

Media Release – Announcing the winners of the 2024 NT Human Rights Awards

The NT Human Rights Awards ceremony, “the Fitzgeralds” was held 10 December 2023 at the CDU Danala Education and Community Precinct in Darwin.

The NT Human Rights Awards recognises the *unsung* people and organisations from across the NT who share a common goal in promoting and protecting fundamental human rights found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as customary law and traditional First Nations knowledge systems.

This year on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2024 we are being asked to focus on how human rights are a pathway to solutions, playing a critical role as a preventative, protective and transformative force for good. Human rights impact everyone, every day with the global theme for the 2024 International Human Rights Day being:

“Our Rights, Our Future, Right Now”.

In the spirit of this global theme, the winners of this year’s NT Human Rights Awards inspire everyone to acknowledge the importance and relevance of human rights, to **change perceptions** by countering negative stereotypes and misconceptions and **mobilise action** to reinvigorate local, national and global movements for human rights.

The Keynote speaker for this year was Shahleena Musk, a Larrakia woman, and the current Children’s Commissioner in the Office of the Children’s Commissioner NT. Shahleena has over two decades experience working in legal, policy and advocacy roles with a focus on child rights and youth justice. Shahleena has also worked as a human rights and youth justice advocate, criminal lawyer, and prosecutor; and has extensive experience in policy development, project delivery, law reform, and strategic research. Shahleena spoke to the impact recent changes to laws and policies have on the rights of vulnerable Territory children. In her speech Shahleena spoke of the need for a Human Rights Act, at both Territory and Federal levels, and the need for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to be brought into domestic law in Australia.

NT Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, Jeswynn Yogaratnam acknowledged the voluntary service of the Organising Committee of the NT Human Rights Awards that includes the Rotary Club of Darwin South, Melaleuca Australia, NT Council of Social Service, Darwin Community Legal Service, Charles Darwin University, Dementia Australia and the NT Anti-Discrimination Commission.

Commissioner Yogaratnam also acknowledged the financial sponsorship and in-kind support provided by over a dozen community service and not for profit organisations, whose generous contributions and commitment, enables the NT Human Rights Awards to be held each year.

The NT Human Rights Awards winners are across 4 categories – Diversity, Youth, Justice, and Social Change. Each category has an individual and organisation component.

- **The Fitzgerald Diversity Award - Individual joint winners**

- **Khami Aughterson**

Khami has dedicated the last 25 years of her legal professional life working across government, non-government, not-for-profit, private and university sectors, predominantly in the NT, consistently promoting and advocating for human rights, peace, equal opportunity, diversity and inclusion. From Khami's own multicultural background, she has focused on working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, along with areas such as mental health, and women's and minority rights. Khami has served on many professional and community bodies including as President of the NT Branch of the Asian Australian Lawyers Association (AALA) and as Director of the National AALA. Khami has also variously served on organisations, such as the Forster Foundation for Drug Rehabilitation Inc; the NT Women's Working Centre; the Buddhist Society of the NT; the NT Multicultural Council; the Education Advisory Council; the Ethnic Communities Council Representative and the Shan Law Association. Khami's legal services and policy advocacy over her 25 year career has contributed significantly to an increased understanding and respect for human rights, including equal opportunity and non-discriminatory attitudes and practices, and to the removal of barriers as well as to the challenging of human rights breaches.

- **Ramnik Singh Walia**

Ramnik has been providing valuable advocacy support to communities in the Top End of the NT demonstrating a passion for promoting and supporting seniors' rights during advocacy education and consultation sessions in the East Arnhem region. Ramnik is an inspiration to colleagues in the aged and disability support sector, encouraging others to advocate for people living with disabilities and seniors, especially those who are often neglected or ignored by mainstream services because of being considered as the marginalised population of society. Ramnik's advocacy extends from the individual, helping prevent a client from being placed in a dementia ward, to the wider community, advocating for wheelchair access at Maningrida airport. Ramnik's work has a significant impact in addressing human rights violations and championing the rights of older Australians. His commitment to advancing equality and inclusivity is crucial for establishing a society where every individual, irrespective of age or ability, is respected and appreciated.

