

ACU

# alum

**Issue 12**  
**2019/2020**

**02**

## **Announcing our winners**

Meet the outstanding graduates who have taken home our 2019 Alumni Awards.

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## **From persecution to prosperity**

Shamiran arrived in Australia as a refugee with only a few words of English. A decade later, she teaches youth from low socio-economic areas.

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## **The challenge of getting people to move more**

How a daily morning walk and regular breaks from sitting can lead to sharper minds and healthier hearts.





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*ACU alum* is published yearly for graduates and friends of ACU.

The views expressed are not necessarily those of the University.

**COVER:**

ACU graduate and Alumni Award winner Nicola Parkes stumbled into a youth work career by chance and has since dedicated her life to supporting people with refugee experiences from Melbourne to Malawi.

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**Alumni Awards 2019  
winner: Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander  
Community Award and  
Alumni of the Year Award**



# The generational trauma that drives Queensland's first Indigenous psychiatrist

Author: Menios Constantinou

Meet the Aboriginal man who's on a three-pronged mission: to help Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians confront the scourge of mental illness, to right the wrongs of yesteryear, and to spin a few yarns along the way.

Derek Chong is pretty sure he was always destined to become a psychiatrist.

"It's one of my mottos," he says. "You don't choose psychiatry, psychiatry chooses you."

But he wasn't always the biggest fan of the profession.

In the late 1980s, as an idealistic 19-year-old studying medicine in Newcastle, Dr Chong was an avowed opponent of the practices and principles of psychiatry.

"I was totally against it," the 49-year-old Mullanjarli and Walkamin man says. "I didn't like the way psychiatry tried to label people and put them into boxes."

Struggling with his studies and his finances, he was forced to leave university and return to the workforce. But he went looking for a job that would provide a pathway back into medicine.

After a short stint as a residential care worker, he found himself studying and working as a psychiatric nurse.

"I guess it's ironic, and it might look like I made a conscious decision to pursue psychiatry, but like I said, *it* chose me."

The young Derek Chong was well aware that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had historically been subjected to misdiagnosis

and mistreatment at the hands of psychiatric institutions.

And he was soon to learn those harmful past practices had cut close to the bone.

"My aunt did our genealogy and we found out that many, many years ago my great-great-grandmother died in a mental asylum, in the actual hospital that I started my training in," Dr Chong says.

"As an Indigenous person, there's a journey you go on where you're constantly processing generational trauma and trying to heal wounds from the past. I was already on that journey, but hearing the news about my great-great-grandmother made it clear that *this* is where I need to be, and *this* is what I'm going to do.

"It further endeared me to psychiatry and made me feel that, somehow, I would right the wrongs of yesteryear."

## 'EDUCATION IS KEY'

Dr Chong's gradual progression from care worker to nurse, doctor and psychiatry registrar endowed him with the practical smarts to complement his formal qualifications.

But in the early days, he questioned whether he would have what it takes to become a medical practitioner.

"Failing my first attempt at university shattered me in so many ways," Dr Chong says.

"There was a lot of unconscious rhetoric around that Indigenous people are not smart, and I'd hear things like, 'Hey, your people are better with their hands, so why do you want to become a doctor?' And that made me ask myself: 'Am I smart enough to do this?'"

Before long, he had the answer to that question.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Nursing from ACU in 1999, Dr Chong went on to study and practice medicine and become Queensland's first Indigenous psychiatrist.

Having that title automatically made him a role model amongst others in his community, and he seems happy with that status. But his main focus is rolling up his sleeves and using his skills to make a difference.

"Having more Indigenous people as clinicians is positive because they create a safe environment for those in their community, and you need a safe environment in order to create healing," Dr Chong says.

"One of the first things I ask someone I'm treating is: 'Where's your mob from?' And by doing that, you're treating the individual but you're recognising straight away that they're part of a bigger picture and a bigger story."

His strength and perseverance is drawn largely from the wise words of his great-grandfather, a Mullanjarli





man who had no access to a formal education, but who taught himself how to read and write from the Bible, and at 16, lied about his age and served in the First World War as a light horseman.

“When he came back, he didn’t tell war stories,” Dr Chong says. “He talked about how education is key for our people.”

His great-grandfather’s legacy has become one of his main sources of inspiration – and, yet another motto.

“I’ve adopted his motto – ‘education is the key’ – because I truly believe in it,” adds Dr Chong.

“I’m always striving to spread the message that if more Indigenous people get an education, it will lay the foundation for our community to thrive, and it will put us on an even playing field.”

### SPINNING YARNS

Spreading that message requires a skill that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are well known for: storytelling.

Dr Chong regularly travels to rural and remote Indigenous communities to wax lyrical on topics like mental health, youth suicide, generational trauma and the importance of culture.

And he often tells stories about the elders who came before him. People like his great-grandfather, who on returning from the war, fought for the right of his children to attend school.

“That was in the 1930s and 40s, when it was up to the school principal to decide if Indigenous kids could attend school, and this principal out near Beaudesert kicked all the Indigenous kids out,” Dr Chong says.

“My great-grandfather went down to the school and said, ‘I fought for this country, and my children have a right to an education. If you have a problem with that, then I’ll be taking it up with the RSL.’

“So there were a lot of people that were always active for Indigenous rights, yet we don’t hear about those stories. What needs to come out too, along with the trauma stories, is the people who championed Indigenous causes.”

As well as his regular psychiatry clinics and his work with Queensland Health and the Inala Indigenous Health Service, Dr Chong mentors doctors

and psychologists to improve their consulting practice when treating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

He is an ambassador for educational programs on a wide array of topics, and recently visited his Walkamin people in Far North Queensland to run a workshop on vicarious trauma and Indigenous pride.

“Cultural pride is one thing actually helping Indigenous people to move forward,” Dr Chong says.

“It’s about forging a closer connection to our culture and our expression of that culture, and mainstream Australians have taken pride in it too, which is great for all of us, because we all need that reconnection to who we are, to our culture and the land.”

As for the case of his great-great grandmother, Dr Chong has yet to delve into her patient file.

“I haven’t opened up that box yet, but you could say my career in psychiatry has been a journey to get her voice heard,” he says.

He hopes that sharing his family story will help other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to process their own generational trauma.

“Telling these trauma stories is all about giving people hope,” Dr Chong says. “It’s about getting people to recognise that even though these things happened, we can all heal the wounds of the past.”

*Dr Derek Chong won the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Award and the Alumni of the Year Award in ACU’s Alumni Awards 2019. He graduated from ACU with a Bachelor of Nursing.*

# The power of youth

Author: Christina Sexton



Nicola Parkes stumbled into a youth work career by chance and has since dedicated her life to supporting people with refugee experiences from Melbourne to Malawi. While she's already contributed much to young people facing disadvantage, Nicola says she's just getting started.

