UNITED NATIONS ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA
CELEBRATES
United Nations
Building Our Future Together

Dynamic Australians contributing to the UN System

3RD EDITION
Dynamic Australians



This initiative is proudly supported by our Patron, Her Excellency The Governor General Ms Sam Mostyn AC

United Nations Association of Australia

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Introduction

About the Project

Australians have made, and continue to make, a dynamic and significant contribution to the United Nations system, from grassroots aid operations and knowledge-building, to leading diplomatic missions and multilateral partnerships. Their impact spans generations and continents.

2025-and 2026-mark two profound milestones: the 80th anniversary of the United Nations, and the 80th anniversary of the United Nations Association of Australia. The Dynamic Australians project celebrates both, gathering 80 remarkable Australian stories in honour of these occasions, with the personal endorsement of the Governor-General, Her Excellency Sam Mostyn AC.

Our profiles span the full arc of Australia's engagement with the United Nations, from founding figures who helped shape the institution's earliest values, to leaders active and influential today. Through interviews, and through research for those no longer with us, we bring these stories to life.

What We Explore

In each profile, we focus our spotlight on five themes:

Motivations and path to the United Nations: what drew each person to international service, and how they found their way in.

Key achievements and impact: the projects, missions, and moments that made a lasting difference.

Meeting challenges as opportunities: how adversity shaped perspective, resilience, and innovation.

Influence: the networks built, the norms shifted, and the voices amplified.

Advice to future generations: the wisdom these leaders pass on to the next wave of Australians.

Our Ambition

Our ambition is that this collection, and those that follow, will engage our fellow Australians, build pride in the extraordinary contribution Australians have made and continue to make, and inspire the next generation to create their own impact through the UN system on the great challenges of our time.

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United Nations Association of Australia

Jessie Street

1889 to 1970



Jessie Street was the only female advisor of the Australian delegation to the United Nations conference in San Francisco in 1945. She played a crucial role in ensuring the inclusion of 'sex' in the anti-discrimination clause of the UN Charter.

Born in Ranchi, India, in 1889, Jessie's family moved to Yulgilbar station in New South Wales when she was seven. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Sydney in 1911. It was here she met her future husband, Lord Kenneth Street, with whom she enjoyed a lifetime of companionship shared with four children.

At the UN, Jessie worked alongside other prominent figures, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, to advocate for gender equality. Her efforts were instrumental in promoting women's rights on the international stage.

After witnessing the devastation of Hiroshima in 1948, Jessie became a staunch anti-nuclear activist.

Jessie Street used her platform at the UN to campaign for gender equality on the Commission of the Status of Women (CSW) and for peace and disarmament.

Jessie Street

A life defined not by convention, but by courage, equality, and justice for humanity.



Motivation | Steps to the UN

Jessie Street was inspired by her commitment to social justice, equality, and peace. Her journey began with her active involvement in various women's rights organisations and her role in the Australian Women's Conference for Victory in War and Victory in Peace. Her dedication to these causes led her to become the only female advisor on the Australian delegation to the United Nations conference in San Francisco in 1945.

Key Achievements | Impact

One of Jessie's significant contributions at the UN was her role in securing the inclusion of 'sex' in the anti-discrimination clause of the UN Charter. This was a crucial step towards gender equality on an international level and had a lasting impact on the rights of women worldwide.

Meeting challenges as opportunities

Jessie's proudest moment likely came from her successful advocacy for the inclusion of gender equality in the UN Charter. Additionally, her ongoing efforts in anti-nuclear activism and her work towards peace and disarmament were significant achievements that she would have been proud of.

Influence

The role of Australian women within the UN is expected to continue evolving positively. Jessie Street's legacy of advocating for gender equality and women's rights has paved the way for future generations. Australian women are likely to take on more leadership roles and influence key policies and initiatives within the UN. Their involvement in areas such as peace and security, economic empowerment, and ending violence against women will continue to grow, reflecting Australia's strong commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment.

Advice to future generations

To young Australian women aspiring to work with the UN, it is essential to pursue relevant education in fields. Such as international relations or law, and to gain experience through internships or volunteer work with NGOs.

