

Cowra Young Citizen of the Year Awards Nominees 2025

Elliott Bennett

Elliott has made an outstanding contribution to the Cowra community, involving himself in every facet of town life. Elliott was a school Prefect of St Raphael's Catholic School, a position he handled with integrity and enthusiasm.

Elliott's 2024 HSC Major Art Work was selected for the HSC Art Express Tour and he has achieved the Gold Level of the Duke of Edinburgh program. Elliott has served the Cowra community as a student Ambassador for both the Festival of International Understanding and the Breakout Anniversary.

In 2024 he was proud to be a part of the local production, 'Intertwined' and he has been an active member of the Cowra Musical & Dramatic Society. In 2025, Elliott will attend JMC Academy to study musical theatre.

Callie Bridges

Callie is a 2024 Vice-Captain of Cowra High School, a role that she has carried out with responsibility, skill and dignity.

Callie is a senior member of the Cowra Youth Council, where she has balanced her commitments with her Year 12 studies, including her participation in the Youth Peace Forum, Youth Week activities, NAIDOC Week and Children's Week Family Fun Days and planning for Mental Health Month activities.

Callie has been a member of the Cowra Ballet School Family for over 13 years, advancing through the age groups and is now an Assistant Teacher, admired by both teachers and younger students. She has participated in many community performances over the years. Callie is always ready to give time and guidance to the younger students, and her maturity, commitment and reliability are highly valued by both Cowra Ballet School and the Youth Council.

Callie has also been a member of the Indigenous dance group, Wagambirra for several years and has participated in many welcome and dance ceremonies throughout the community.

Ella Meuwisse

Kind, generous and creative are some of the words used to describe Ella, a young Cowra local committed to making Cowra a better place for all.

She is the proud business owner of Designed To Bloom which she began in 2022. Supported by the Cowra community, Ella made the leap from running her business out of home to occupying a shop front and now contributes to the Cowra business landscape with a shop front on the main street.

Ella has frequently contributed to local events in the community, adding a dash of colour to each occasion, including events such as the Cowra Christmas Festival, Cowra Breakout 80th Anniversary Commemorative Wreaths, Cowra Senior Soccer Club Presentation, Cowra Jockey Club and the Pretty in Pink Breast Cancer Fundraiser at Club Cowra.

She also regularly gives back to the Cowra community through various events including school holiday floristry workshops and a Garden Party for International Women's Day at the Cowra Information and Neighbourhood Centre and Bilyara Cowra Retirement Home.

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Marc Grant

Marc from Brother Fox Barbershop, makes outstanding contributions to the Cowra community through his exceptional services and leadership. In addition to his professional role, Marc volunteers on multiple boards of management and charities, including the Cowra Information and Neighbourhood Centre and the Mental Health Project Cowra.

Marc currently has two apprentices from Cowra High School, trying in particular to identify with students who might otherwise be struggling in order to give them a good chance to succeed.

Marc donates his services each year to shaving fundraisers in Cowra. He also provides free shaves and haircuts to gentlemen in hospital and nursing homes and continues this service to anyone that returns home and has restricted mobility.

Ray Heilman

Ray arrived in Cowra in 1939 and received all of his education in Cowra before completing a food technology degree in Sydney. This enabled him to commence employment with Edgell in Cowra where he worked for the next 37 years, before retiring as Deputy Manager and becoming a hobby farmer in Billimari.

Following the closure of Edgell factory in Cowra in 1992, Ray worked as a consultant on possible manufacturing operations for the Cowra Shire and in 1993, Ray was the driving force behind Cowra Export Packers, which helped put Cowra back on its feet.

Ray has also been an active member of the Cowra and District Aero Club since 1987, where he still holds the position of Secretary to this day.

Carolynn Hodder

Carolynn has had a successful career as a registered nurse for over 40 years, 17 of those as an oncology nurse where she has gone above and beyond her duties. Carolynn has taken patients to medical appointments and taken meals to the ones who needed it, as well as calling in and having conversations and coffee with family members that have been finding it hard to cope.

Carolynn has also been a member of the Cowra Community Chest for 20 years where she is involved in interviewing clients who come to the group for financial assistance, and until recently, she has been a member of the Darbys Falls Progress Association.

Lusi Austin

Lusi is a writer, a playwright, a director, a composer, a musician, a performer, a historian, a wife, a home-schooling mother of five and a creative spirit who has made a significant contribution to our Shire in the ten years since her arrival in Cowra.