"I know what it sounds like, but all I did was read a little blurb about studying youth work at ACU, just a few sentences, and that was it. I knew it was for me," said Nicola.

While this year's Young Alumni of the Year award winner readily admits to knowing little about the realities of a youth work career when she began her studies, Nicola's passion for helping people began while she was still in high school.

"I went to a fairly progressive and inclusive school in a low socio-economic area in Brisbane. I was exposed to a lot of disadvantage," she said. "This got me thinking about a career working with people."

After school Nicola moved to Melbourne. It was there she applied to study youth work at ACU.

"It was only once the degree started that I understood how lucky I was to have such a supportive family and

home environment. I felt overwhelmed by my privilege and the power imbalance that existed in society.

"Learning about people seeking asylum and the multitude of people living in refugee camps gave me a strong desire to advocate for systematic change."

After her final exam in the last year of her course, Nicola began work the very next day as a full-time multicultural youth worker.

## THE WORK BEGINS

In her first professional job, Nicola was working with young people who had arrived in Australia by boat after seeking asylum from Afghanistan.

"They were granted humanitarian protection in Australia and many had arrived by themselves as minors. At the time, the government was taking a punitive approach to those seeking asylum through the means of a boat," Nicola explained. "Working with young



people who had to navigate their family reunification options under awfully harsh policies was heart-wrenching.”

After spending a year in the role, Nicola moved home to Brisbane and began working with homeless youth for The Salvation Army.

While Nicola found this type of youth work challenging, she knew a job supporting people with a refugee experience was where she was meant to be. Soon, she was in a new position with Access Community Services and was back to helping newly arrived young people and families navigate life in Australia.

But while she was helping others settle into their new home, Nicola realised she was ready to move on from her own.

### OVERSEAS EXPERIENCE

“I took some time off to backpack in East Africa. In Australia, I had worked with many families from The Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Burundi and Eritrea. I thought maybe I could work with those communities in countries like Kenya or Tanzania and learn to speak Kiswahili.”

But when this plan hit a road block, a new door opened for Nicola in Malawi.

Nicola began working for the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and was placed in Malawi’s Dzaleka Refugee Camp, which is home to almost 35,000 people, mostly from The Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Ethiopia and Rwanda.

“It was incredibly rough conditions for people living in the camp and in

the surrounding villages. Sometimes electricity would just shut off across the entire country and families had limited access to food and decent shelter,” Nicola said.

“I lived in a village outside of the camp and I hitchhiked to work each day. I had intermittent electricity and no running water, but food was the hardest thing to get used to. My only option was to cook outside with coal. It took me a while to adjust but at least I know now how to light a fire, thanks to my Malawian housemate.”

In the camp, Nicola met with the different community-based organisations to discover what sort of projects they’d like to work on.

“Our organisation provided funding and I helped oversee the implementation of those projects. I also arranged training sessions on topics like proposal writing, micro loans, and networking.”

### AN UNLIKELY LESSON

When Nicola’s position came to an end and she flew home to Melbourne, she was surprised to see how much her own perspective had shifted after her time in Malawi.

“When I first got back, I needed temporary support from Centrelink. During an appointment in their office, I was shocked to see the staff member had her own printer. I couldn’t believe it! I had needed a printer so badly to do my job in Malawi, but with limited resources and country-wide electricity problems, I had to beg and bribe to

get anything copied. And there she was, just printing away so I could sign documents immediately on the spot!”

For Nicola, the sight of this printer proved to be a gamechanger.

“This experience really opened my eyes to the perspective of people who’ve come to Australia from refugee camps. All of these complex systems we have here, such as job network providers like Centrelink, and our easy access to things like hot water, electricity and printers are simple pleasures that new families only dreamt of when they were living in refugee camps.”

### NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Since she returned home, Nicola has begun working for Stonington City Council’s Community Hub in Melbourne, implementing child development programs. She has also made time to begin volunteering as a project manager for the THREE For All Foundation, which partners with grassroots community-based organisations all over the world.

“I’m in a working group made up of ACU lecturers and undergraduates who are studying international development or youth work. We run fundraising activities for projects in Malawi, Uganda and Kenya. I assist with the communication between organisations in those countries and THREE For All.”

### LEARNING TO LISTEN

With six years of experience now under her belt and a masters degree in the works, Nicola has learnt it’s not all about what she has to say.

“Listening has been my biggest lesson, especially in an international context. If locals give you advice, take it. If they disagree with something, be curious and take it on board.

“Because of my experiences in Malawi, I’m now better equipped to work with families who are new to Australia. I understand that it may take them time to feel comfortable here, but I promised myself I’d meet people where they are at. It’s not about me telling them what to do and how to do it.”

*Nicola Parkes won the Young Alumni of the Year Award in ACU’s Alumni Awards 2019. She completed a Bachelor of Youth Work at ACU.*



# A quiet achiever shines

Author: Menios Constantinou

He's the 'ordinary Filipino' who has devoted his life to uplifting disadvantaged communities and alleviating human suffering.

Nicamil Sanchez has never been one to shout his achievements from the rooftops.

"It's not the Filipino way," said the 40-year-old social worker, technocrat and academic. "I consider myself an ordinary student, an ordinary scholar and an ordinary Filipino, and we ordinary Filipinos are quiet achievers by nature."

But Dr Sanchez's impact on his community and the discipline of social work in the Philippines has been anything but ordinary.

Born and raised in Balagtas, a rural province outside Manila, he endured a childhood of disadvantage to become an international scholar, attending university in Malta, the UK and Australia.

“I chose to study social work, gerontology and public management because I have experienced and seen hardship firsthand, not only in my family but also in my community,” Dr Sanchez said.

“I told myself from an early age that my goal would be to uplift that condition, and it gives me a sense of satisfaction and significance to be doing this kind of work.”

### **A DESIRE TO GIVE BACK**

In 2015, while pursuing his PhD in social work at ACU’s Canberra Campus, Dr Sanchez founded The Philippine Consortium, an innovative technology firm that provides consultancy services to social welfare organisations, research bodies and universities.

The Consortium is a generous giver. It donates part of its income to various charities and runs a feeding program for rural day care centres in the Philippines, which has alarmingly high rates of child poverty.

“We chose to support day care centres because these services are crucial in contributing to the future success of our children,” Dr Sanchez said.

His steadfast commitment to rural education and social welfare stems mainly from his humble upbringing.

“I’ve come from a simple family, raised lovingly but with grit, and taught that you have to work hard to survive — but more importantly, that you need to give back to the community,” Dr Sanchez said.

“Our community is what keeps us going, and my family, parents and life experiences instilled those values in me and gave me the desire to make a difference.”