Developing key skills such as diplomacy, communication, and cultural sensitivity is crucial.

Ronnie Wilson

1914 to 2016



Ronnie Wilson was one of the first Australian women to work for the United Nations. Her work in humanitarian and peacekeeping missions in China, Indonesia and Kenya fostered reconciliation, helped provide security guarantees and supported political transitions.

From humble beginnings living on a farm in Armadale Melbourne, Ronnie commenced employment in a legal firm, as an administrator. Later she volunteered in the Clothing Collection relief agency during the early 1940's. Here she met Dr Sutch who worked for the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), an initiative of the Foreign Minister, Dr Herbert Evatt.

Ronnie was renowned for her rapport building and collegiality with local workers. She received a letter from Deputy Director General of the Chinese National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, Mr C. N. Li on 31st December 1947 recognising her contributions:

> ***I do not want you to leave UNRRA without my having the opportunity to tell you how much we have enjoyed having you work with us. You have been in the Secretariat for a long time, 18 months, and I have heard nothing but praise for your work and for your cooperativeness with your colleagues. I am sure that Dr Tsiang would like to join me in this letter because of the special work that you did for him.***

Ronnie Wilson

A life defined not by recognition, but by cooperation, resilience, and service to humanity.



Motivation | Steps to the UN

Ronnie Wilson was inspired by her commitment to international peace and security. Her journey began with her involvement in various humanitarian efforts and her dedication to promoting global cooperation. She was one of the first Australian women to work for the United Nations, which marked the beginning of her impactful career.

Key Achievements | Impact

One of Ronnie Wilson's significant contributions was her involvement in peacekeeping missions. These missions aimed to end conflicts and foster reconciliation in war-torn regions. Her work helped provide security guarantees and supported political transitions, contributing to the stabilisation and development of affected countries.

Meeting challenges as opportunities

Ronnie Wilson's proudest moment likely came from her successful efforts in peacekeeping and her role in promoting international cooperation. Her dedication to peace and security left a lasting impact on the regions she served and on the UN's mission as a whole.

Influence

Ronnie Wilson's life and experiences exemplify the evolving role of Australian women within the UN. Her journey, marked by resilience and dedication, highlights the increasing influence of women in global governance. As Australian women continue to break barriers and take on leadership roles, their contributions will shape policies and initiatives that promote gender equality, sustainability, and human rights. Ronnie's legacy serves as an inspiration, demonstrating how persistence and a commitment to making a difference can lead to significant achievements on the world stage.

Advice for future generations

Ronnie would probably say, never give up! Persistence may win the day over a splash of brilliance, but even better if people work together for a common goal.

Narelle Townsend

1927 to 2022



Narelle served 40 years for the United Nations, at the UNDP and UNHabitat.

Narelle was the eldest of nine children born to Mother Rae, and father, union organiser on the Sydney docks. Rae inspired all her children to have formal education and saved her pennies and ration coupons so that all nine would have a better life.

At fourteen, Narelle worked to bring home income and studied at night school. She soon progressed to Sydney Technical College, now the UNSW. She dearly wanted to be an architect despite her father forbidding it.

At 30 after WW2, she was awarded top student in Architecture along with another UN Habitat colleague. She won a scholarship to Spain to learn environmental techniques for arid cities, where she resided in a convent and graduated with honours. Narelle was employed by an English company who delivered housing and services to resettle 5 million displaced people during the building of the Suez Canal.

Advice for future generations

Narelle believed in the value of a non-linear career path, emphasizing persistence and doing one's best for the right reasons.

Her legacy includes scholarships for women in the built environment and functional monuments. Narelle’s impact endures through the lives she touched.

Narelle Townsend

A life defined not by boundaries, but by imagination, inclusion, and building futures for humanity.

Motivation | Steps to the UN

Narelle, inspired by her mother Rae, pursued education despite financial challenges. She studied architecture at the University of Sydney and excelled, earning a scholarship to Spain. Her career included significant contributions to housing and resettlement projects, particularly during the Suez Canal construction. She held leadership roles with UN agencies, focusing on urban development and sustainability. Narelle chaired the UN Habitat NGO groups and the Global Housing Foundation, dedicating her life to improving human settlements and adopting many families.

