

Proud Gungarri and Ngunnawal women awarded Francis Xavier Conaci Scholarship to study in Rome

Aboriginal women Raylene Pennay and Tyahn Bell are preparing to represent their mob during NAIDOC Week in Rome as recipients of the 2023 ACU Francis Xavier Conaci Scholarship.

The annual scholarship, named after young Aboriginal boy Francis Xavier Conaci, offers First Nations students from ACU the opportunity to study at ACU's Rome campus.

While undertaking their study, Raylene, 38, and Tyahn, 22, will also represent Indigenous Australians in Rome's NAIDOC Week celebrations, hosted by the Australian Embassy to the Holy See.

"It's definitely a once in a lifetime opportunity to go and study Catholic social thought, and I'm so grateful to be able to do that in Rome, in the home of the church," Raylene said.

A Gungarri mother of two young children living on Yugembeh country, Raylene is studying a Bachelor of Midwifery (Indigenous) through ACU's Away from Base program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

"I think the theme throughout my life has been about helping people. I've always gravitated towards helping empower them and encourage women," she said.

"After having my own children, it made me realize that this was where I wanted to focus my career, helping women in that transition and journey into motherhood and through birth."

Raylene, whose father is a Gungarri Elder, hopes to highlight the initiatives that are closing the gap for First Nations women in the healthcare system.

"There is a lot of disparity in the healthcare system, especially in maternity care for First Nations women, but there's also some really great programs in place to help close that gap," she said.

"I would like to take over a message about what's being done and what more can be done in that space."

Tyahn is a proud Ngunnawal woman, a direct descendent of the Bell and Brown bloodlines, and studying social work at ACU Canberra. The Ngunnawal people are the traditional custodians of ACT and parts of surrounding NSW. Tyahn's family grew up on the Aboriginal missions in Yass, Ngunnawal Country, Wallabalooa clan.

"Getting the Francis Xavier Conaci scholarship, I felt really proud," Tyahn said.

"I was really shocked when I got the email, and that they referred to us as Scholars. The term scholar is such an uplifting term. I think sometimes we don't even realise the achievements we are making till we sit back and reflect."

While in Rome, Tyahn hopes to send an encouraging message to all First Nations people.

"I'd like to send a message back home that you can do things, that we were made for deadly things and that we can and will do deadly things," Tyahn said.

"I want this to be a reminder even when faced with systemic obstacles and challenges in life that we can exceed beyond the colonial narrative, as our ancestors have paved our way."

Francis Xavier Conaci was an Aboriginal Yued Noongar boy who travelled from New Norcia in Western Australia to Rome in 1849 to train as a monk. He sadly died in Rome following an illness and is believed to be buried in the Papal Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls. Both Tyahn and Raylene will pay their respects to Conaci while in Rome.

Director of ACU's First Peoples Directorate Jane Ceolin said the university was proud to continue the relationship with the Embassy to the Holy See.

"The Francis Xavier Conaci Scholarship is one of many ways that ACU acknowledges the commitment and dedication of our First Nations students," Ms Ceolin said.

"I congratulate both Tyahn and Raylene on being awarded the Conaci scholarship to study in Rome and represent the Ngunnawal and Gunggari peoples.

"As a university committed to reconciliation, the Conaci Scholarship enables our university community to honour and remember the life of Francis Xavier Conaci."

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MEDIA RELEASE

29 June 2023



Australia's Ambassador to the Holy See, Chiara Porro, said her team looked forward to welcoming the two scholars to Rome.

“It is one of the highlights of the year for us, marking NAIDOC Week with the presence of two Indigenous scholars in Rome, this year just ahead of World Youth Day in Lisbon,” she said.

“It will be a unique opportunity for Raylene and Tyahn, but also for us to share our incredible First Nations heritage with the broader network of the Catholic Church.”

Photos of Raylene Pennay and Tyahn Bell in Rome are available on request.

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