### **UPLIFTING HUMAN DIGNITY**

Dr Sanchez has no problem identifying what drives him: a long-term vision to uplift the condition of the most vulnerable Filipinos.

About one in five people in the Philippines live in extreme poverty, and despite sustained economic growth, the nation’s poorest still struggle to feed themselves and earn a living.

This presents many challenges to social workers on the frontline.

“I’ve had the opportunity to travel around the country into rural communities and I’ve seen the many

different faces of poverty,” Dr Sanchez said.

“It’s a complex issue, and to tackle it we need a government that cares, that is free from corruption, and that takes action to assist the most vulnerable in a holistic way, which engages non-government organisations and the academe and volunteers who are out there in communities.”

He said social workers in the Philippines were “very hands-on”, but they don’t often get a say when poverty alleviation policies are devised.

“Social workers should not only be the ‘foot soldiers’, they should also be the ones informing politicians who are tasked with developing social welfare policies concerning the most vulnerable,” Dr Sanchez added.

“They’re dedicated, passionate and committed, they’re on the frontline and they get their hands dirty, and when you see the hardship with your own eyes, you’re motivated to do all you can to alleviate human suffering.”

### **HOME AWAY FROM HOME**

When Dr Sanchez arrived in Canberra to study at ACU in 2010, he was already an accomplished scholar.

He had completed his studies in social work and public management in the Philippines, obtained a postgraduate degree in gerontology at the University of Malta, and was an academic visitor at Oxford University’s Institute of Population Ageing.

But it was while pursuing his PhD at ACU that he really hit his straps.

Inspired by the University’s focus on producing effective transformational leaders, he became the first international student to serve as National President of ACU’s Postgraduate Students Association.

While at the helm, he led a fundraising drive for victims of the Haiyan typhoon in the Philippines through the Australian Red Cross, and initiated the ‘Books for a Cause’ campaign, which saw some 15,000 books sent to rural universities and schools in the Philippines.

By the time his five-year stint at ACU was near its end, Dr Sanchez had come to view Australia as his “second home”.

However, the pull of his homeland was always strong.

While most Filipinos who obtain their PhD in another country decide to settle overseas, Dr Sanchez chose to return to the Philippines.

“I feel that returning and contributing to my country is my duty, because it is here in the Philippines that I can best serve humanity,” he said.

On his return to Manila, he worked in professorial roles at the University of the Philippines and Ateneo de Davao University, and was a military professor in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

He also ramped up his volunteer work. At present, he donates his time and expertise as a reservist in the AFP.

He’s a lifetime member of the Philippine Association of Social Workers Inc, and regularly volunteers his time to give lectures at universities, charity functions and conferences.

But his main gig is heading up the welfare services department for the Philippine Red Cross, where he manages national programs that support the country’s most vulnerable.

“We work in partnership with communities, concentrating on managing and leading Philippine Red Cross social welfare programs, like livelihood for indigenous peoples, child protection, promoting disability inclusion and preventing gender-based violence,” Dr Sanchez said.

“We have limited resources and limited budget, but we deliver social welfare to the most vulnerable individuals, groups and communities that have nowhere else to turn, and that’s all thanks to our donors, volunteers and aid workers.”

He sees those working in social welfare as his country’s “quiet heroes”.

“Society is so quick to give praise and acknowledgment to politicians and celebrities who come from privileged families,” Dr Sanchez said.

“But in my mind, the real heroes are the quiet achievers: those ordinary Filipino citizens who make extraordinary contributions, who uplift the vulnerable and alleviate human suffering, and who don’t expect anything in return.”

*Dr Nicamil Sanchez won the International Contribution Award in ACU’s Alumni Awards 2019. He graduated with a PhD in social work from ACU.*

Alumni Awards Winner  
2019: Community  
Engagement Award



# Scouting for opportunity

Author: Jennifer Chandler

Brendan Watson OAM has been shot at in East Timor, dodged tanks at the fall of the USSR and revitalised education in his community. While at times Brendan's escapades have been dangerous, he says it's all worth it to enable young people to follow their own paths.

If there is one thing Brendan could use more of, it's time. As Principal of Catholic Regional College (Sydenham), Chief Executive Officer of the Catholic Regional College Institute of Training, White Ribbon Ambassador, and Chief Commissioner of Scouts Victoria, he gives freely of himself to others.

"The greatest gift you can give anyone is your time. Not because you must, but because it brings joy," he said.

It's a philosophy that's helped him help countless others, first as a Scouts' volunteer and later as a teacher and principal.

## CHANGE THROUGH ADVENTURE

Much of the time that Brendan gives his community is spent leading Scouts Victoria, where he has responsibility for 20,000 participants, their groups and programs.

As he found out early in his career, Scouts is not all surf camps and jamborees. It's an organisation dedicated to serving others, sometimes in unexpected places.

"My first time overseas was as an 18-year-old Scout Leader," said Brendan. "I had worked with Chernobyl victims, camping with them in Australia to boost their immune



“When you spend time with people and communities, you learn what they really need, and then work together to make that happen.”

“Every young person has potential, we just need to find the right pathway for them.”

systems. On the back of that I was invited to attend a UNESCO peace conference in the USSR.”

The year was 1991 and the conference unfortunately coincided with a coup attempt and the start of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

“The KGB were rounding people up,” he recalled, “so we camped in the foothills near Moscow to keep out of sight. On hearing that the parliament building was safe, we ventured into the city to get help. But as we approached the parliament building we were greeted by tanks firing on it. We ran for our lives. Soon we managed to get in contact with the Australian Embassy and were evacuated, unscathed.”

On another occasion, as the Australian International Commissioner for Scouts, he was asked to advise the United Nations on programs to help young East Timorese get back to “being kids”. This was after years of Indonesian oppression where children were taught to be warriors and fight for their independence.

“We were in a school one day and all of a sudden the windows started breaking,” he said. “Our Portuguese interpreter said ‘Quick! Put your scarves on and they won’t shoot you!’”

Scouts were held in high esteem by the locals – so putting on their scarves made them a less likely target. In the end, the shooters turned out to be bored kids taking pot shots at what they thought was an empty building.

His goodwill has also seen him work with Scouts to reforest areas of Nepal, help prevent child deaths in Mongolia, and push for local acceptance.

“We ran a project reforesting landslide prone areas in Nepal. The most powerful moment was dining with a family and them telling me their home would not be standing if it wasn’t for our work.

“We also ran a Mongolian Global Development Caravan in conjunction with UNICEF and Scouts Mongolia. We basically educated parents on child health and care – our work saw an immediate drop in child deaths and improved the lives of a whole generation.

As a result, during Brendan’s time as Chief Commissioner, Scouts has opened Victoria’s first Muslim Scouts group; approved the Scouts participation in the Victorian Pride March; and invested in mental health programs for the organisation. The changes, he hopes, have created a healthier, more inclusive Scouts community.