- **The Fitzgerald Diversity Award - Organisation winner – Sikh Family Food Van.**

The Sikh Family Food Van is a not-for-profit charity founded by Tejinderpal Singh that helps to feed around 350 people per week with a fresh vegetarian meal at no charge. The Food Van's clients are people from diverse backgrounds, such as international students, refugees, people with family and/or mental health trauma, people who are homeless and First Nations people. The Food Van has run this charity for last 14 years, and during the COVID-19 pandemic they fed an estimated 15,000 people. Every weekend volunteers cook fresh meals and then distribute the meals to people. Volunteers undertake all the work from their own homes, working a minimum of 20 hours per week, at a cost of \$500 per week. The Food Van volunteers depend upon on local charity and/or government grants. The Sikh Family Food Van recognises the necessity of a fresh meal for every human being and that having an adequate meal upholds people's dignity and respect so that they can keep themselves content and be recognised by their community.

- **The Fitzgerald Youth Award - Individual winner – Riece Ranson**

Riece is a mentor and street artist whose work actively promotes diversity and inclusion by empowering disengaged youth from varied cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. For over five years, Riece has dedicated his weekends to mentoring incarcerated youth, many from culturally diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds. Through art, Riece provides a therapeutic and empowering outlet that fosters self-expression, healing, and resilience. Riece conducts creative workshops for diverse youth, and collaborates with the Grassroots Action Palmerston (GAP) and provides mentorship through the Palmerston and Regional Basketball Association (PaRBA) along with other organisations who support vulnerable youth. Drawing on his lived experience, Riece has transformed his personal journey into a platform for advocacy and mentorship, ensuring that young people from diverse communities feel seen, heard, and valued.

- **The Fitzgerald Youth Award - Organisation winner – Yalu Aboriginal Corporation, Girl Power Group, Galiwinku**

In 2022 Jasmine Yunupingu was providing cultural support to the Child Abuse Taskforce who were investigating allegations of sexual exploitation of four young girls aged 8 to 14. Jasmine was shocked to hear that sexual violence was happening in her community. Jasmine decided to reach out to these young women, and very quickly this number grew to 45 young women ranging in age from 10 to 21 years coming together just to talk and share their stories. Jasmine would feed the girls out of her own 'sweat money'. Litisha Baker then came on board to provide support and now Girl Power was happening 3 nights per week and on a Saturday, all the girls coming to Jasmine's home to share a meal and talk.

Jasmine and Litisha are both Program Managers at Yalu and Yalu supports them to run Girl Power camps. The Girl Power Group Jasmine, Litisha, Galirrimun Joanne Dhurrkay (deceased) and Annie Cain work closely together to identify the needs of young women in their community, to learn what really goes on, and how young people often don't access information about the big issues in their lives. Although Yalu doesn't have dedicated funding, the organisation acknowledges the importance of this work and continues to recruit and train Yolngu women so that they can have weekly gatherings once again. This work is transformational, and these women continue to support each other with their vision to end all violence.

- **The Fitzgerald justice Award - Individual joint winners**
 - **Kevin Banbury**

Kevin works as the Regional Managing Lawyer at the Tennant Creek Office of the NT Legal Aid Commission, based in the remote region of the Barkly. Kevin has been a tireless advocate for First Nations people living in remote communities in the Central Australian and Barkly regions of the NT for over 20 years. Kevin has provided compassionate, timely and high-quality representation for First Nations children, young people and adults for over 10 years in Tennant Creek. In his work for systemic change in the Barkly, and for individual justice outcomes, Kevin demonstrates a commitment to human rights principles. His outreach work to communities has been focused on the right to access equal justice and has been designed to remove the insidious barrier to just outcomes of vast and remote distance. Kevin's representation of First Nations people who experience profound socio-economic disadvantage which impacts their involvement in the criminal justice system, is with human rights principles front of mind. Kevin has lived and breathed a deep commitment to these human rights principles for over two decades.

