyongere, 23, is a Para-athlete and coach who transforms lives through the power of football.

Born with cerebral palsy and migrating from Burundi as a child, Rodrigues found belonging and hope in football. Today, he pays that gift forward by using the sport as a tool for inclusion, confidence and joy through his work at Football Futures Foundation.

Rodrigues mentors children and young people at risk of social exclusion ensuring everyone feels valued, capable and proud of who they are. His story shows that barriers can become bridges, and that football can be more than a game; it can be a pathway to belonging and opportunity. He has been recognised with the Football West David Cantoni Award for Excellence in 2024 and the City of Bayswater Young Citizen of the Year Award 2025.

As a Para-footballer, Rodrigues has represented Western Australia at national championships. Through football, his dream is to ensure all young people, no matter their background or ability, are included.

Dr Haseeb Riaz and Gareth Shanthikumar

Positive masculinity educators

Dr Haseeb Riaz (24) and Gareth Shanthikumar (27) had their fair share of challenges growing up including struggling with negative emotions and transitioning from high school to adult life.

Haseeb and Gareth felt that negative stereotypes of masculinity were harming young men, so they established MAN UP to help young men strengthen their mental health, communicate openly and build pathways to healthier lives. Through workshops on male culture, respectful relationships and emotional coping, they provide boys with safe, relatable spaces to explore identity, relationships and emotional literacy.

At MAN UP, Haseeb and Gareth address the root causes of poor mental health and gender-based violence, equipping boys with tools for self-awareness and empathy before harmful behaviours take root. Both founders continue to volunteer their time to MAN UP alongside their professional careers.

Together, they've reached thousands of students and have built partnerships with educators, community leaders and mental health advocates across Australia.

2026 LOCAL HERO FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIA – NOMINEE BIOS

Bronwyn Bate

Founder, Mettle Women Inc

Bronwyn Bate is helping women escape domestic violence and find work.

In 2018, Bronwyn spent a year interviewing women who had experienced homelessness to co-design a trauma-informed social enterprise. Bronwyn was confronted with a tragic reality: domestic and family violence is the single largest driver of homelessness for women in Australia. Saddened by the lack of support after women leave a shelter, Bronwyn launched Mettle Women Inc in 2019.

Mettle provides safe, flexible and supportive employment for women in crisis recovery. So far Mettle has employed 47 women, with many more accessing support services. Of the women who've been through the six-month program, 82% remain in stable employment.

Beyond paying fair wages, Mettle provides funds for crisis support, childcare subsidies, rental assistance and scholarships. Bronwyn, 35, has shown that addressing complex issues like domestic violence and homelessness requires dignity, structure and belief in people's potential.

Frank Mitchell

Indigenous construction leader

Frank Mitchell, 42, is a proud Whadjuk-Yued Noongar man, co-director of Wilco Electrical and co-founder/director of Kardan, Baldja and Bilyaa in the trades and construction industry.

Frank's commitment to change was shaped by early lived experiences of suicide and the loss of best friends. As a young single father, being offered an electrical apprenticeship felt like a profound opportunity. When he became a business owner in 2015, he pledged to create the same opportunities for Mob.

Starting with just eight staff and \$1.5 million turnover, Frank and his partners have created over 70 Aboriginal upskilling positions in the electrical and construction industry, including 30 electrical apprenticeships and awarding over \$11 million to Aboriginal subcontractors.

Today, all four companies collectively employ over 200 full-time staff. His story embodies a vision that integrates cultural values with business leadership, strengthening his ties to community while reshaping the construction industry and creating lasting impact and social justice.

Holden Sheppard

Award-winning author

Holden Sheppard is one of Western Australia's most distinctive literary voices.

Deploying raw, powerful storytelling, Holden's debut novel, *Invisible Boys*, draws directly from his own experiences growing up gay in Geraldton. Through his generous mentorship, authentic LGBTQIA+ representation and fearless mental health advocacy, Holden is a voice for countless Australians, particularly gay and bisexual men from rural areas.

Holden's novel became a bestseller and received multiple prestigious literary awards. It's now streaming as a critically-acclaimed 10-episode Stan Original series.

Holden served as deputy chair of Writing WA from 2019 to 2023, where he helped expand the organisation's reach and impact. He has mentored emerging writers, judged major literary awards, been a grant assessor for arts funding bodies, and championed greater diversity and ethical standards in publishing, including taking a national stand on AI ethics.

Through these efforts, 37-year-old Holden has built a more inclusive, representative and ethical creative sector.

Dr Lara Shur

Paediatric audiologist

Dr Lara Shur is making it possible for hearing-impaired Aboriginal and at-risk children in Western Australia to hear.

Ear infections are more prevalent among Aboriginal children than non-Indigenous children. If left untreated, they can cause hearing loss and serious, life-long limits on learning and development.

Lara co-founded Earbus Foundation around her kitchen table in 2013, where she and her co-founders worked for 12 months before they were able to pay themselves a salary. Lara became CEO in 2023 and has mapped hearing services across Western Australia, focusing on Indigenous communities.

Under Lara's leadership, a fleet of mobile ear clinics travel to schools, daycare centres and kindergartens at 200 locations in regional and remote communities. Up to 5,200 Aboriginal and at-risk children are treated for free each year. Lara, 51, has also facilitated ear, nose and throat surgery clinics to treat children seen in Earbus programs across the state.