### TAKING IT TO SCHOOL

As principal of Catholic Regional College, Brendan approaches his day job by listening, serving and giving his time.

“When I started, we were a purely VCE school – but only 26 per cent of students were using their ATAR to go on to higher studies. The school wasn’t meeting the needs of the community,” he said.

“So, we adapted to the needs of our students. Twelve years on and the school now offers a range of Vocational Education Training (VET) options and supports 16 profitable, student-led businesses – including a bakery, beauty salon, restaurant and picture framing business. We’re now one of the largest VET providers in Australia.

“One of my proudest moments was about four years ago. We had a Syrian refugee that was working as a gardener at the school and came to us wanting to learn. In Year 11 he couldn’t speak English. When he graduated he was dux of the school. He received a full scholarship to study biomedicine at university and is going on to study medicine.”

In 2007 Brendan was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for his service to Scouts. But for Brendan, none of this is about the accolades. Scouts and teaching align with his passions of giving back to the community, helping youth, and serving God.

“Every day I laugh and learn from young people. It is a privilege to be able to work with them. By investing in them we’re investing in ourselves and our own community. They are our future.”

*Brendan Watson won the Community Engagement Award in ACU’s Alumni Awards 2019. He graduated with a Graduate Diploma in Religious Education.*

Alumni Awards 2019  
winner: Community  
Engagement Award –  
Posthumous



## A special recognition

This year, we wish to posthumously recognise one of our wonderful graduates and staff members who was a tireless advocate for the community.

Julie Morgan spent her entire life working to transform the lives of marginalised people. From the time she graduated from ICE Christ College in 1984, to her final working days teaching executive leadership at ACU, she was a tireless advocate for those without a voice.

Her work included helping homeless Sydneysiders receive health care, enabling the education of children sold into sex slavery in Cambodia, peace-building in the former Yugoslavia, assisting the people of Rwanda after the massacre, advocating for human rights in South-East Asia and teaching for ACU in the Solomon Islands. Julie lived with a compassion that expanded in the face of each new challenge. Even after she was diagnosed with

metastatic breast cancer in 2016, she continued to teach, and when unable to teach any longer, she continued to advocate for those facing disadvantage – the poor, elderly, and those who could potentially be exploited by assisted dying legislation in Victoria and New South Wales.

Julie passed away in July 2018. She died as she lived: with compassion for all those around her, without self-pity or self-centredness and with sincere faith that death was not the end but a transformation.

*Julie Morgan was posthumously awarded the Community Engagement Award in ACU's Alumni Awards 2019. She graduated from ACU with Diploma of Teaching (Primary).*

# New York state of mind

Author: Christina Sexton



Justin Giuffrida's entrepreneurial ventures have taken him from cutting grass in high school to coffee and cafes in New York. While this Bachelor of Commerce graduate now calls America home, Justin's Australian roots have become the foundation of his business.

Justin's entrepreneurial endeavours first began with a lawn mowing service in high school.

"I can still remember the thrill of creating the business, organising jobs and rallying my school friends to help out," he said. "From this early age, I knew I wanted to work for myself."

## OVERSEAS OPPORTUNITIES

While Justin now resides in New York, this wasn't his first international move.

"When I was at ACU and saw all the places I could choose from to study overseas, I felt like a kid in a candy shop," he said. "I went with Vrije University in Amsterdam. By leaving the little ecosystem of my world in Melbourne behind, the experience opened my eyes and really gave me a new perspective on culture."

Justin is now the owner of a successful cafe business known as Citizens, with two locations at present and a third on the way. Each one is proudly serving Australian fare to American diners, who have embraced Citizens' antipodean style.

"The name of my cafes are 'Citizens of...' followed by their locations in New York," he said. "So, right now, I own

Citizens of Chelsea and Citizens of Grammercy (with Citizens of SoHo in the works). I wanted the name to play on the notion of my cafes serving the citizens of the communities they're located in."

## COFFEE CULTURE

A passion for the hospitality industry began during Justin's days at ACU Melbourne.

"While I was studying, I used to frequent all of the phenomenal cafes around campus. Still to this day, one of my all-time favorites is Proud Mary in Collingwood, which was close enough to grab a coffee in between lectures," he said. "When I moved to New York, I realised how special the cafe culture in Australia really is. And that's where it began for me – I am trying to bring one of the best cafe cultures to one of the best cities in the world."

Justin readily admits that starting a business in New York was a steep learning curve.

"It was like trying to drink water from a fire hose!" he said. "New York is so demanding and we were a young team on a small budget with big dreams. I still have vivid memories of rallying my

friends into helping paint our first cafe – it turns out inexperienced painters can cause quite a mess, which was a lesson within itself.

"My academic background from ACU was how I was able to learn quickly, make adjustments and overcome those initial hurdles," he said. "My degree gave me a strong base of technical and practical skills that I continue to use and build upon in my career."

## ENTREPRENEURIAL ADVICE

Justin's advice for other would-be entrepreneurs?

"Love the process. And building momentum is absolutely key, which requires some patience.

"What typically happens is a lot of people set goals, and it ends up looking like a gigantic staircase and they never start. My advice is to focus on making that first step. Then the second, then the third. Eventually you begin running, and the momentum becomes real as the goal moves closer and closer. Once you can harness this energy, the possibilities seem endless."

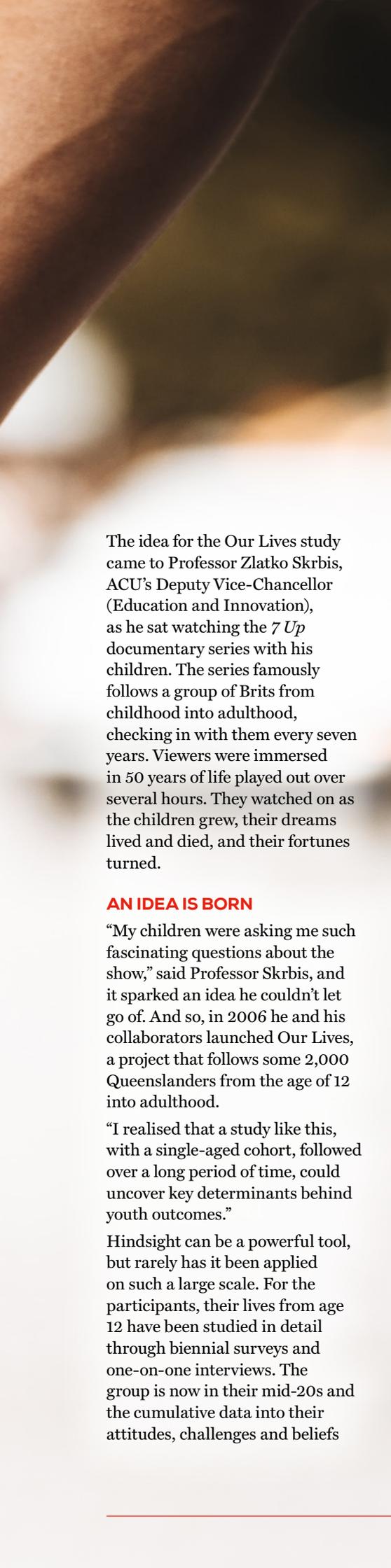
*Justin Giuffrida graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce from ACU.*



# Time of their lives

Author: Jennifer Chandler

Zlatko Skrbis was watching a documentary with his children when the seed of a research project was planted. Thirteen years on, the extraordinary Our Lives project is shining a light on the issues and attitudes of Australian youth.