Lusi is described as a dynamo, someone who despite living with multiple auto immune diseases, brings infectious enthusiasm to every task that she undertakes. As well as Homeschooling her children, Lusi also mentors other families in the area who choose to homeschool. She writes programs and makes her resources available online for those families.

Since her arrival in Cowra, Lusi has taken a great interest in the history of the town. The story of the Cowra - Japan relationship is familiar to many people, but it is only Lusi who has been inspired by that knowledge to create a series of community-based activities that have spread the story far beyond Cowra Shire.

These include writing and directing a major historical production featuring personal tales of locals involved in the Cowra Breakout as part of the Cowra Breakout 75th anniversary commemorations in 2019; writing and self-publishing the children's book 'Jack's visit to Cowra' as a way of telling the Breakout story to young readers in 2021; writing the lyrics for the final act of Nicholas Gentile's 'World Peace Suite'; writing and directing a second historical production based on the Cowra Breakout story as part of the Cowra Breakout 80th anniversary commemorations in 2024.

However, these activities are overshadowed by the debut earlier this year of 'Intertwined', a full-scale musical production focusing on the Cowra Breakout that had its triumphant world premiere in July 2024 as the major lead-up event to the Cowra Breakout 80th Anniversary commemorations.

Lusi's "can do" attitude and her ability to constantly deliver high-quality projects that entertain and educate locals and visitors alike is a unique gift she constantly gives to our community.

Esther Cutmore

Aunty Esther is a proud Wirajuri Elder and is an incredibly inspiring person. Her journey from facing hardship and racism to becoming a respected Elder and advocate for reconciliation is truly remarkable. It's a wonderful gift to witness her dedication to sharing culture and educating both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and is truly commendable.

Her involvement in various organisations, such as the Cowra Information & Neighbourhood Centre and Wegelli Drug and Alcohol Centre, where she holds seats as a director at both, highlights her commitment to her community.

Aunty Esther has done many Welcome to Countries at State Funerals, parliamentary receptions, as well as been an advisor on many projects, such as the hospital site, headspace, as well as the Corridor arts project.

It's also heart-warming to know how much she is loved and respected by the students at Cowra Public School, where they created an outdoor learning space dedicated to Aunty Esther.

Esther's story of pursuing university studies in Wiradjuri Culture later in life is a powerful reminder that learning and growth have no age limit. Her resilience and pride are truly admirable.

Aunty Esther is truly is a gem of Cowra.

Ray Johnston

Ray has been a member of the Cowra SES Unit for over 10 years, and a part of the SES overall for over 30 years, where he has received many long service awards. As part of this role, he has worked tirelessly during flood and storm events to help the community.

He is a founding member of the Cowra Community New Year's Eve Beach Party Committee, which has become an eagerly anticipated annual event by the Cowra community.

Ray is also one of Cowra's town bus drivers and assists Cowra Lions Club and the Rotary Club of Cowra wherever possible.

Lesley Burns

Lesley Burns is a quiet achiever in her dedication to making the lives of our communities across the Cowra Shire a better place. Her work in public service roles in our community for over 20 years takes her all over the Central West and she is passionate about all of us recognising, respecting and valuing the input and lives of older Australians.

Lesley will always put her hand up to help out and her courage brings out the willingness in others to get in and lend a hand. One of her outstanding qualities is that she will always acknowledge that it was a team effort and sing the praises of those around her.

In 2022, with the real possibility that the Gooloogong Country Club would close due to a lack of nominations for the volunteer Board, a small group with Lesley as their President worked tirelessly to bring the small club back to being a central meeting place in the community. Despite Lesley working full time, she committed most of her free time to volunteer hours at the club - from mowing, to organising working bees, to cleaning and publicising the club. The Gooloogong Country Club is still open and running today with a full board of volunteers.

Lesley has worked through the night on many occasions, spearheading a fundraising event to raise money for causes such as Royce's Big Walk from Gooloogong to Penrith for Dementia Australia, the victims of the Eugowra floods and Headspace mental health services for kids.

Lesley's humour, willingness to learn and get in and give anything a go shows her community spirit.

Cowra Community Group of the Year Awards Nominees 2024

Lachlan Valley Railway Society

The Lachlan Valley Railway Society (better known as the LVR) has been based in Cowra for almost 50 years. From its arrival in June 1977, the LVR has held a special place in the hearts of many locals as a living reminder of the days when Cowra truly was a railway town. However, it has also been a major tourist attraction that has survived despite many setbacks outside its control, including the government's closure of all operational rail lines in the area.