– **Greg Phelps**

Greg was nominated for his tireless work on the Montara Class Action. In 2009 there was a large oil spill from the Montara wellhead platform drill rig in the Timor Sea which spilled an estimated 2,000 barrels a day into the sea. The class action concerned the damage that the uncontrolled discharge of oil and gas did to the livelihoods of seaweed farmers from five islands which were affected by the spill. It is considered one of Australia's worst oil disasters. The claim provided representation for and elevated the people of Nusa Tenggara Timor who otherwise would not have been able to advocate for themselves. Particularly the claimants themselves: poor, uneducated and remote seaweed farmers from the Easternmost, and one of the poorest, provinces of Indonesia.

Greg made the Montara Class Action his job, recreation and mission. He has spent most of the last 10 years in Indonesia fighting for his clients, often working through the night. The impact of Greg's work on the lives of his clients is palpable. Greg has received countless hugs, kisses, nose kisses (a great honour) and profuse thanks from the bottom of their hearts. The difference his attendance in the village made was not about the prospect of winning damages. We were told by the people that this was not important, rather it was that we came to share their problems and to fight for them. That they had not been forgotten.

• **The Fitzgerald Justice Award - Organisation winner – Justice Reform Initiative**

The Justice Reform Initiative (JRI) formed in 2020 as an alliance of Australians who recognised that the criminal justice system was failing vulnerable people and increasing (not reducing) the cycle of incarceration. The work of the JRI is evidenced based, their body of evidence is not just concerned with the systemic failures of the criminal justice systems, but importantly, advocating evidenced based alternatives to custody that work. JRI reporting is used to form a strong body of evidence for justifying their advocacy positions. The most visible level of advocacy that the JRI undertake is through the media, which their NT Coordinators contribute to significantly at a local level. Critically, JRI also understand the importance of including people with lived experience at every stage of their advocacy. JRI's mantra is "Jailing is Failing" and by influencing political systems and policy, JRI is determined to break the cycle of incarceration, halving the number of people in Australian prisons by 2030.

• **The Fitzgerald Social Change Award - Individual winner – Yvonne Margarula**

As the senior traditional owner of the Mirarr Clan of Kakadu, for over 30 years, Yvonne has led her people and the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation (GAC) in the protection of their traditional country and cultural practices, and the advancement of their socio-political rights. Yvonne's leadership has taken many forms over the decades, from the prudent administration of the GAC, lobbying successive Territory and federal governments, leading one of Australia's largest environmental actions to prevent mining at Jabiluka, speaking tours across Australia and overseas, advocating at a variety of national and international political forums, including the World Heritage Committee. Many indigenous activists and others worldwide have drawn on Yvonne's experience in protecting the Jabiluka site from unwanted resource development. Her cause is known the world over for being a case study in how to represent one's culture and country against unwanted development. Yvonne's practical contributions to the advancement of Indigenous social and cultural rights, Indigenous intellectual property protection, environmental protection, and more are truly phenomenal.

- **The Fitzgerald Youth Award - Organisation winner – Yilli Rreung Housing Aboriginal Corporation's Volunteer Board**

The voluntary board members of Yilli Rreung Housing have made a significant contribution to advancing human rights awareness, understanding, and respect for the diverse communities in the NT, particularly for First Nations peoples and the most vulnerable individuals experiencing homelessness. Board initiatives have meant that 350 homeless people have 3 meals a day and a safe room to stay. The Board have developed pioneering programs that integrate cultural education into housing services, ensuring that the specific needs of First Nations peoples and other vulnerable individuals are met in a meaningful and respectful manner. Board members have devoted countless hours, energy, and resources to ensure that every community voice is heard and valued. Their commitment to mentoring emerging leaders within the organisation and the broader community exemplifies their passion for nurturing future advocates for human rights.

For more information or to arrange an interview contact:
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*NTHRA Steering Committee
10 December 2024*