The idea for the Our Lives study came to Professor Zlatko Skrbis, ACU's Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education and Innovation), as he sat watching the *7 Up* documentary series with his children. The series famously follows a group of Brits from childhood into adulthood, checking in with them every seven years. Viewers were immersed in 50 years of life played out over several hours. They watched on as the children grew, their dreams lived and died, and their fortunes turned.

### AN IDEA IS BORN

"My children were asking me such fascinating questions about the show," said Professor Skrbis, and it sparked an idea he couldn't let go of. And so, in 2006 he and his collaborators launched Our Lives, a project that follows some 2,000 Queenslanders from the age of 12 into adulthood.

"I realised that a study like this, with a single-aged cohort, followed over a long period of time, could uncover key determinants behind youth outcomes."

Hindsight can be a powerful tool, but rarely has it been applied on such a large scale. For the participants, their lives from age 12 have been studied in detail through biennial surveys and one-on-one interviews. The group is now in their mid-20s and the cumulative data into their attitudes, challenges and beliefs

has allowed researchers to analyse trends in a broad range of areas such as education, careers, relationships, attitudes towards climate change and even body modification.

"We've been able to track young people's experiences of major life events, such as tertiary graduation, starting a full-time job, marriage and leaving the family home. We can see how these events affect their values, behaviours and quality of life in early adulthood," says Professor Skrbis.

"The findings have potential to contribute to policy and decision making that will shape Australia's future."

### A GENERATIONAL SNAPSHOT

The most recent report shows a snapshot of the cohort's lives aged 23 and 24.

- 8 per cent are married.
- 5 per cent have children.
- 30 per cent live with their parents.
- 52 per cent are in permanent full-time employment.

Beyond demographics, the report also shows how participants attitudes are shifting on key topics. For instance, 36 per cent said they had no religion in 2008, by 2017 that number had almost doubled to 62 per cent.

In 2010, only 63 per cent believed immigrants make Australia more open to new ideas and culture. That number is now around 80 per cent.

### ON RELATIONSHIPS

What does it take to have a successful love life? Money, good looks and an intriguing Tinder profile? According to the study, security and personal control were driving factors in building romantic relationships.

The study uncovered a strong link between secure employment, sense of personal control, education, health and love. While this generation is generally more highly educated than their parents, they are less likely to be in full-time employment. This undermined their sense of personal control and their ability, or desire, to maintain serious relationships.

### ON HEALTH

The findings show that between 2015 and 2017 the cohort felt less positive

about their health. Only 77 per cent felt positive about their mental health at age 24 compared to 84 per cent aged 22.

Professor Skrbis says this isn't necessarily cause for alarm, explaining that this generation may simply be finding it easier to be more open about mental health issues.

"One of the surprising outcomes from the study has actually been the resilience of the participants, particularly at times when we would expect vulnerabilities. It is a real testament to the generation."

### ON GROWING UP

Growing up has not been easy for this cohort, a process Professor Skrbis calls 'the new adulthood'.

"In many industrialised countries, and this cohort appears to be the same, the transition into adulthood has become prolonged and complex," he said.

Adolescence was once thought to be the period of time where young people developed a solid sense of identity before taking steps towards adulthood – getting a job, leaving home, finding a partner, and starting a family.

The Our Lives study showed that many in their early to mid-20s, well into the traditional age of 'adulthood', had still not committed to their identity. As such their work, home and romantic lives continued to be in flux.

One argument for the emergence of this 'new adulthood' is that people's lives are no longer dictated by conventional patterns. Instead, with greater flexibility on how we live our lives, young adults have become ongoing personal planning projects.

### ON TRUST

The study also looked at participants' trust in institutions. Throughout the study, trust in police has remained consistent, however trust in politicians, the government and financial institutions has steadily declined.

The Our Lives participants will once again have an opportunity to share their views and their lives in 2019.

*Professor Zlatko Skrbis is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education and Innovation) at ACU with responsibility for the Advancement and Alumni Office and the Principal Chief Investigator of the Our Lives project.*



# From persecution to prosperity

Author: Menios Constantinou





**Shamiran Merkhaal arrived in Australia as a refugee with only a few words of English. A decade later, she teaches disadvantaged youth in Melbourne’s western suburbs.**

“I felt like an outsider,” said Iraqi refugee Shamiran, when asked about her arrival in Australia on a humanitarian visa in 2009 – a week shy of her 14th birthday.

Along with her parents and two older brothers, Shamiran fled war-torn Baghdad in 2004 and spent half a decade in Jordan – “a painful, five-year journey” – while awaiting the approval of their Australian visas.

Finally, after several failed application attempts, the Merkhaals got news they would be reunited with relatives who had fled Iraq and settled in Melbourne years earlier.

“I was so excited, but when we finally got here it was actually very isolating,” said Shamiran, now 23.

“We would be in family gatherings and my cousins were all speaking in English, and I just felt out of place. It might not sound like a big thing, but it really hurt at the time, and that feeling still comes back when I see them.”

As a Chaldean Catholic, Shamiran’s native language is a form of Aramaic, but she had learnt bits of English while at school in Jordan.

“I knew the alphabet and numbers but that was basically it,” she said. “I would try to imagine what it would be like to have a conversation in English, but back then, I would never in a million years have imagined I would one day be fluent.”

Learning to read and write was Shamiran’s gateway to acceptance in Australia.

While in high school at Kolbe Catholic College in Greenvale, a suburb of Melbourne that is popular with Chaldeans, she steered herself to a culturally diverse group of friends, “so I would be forced to speak English”.

“I pushed myself out of my comfort zone and made friends from all around the world, and even now, we still hang out,” Shamiran said.

“These are the small decisions I made to ensure that I would learn to speak the language well, but also to secure a better tomorrow for myself.”