Despite such challenges the LVR has survived, first by changing Cowra Locomotive Depot from an operational rail facility into a rail heritage centre, and then by commencing the mammoth task of reopening short sections of the disused rail lines, using a mix of accredited railway professionals and volunteer labour.

The LVR have undertaken extensive restoration projects to refurbish the Cowra Rail Heritage, bringing back to life the WWI and WW2 memorial fountain in the Depot's extensive garden; restoring and rebuilding the Depot Amenities Block and Steam Store; and restoring Lounge Car MBV 931 for use at various functions. This carriage is moved to Cowra Station each month and used as an elegant cafe where Devonshire Teas are served. The more recent restoration of Planet Shunting Locomotive No.52 and two carriages has seen monthly heritage tourist rail services underway.

These and various other projects have been completed to improve the visitor experience at the Cowra Rail Heritage Centre at Cowra Locomotive Depot and to enable regular heritage tourist rail

operations to resume from May 2023. Wherever possible works were completed with volunteer labour and the support of local Cowra businesses.

Cowra and District Aero Club

In 2024, the Cowra and District Aero Club celebrated its 75th anniversary with a double celebration – the opening of their new hangar.

The hangar was opened by Member for Cootamundra, Steph Cooke in May 2024 and is designed to accommodate first responders. It includes an ambulance bay that allows for patients awaiting air-transfer, to be attended-to in an undercover area protected from the weather, before they are transferred to their medical aircraft.

The new upgrades also allow the Club to increase their current capabilities, expand their teaching opportunities, and gives the Club the chance to become a better facility to introduce young people in particular, to all aspects of aviation.

The planning for the Cowra and District Aero Club's commenced in 2019, with grant funding applications, before construction commenced in July 2021. By the end of 2022, the grant funding was exhausted and the Club members took over finishing of the project. Approximately \$12, 500 was donated by members as materials, labour, loans and financial donations.

The new hangar and its facilities are available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week to the crews of all the aero-medical teams and associated Ambulance and Transfer crews.

Congratulations to the Cowra and District Aero Club for their longevity, and for continuing to support aviation in regional NSW.

Dr Warren Whiley Memorial Award

Richard Neate

Richard Neate is the sort of member that every community organisation needs. Hard working, dedicated, supportive of others, and always willing to lend a hand regardless of what needs to be done. Richard has been that member to both the Cowra Eisteddfod Inc. and the Cowra Musical and Dramatic Society (M&D) for a combined total of over 35 years.

Richard joined the Cowra M&D soon after arriving in town in the early 2000s. His first on-stage appearance was in the highly successful production of 'The Crucible'. Richard subsequently became a regular on the Cowra stage, appearing in a variety of plays and musicals including 'Cabaret', 'Swag', 'Mr Bennett's Bride', 'Dimboola' and two 'Fawlty Towers' shows. He also regularly appeared in M&D variety shows that were a mainstay of the society for many years.

In 2004 Richard was elected to the position of Treasurer of the Cowra M&D. He continues in that position today. For over 20 years Richard has been the steady hand overseeing M&D finances. He is always on hand at M&D productions, often managing the box office before rushing backstage to change into his costume for an on-stage performance.

To the M&D, Richard is an indispensable member of the group. For his dedication and years of service he was made a life member of the society in 2019.

As well as the M&D, Richard has made a significant contribution to the Cowra Eisteddfod Inc. where he has held the position of Treasurer since 2010. The volunteer-run Cowra Eisteddfod is the

town's premier celebration of the performing arts attracting hundreds of performers to town to complete in a range of disciplines in a program of events that extends over a three-week period.

However, his volunteer work for the Eisteddfod extends far beyond the actual dates of the annual event. Richard has guided the Eisteddfod forward with the development of online entry programs, a serviceable website, the establishment of computer programs for volunteer rosters, in addition to putting together and editing the eisteddfod program and syllabus each year. For his dedication and contribution Richard was made a life member of the Cowra Eisteddfod Inc.

Richard's contribution has substantially benefitted both the Cowra Eisteddfod Inc. and Cowra Musical and Dramatic Society over many years. As both these organisations stage activities that are high-profile community events, his overall contribution to the residents of Cowra Shire and beyond has been long-lasting and significant.