## FLEEING WAR-TORN IRAQ

The Merkhaals were lucky. They escaped Iraq before the persecution of Christians intensified in the majority-Muslim nation.

“It was just after the start of the war when we left, so the violence against our people was happening, but it was nowhere near as severe as it was say five or six years ago,” Shamiran said.

In recent years, the persecution of Iraq’s Christian minorities by Islamic State and other jihadist groups has been labelled as “genocide”. Chaldean Catholics were given an ultimatum to “convert, flee or die”, with many leaving Iraq to resettle in countries like Australia — now home to at least 20,000 Chaldeans.

While most of Shamiran’s extended family had fled Iraq by 2004, her father, a successful businessman, was hesitant to leave Baghdad. He changed his mind when the practice of demanding *fasil*, or blood money, increased.

“The fact that we were Catholics made us an easier target, and that was the turning point for my dad. That’s when he decided to leave everything behind and go to a place where we would not be targeted, where we could believe what we believe without being persecuted.”

For her part, Shamiran remembers little of her childhood in Iraq.

“Maybe it’s a coping mechanism, maybe it’s just me not having the greatest memory, but honestly I only remember bits and pieces,” she said.

In Jordan, the Merkhaal family’s faith was strengthened. Shamiran’s father worked for Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity in Amman, and they attended church services almost every day.

“When you face difficulties and go through a hard time, religion is your only option and God is your only saviour, and so it was in Jordan that we became really close to the Church,” she said.

“It was hard to be in a place where we had no family. What kept us sane was praying and having faith and knowing that everything happens for a reason, and even if we had to wait a bit longer, eventually we would be accepted and find a new home in Australia.”



## A LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

Things started to fall into place for Shamiran in her final years of high school.

She was studying hard and developing a love for her new homeland, where people could “do what they want and not be judged”.

“I loved everything about Australia, all the freedoms and opportunities that we have here,” she said, adding that she experienced mild culture shock at the fact that girls could wear short dresses and skirts.

“I’m not joking – I didn’t even know that was a thing,” Shamiran said. “We may be Catholics but we grew up in a predominantly Muslim country, and while we would never judge people for wearing any type of clothing, we were influenced by that mentality.”

“The longer I was here, the more I realised I could do anything I wanted, and finally I thought, ‘I would love to be a teacher who could make a difference to a student’s life, even if it’s just making one day of their life better.’”

## THE GIFT OF EDUCATION

Shamiran graduated in September 2018 and was employed by a school in a low socio-economic area.

“I see a lot of similarities between these kids and myself when I arrived 10 years ago, especially those from a refugee or immigrant background, so there’s a lot of empathy there and an awareness that you never know what these kids have gone through,” she said.

Shamiran’s greatest hope is to give her students the guidance and support she received from some of her teachers, who armed her with the tools she needed to thrive.

*Shamiran Merkhaal graduated from ACU with a Bachelor of Teaching/ Bachelor of Arts (Humanities).*

A silhouette of a person walking a dog on a beach at sunrise. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright glow and long shadows on the sand. The person is wearing a hat and a long-sleeved shirt, and the dog is on a leash. The background shows the ocean with gentle waves.

# The challenge of getting people to move more

Author: Menios Constantinou

How a daily morning walk and regular breaks from sitting can lead to sharper minds and healthier hearts.

It's no secret that regular exercise is good for us. And it's hardly breaking news that way too many of us are physically inactive.

The statistics portray an alarming truth: up to 85 per cent of Australian adults don't do enough aerobic and muscle-building physical activity, leading to chronic diseases that increase the risk of early death.

This seemingly intractable tug towards sedentary behaviour is a major challenge for exercise physiologists like Michael Wheeler.

"You go away to an exercise conference and all the presentations are about the positive effects exercise can have on this and that, and the message is loud and clear: 'exercise is good for you,'" said Wheeler, from ACU's Mary MacKillop Institute for Health Research.

“I’m always left with the lingering thought that we already know exercise is good for us, and the real challenge is getting people to do it.”

It’s with this in mind that Wheeler and his co-researchers designed the Brain Breaks study, led by the Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute and published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*.

They recruited 67 participants aged between 55 and 80 – who were relatively inactive and either overweight or obese – and they each underwent three conditions.

In the first scenario, they plonked themselves in a chair for eight hours, moving only for toilet breaks; in the second, they did a brisk 30-minute treadmill walk in the morning and sat for the rest of the day; and in the third, they walked for 30 minutes once again, but rather than sitting all day, they popped back on the treadmill for three minutes every half hour.

Throughout each condition, researchers tested a range of brain functions including concentration, decision-making, visual learning and working memory.

“We found the cognitive test scores were worse on the day when participants sat still the whole day without any exercise,” Wheeler said.

“And that says a lot for jobs where people are encouraged to sit for prolonged periods but are also expected to engage in competent decision-making.”

The study found a 30-minute morning walk improved both decision-making and short-term memory over a period of eight hours, and memory scores continued to improve when the exercise was combined with regular “brain breaks” (short, active interruptions to sitting).

From a public health perspective, there were two main take-outs: kicking off the morning with a brisk walk may lead to a sharper mind during the day; and staying seated for long periods is likely to be detrimental to cognitive health.

In Wheeler’s words: “The study highlighted how relatively simple changes to your daily routine can have significant benefits.”

## THE PROBLEM WITH SITTING

From a very young age, the majority of us spend large chunks of our time sitting down – whether we’re at school, at work, having lunch with friends or lounged in front of a screen watching Netflix.

Countless studies have warned of the health risks of sedentary behaviour, including heart disease, diabetes and some cancers.

That’s led some media to label it “the new smoking” – a tag that doesn’t sit well with scientists who argue the comparison is problematic. But once again, the message is clear: sitting too much is bad for us.

Meanwhile, the effect that prolonged sitting can have on our brains has not been well studied. In 2017, Wheeler led a review exploring how sedentary behaviour might influence brain health, and concluded that breaking excessive sitting with short bouts of exercise “may be important in forestalling cognitive decline”.

Previous studies investigating the effects of prolonged sitting on brain function have had mixed results; with some supporting and others failing to support the theory it could impair active memory.

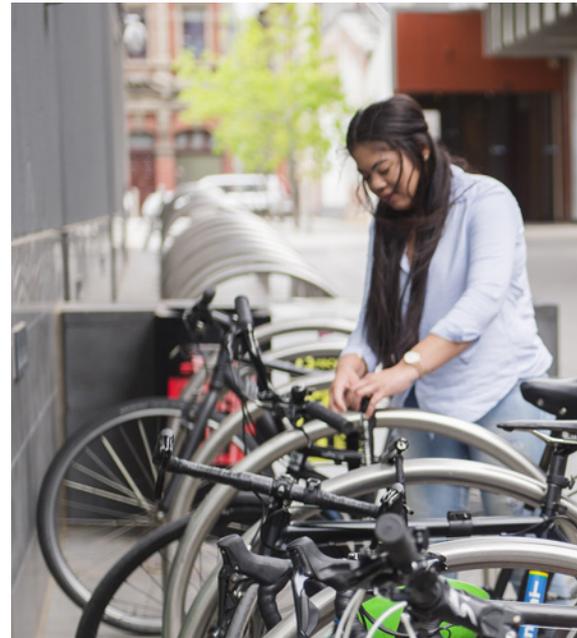
But the Brain Breaks study has now provided strong evidence that cognitive function in sedentary individuals improves with exercise.

Good news for companies keen to improve performance and productivity, but also for employees – because even if you work in a sedentary job, there can be lots of opportunities to build more activity into your day. Try lumbering upstairs instead of taking the lift. Or walking over to a colleague for a chat rather than sending an email.

Wheeler’s research suggests such activities are likely to improve cognitive performance.

“One of the problems we have is that our lifestyles don’t require physical activity like they used to, so we have to compartmentalise exercise and consciously carve out 30 minutes or an hour of our day to go to the gym, and a lot of people find that really difficult,” Wheeler said.

“But walking for 30 minutes in the morning and leaving your chair to



take a regular break is something a lot of people can do. It almost falls into the category of ‘incidental’ physical activity. And that’s why we believe this has the potential to be really popular.”

## GETTING PEOPLE TO MOVE MORE

If any of the three scenarios in the Brain Breaks study seem familiar, it’s because they were designed to mimic common daily routines.

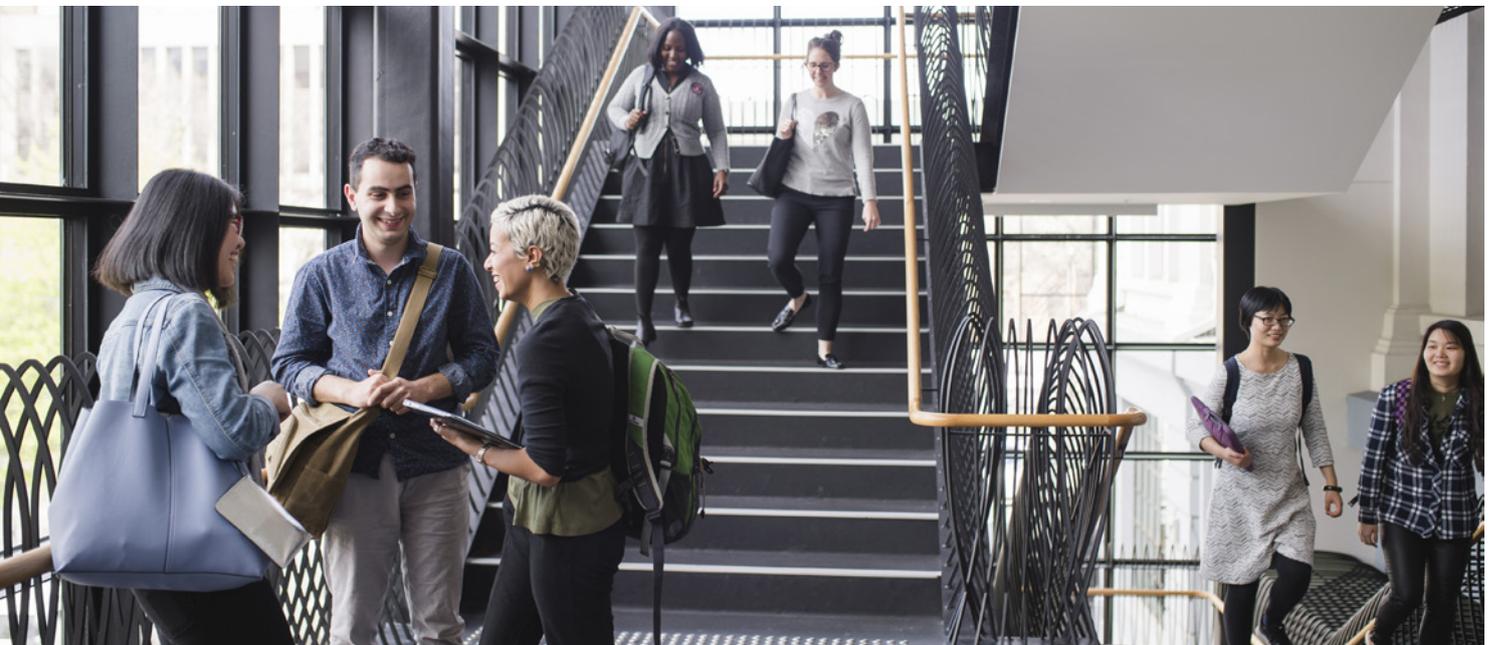
You might drive your car to work, park in the street outside and then scamper to your desk, where you mostly sit tapping away at a keyboard until you knock off that afternoon.

Better yet, you might be a so-called “active commuter”, who gets some moderate exercise in the morning by walking or riding to work, but is then chained to a desk for most of the day.

Best of all, your day might resemble the third condition in the study, where a bout of physical activity in the morning is combined with regular breaks from sitting.

The healthier habits formed in the latter two of those scenarios might have an added benefit, hopefully setting you on the path to a more active lifestyle.

The exercise can effectively kick off a ‘virtuous circle’, leading to improvements in decision-making and other cognitive performance, which in turn pave the way to better planning



and adherence to a wide variety of health-enhancing behaviours.

“Forming a daily habit for this type of physical activity can be a real stepping stone to increasing and eventually achieving a higher level of exercise,” Wheeler said.

For many of us, a more intense level of exercise is the ultimate goal. Because while a small amount of activity proved extremely beneficial for the study participants who were over 55 and either overweight or obese, the returns would likely be diminished if you are young and healthy.

“You’re never going to get around

the fact that moderate to vigorous intensity exercise will produce the best health benefits,” Wheeler added.

“But in my view, the word ‘vigorous’ in the physical activity guidelines may put people off if they can’t achieve that level of intensity, and that’s why we chose a 30-minute bout of moderate exercise for the study – because the goal was to design something that would reflect a realistic scenario or pattern.”

The most important thing of all is to “get out there and do something”.

“The reality is that all movement along the spectrum of intensity has positive

implications for health,” Wheeler said. “In the end, we need to encourage people to move more, because any amount of physical activity is better than none at all.”

*Michael Wheeler’s research focuses on physical activity and sedentary behaviour and the implications for brain function. He works with ACU’s Mary MacKillop Institute for Health Research.*



# Launching a new career

Author: Christina Sexton



Cherie Martin spent 13 years up in the air as a flight attendant. Looking for a new challenge, she decided to come back down to earth to pursue a Bachelor of Midwifery. With three kids of her own to support, and a part-time job to squeeze in as well, this soon-to-be midwife is more than ready for her new life welcoming new lives to the world.

“Becoming a midwife was always in the back of my mind, but I never, ever thought I’d go to university or do any kind of formal study,” said Cherie. “I just didn’t think I was academically minded.”

## FINDING HER FEET

Cherie admits her studies got off to a shaky start. “It was incredibly daunting and overwhelming at first.

“I was in my late 30s and I hadn’t written an essay for more than 20 years. I was told I had to do this thing called ‘referencing’ and I had no idea what that even meant.”

Throwing herself into the deep end turned out to be her best move, and Cherie quickly became determined to take advantage of every opportunity.

“I was *that* student – in the front row of every lecture and I couldn’t type my notes fast enough. I never missed a class and I’d go home at night and go over my notes again,” she said.

## SHOWING OFF

With three young kids of her own, dedicating her spare nights and weekends to her studies wasn’t easy for Cherie.

“As a mum and a mature student, I put extra pressure on myself. I put my whole family through this and it meant being selfish and taking time away from them.

“But I also saw it as a good opportunity to show my kids that mums can do anything. I was very open with my three, and I said, ‘Mummy has homework to do just like you’. I knew it would be worth it. My degree was about sacrifice, but it was about finding balance too.”

## WORK WONDERS

When Cherie moved from the classroom to the maternity ward to begin her practical training, she quickly discovered being a mum herself was an advantage – and an easy ice-breaker.

“A lot of pregnant women asked me if I had kids myself. When I told them, ‘Yep, I’ve got three at home’, I could see in their eyes that they felt more confident with me, knowing I’d been through it all before.”

Although Cherie has already participated in many births, she hasn’t lost her sense of wonder.

“I admit I still get teary. The first birth I witnessed (not counting my own children) was incredibly surreal and it was fascinating to see it from a different perspective.

“It made me appreciate women even more. Getting to see the essence of love in that particular moment is so special and it’s a privilege to be a part of it.”

*Cherie Martin graduated from ACU with a Bachelor of Midwifery.*



“Growing up, I was constantly falling over and running into things, and I’ve had so many concussions over the years. What I didn’t realise at the time is all those hospital visits were actually setting me up for my future career – nursing.

High school wasn’t easy for me. Quite simply, I didn’t understand most things. But I didn’t get diagnosed with dyslexia and dyscalculia (this is when you have difficulty understanding number-related concepts, symbols and functions related to maths) until I was in Year 11. It came as a huge shock.

All I knew was that I had to find different tools and strategies to make it through school and to keep going. I started teaching myself a series of hand signals and handshakes to help me remember words and concepts – I think of it as a dance routine for my hands. Using these gestures would jog my memory. Now that I’m at uni, I’m doing the same thing to get through my science subjects in particular.

Receiving a Creating Opportunity Fund (COF) scholarship was a huge confidence boost and the money is making a real difference to me. I’m saving for a car, which will help me get to campus much more quickly. I’m also using it to buy textbooks and I can’t wait to get my first nursing uniform.

I’m incredibly grateful to the COF donors. It’s so nice that there are people out there that want to help someone like me. The scholarship made me feel even more determined to complete my degree.

Being awarded a COF scholarship has really motivated me to work hard. It feels like if the donors believe in me, I have to keep going. I’d never want to waste this opportunity.”

**Charlotte Coulter, ACU nursing/business student**

# Creating Opportunity Fund

ACU’s Creating Opportunity Fund helps students in need receive the education they deserve. By generously supporting our fund, you will be directly helping talented students unlock their potential and explore their gifts and passions without limitations.

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## A NEW CAMPUS

ACU has partnered with Blacktown City Council to build a university campus in the Blacktown CBD.

Blacktown City Mayor Stephen Bali, MP, made the joint announcement in March with ACU Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Greg Craven.

Professor Craven said he was looking forward to ACU forging deep ties with Blacktown City businesses, schools and community groups.

“By 2036 half of Sydney’s population will live in Western Sydney, yet currently only 18 per cent of university places are in the area.”

More than 54,000 higher education students live within 30 minutes of Blacktown, and more than 17 per cent of current ACU students and five per cent of staff currently travel from the Blacktown area to ACU’s Sydney campuses.

## BACKSEAT GENERATION

Time-poor parents are creating a ‘backseat generation’ of children who don’t walk to school even when they live close by. Experts warn this trend could lead to long-term damage to their future health.

New ACU research, published in the *Journal of Transport & Health*, found an alarming 60 per cent of primary school children don’t walk or cycle to school, with most parents – even those living less than 750 metres from their school – dropping their kids off by car.

Dr Alison Carver from the Mary MacKillop Institute for Health Research said a survey of 700 Victorian households found convenience played a key role in parents stopping their children from making their own way to school. Research shows that only one in five children meet the recommended level of 60 minutes of physical activity every day.

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## A CELEBRATION OF MEDIEVAL ART

ACU has installed a triptych, the first full-size altar piece created in the Medieval Italian Sieneese style in at least 400 years, which depicts the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child, accompanied by St Joseph and St Mary MacKillop.

The work, *The Mother of Divine Wisdom, Saint Joseph and Saint Mary of the Cross MacKillop*,



was created in Italy by Chiara Perinetti Casoni, an eminent artist based in Siena who crafts perfect recreations (not reproductions) of 14th and 15th century Sieneese art using ancient materials and techniques, including centuries-old wooden panels, powdered lapis lazuli for blue, and real gold. The triptych is unique in Australia and is not a copy of any existing work. It has three distinctive panels: the centre panel depicting Mary Seat of Wisdom (Patron of Catholic universities worldwide), flanked on either side by St Joseph (Patron of the Sisters of Saint Joseph) and St Mary of the Cross MacKillop. As St Mary always wore a traditional religious habit, there is no artistic difficulty in including her in a medieval composition.

The work will be permanently displayed in the Our Lady Seat of Wisdom Chapel at ACU’s North Sydney Campus.

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[acu.edu.au/courses](http://acu.edu.au/courses)

“For me, the 10 per cent alumni rebate was a great reward for returning students and it was something I definitely wanted to take advantage of. As an alumnus, the rebate made me feel valued and appreciated by ACU, and I was very grateful to receive that acknowledgment.”

*Eddie Lsui, Master of  
Business Administration  
(Executive) graduate*

## Stay in touch

We love to hear from our alumni. If you have a question, need to update your details or wish to discuss an opportunity, please get in touch.

[acu.edu.au/alumni](http://acu.edu.au/alumni)

\*The 10 per cent rebate will be offered to domestic ACU graduates from any faculty.