Key Achievements | Impact

Narelle’s influence led to the establishment of the UN Office for Youth in 2023. Narelle championed youth involvement in urban planning, advocating for their voices in design stages and UN reforms. She supported internships and scholarships in planning and environmental fields. A trailblazer for women in male-dominated professions, Narelle's inclusive co-design approach is studied globally. She won international awards for her designs, art, and poetry. UN Habitat, unique in its direct connection with local governments, benefits from her legacy of fostering sustainable communities with youth engagement.

Meeting challenges as opportunities

Narelle's proudest moment was speaking at the UN General Assembly, where her bold recommendations were adopted by 56 Commonwealth countries. Alongside Zena Daysh, she influenced significant reforms at Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings. Her achievements include recognition from diverse partners and winning an art prize at Columbia University for her Arabic poetry at age 87. Narelle's lifelong dedication to learning and service left a lasting impact on sustainable communities.

Influence

Narelle inspired many women. She envisioned the UN complex in Gigeri, Kenya, as a sanctuary for learning about Africa's diverse countries. This complex now supports several UN programs and remains safe for women. Narelle's efforts led to significant female participation in UN Habitat, with Dr. Anna Tibaijuka becoming the first female Executive Director in 2001. After Kenya, Narelle contributed to UN projects globally, including designing three UN buildings in New York. Her greatest achievement was fostering collaboration among multidisciplinary teams.

Jennifer Ashton

A Life of Service and Continuing Commitment



Jennifer Ashton's lifelong commitment to peace and social justice stems from her Quaker upbringing; a community known for its deep moral conviction and dedication to humanitarian values.

In the mid-1980s, a life-changing trip to Cambodia ignited Jennifer's determination to serve. She returned soon after to coordinate Australian NGOs providing aid in a country still recovering from decades of conflict. Few from the West were living there at the time, fewer still with families.

When the United Nations launched the Cambodian peace accords in 1992, UNHCR sought a candidate with a rare combination of experience: a social worker, fluent in French, and with Phnom Penh experience. Jennifer was the only one who met all three. What began as a three-month contract evolved into a career that would span continents and decades, grounded in empathy, pragmatism, and an unwavering belief in people's resilience.

Jennifer recalls that the first posting after Cambodia, in Nepal, marked the true beginning of her UN career, a place where she learned that international work is as much about listening as it is about leadership.

"I wanted to be where I could listen, act, and make a tangible difference, and I still do."

Advice for future generations

Learn a second language!

At the UN, it's not just an advantage; it's a requirement. Every applicant is expected to speak at least two UN languages, English, French, Spanish, Russian, Mandarin, or Arabic.

In Australia, we often overlook this because we're not surrounded by borders the way Europe is. But language is more than communication, it's connection, empathy, and opportunity. I'd sometimes see hundreds of applications for one position, and before we even looked at experience or skill, those without a second language were immediately set aside.

If you want to serve globally, start by learning to listen in another tongue."

Jennifer Ashton

A life defined not by titles, but by compassion, courage, and enduring commitment to humanity.



Throughout her UNHCR career, Jennifer worked across Asia and Central Asia, supporting communities displaced by war, statelessness, and loss.
Her final posting, as Deputy Regional Representative in Kazakhstan, oversaw five countries emerging from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Statelessness was one of the region's most complex challenges: generations of people had no citizenship or documentation.

Under her leadership, UNHCR's regional initiative helped more than 250,000 people gain citizenship, opening access to healthcare, education, employment and, most importantly, a sense of belonging.
Earlier, in Malaysia, Jennifer coordinated a program that provided identity and protection for 20,000 Rohingya refugees, achieved through collaboration with local Muslim NGOs. The initiative offered hope to families who had lived without recognition or rights, a rare success built on trust and cultural understanding.

Jennifer describes Australian women in the UN as "**pragmatic, fair, and driven to get things done**." She hopes more will follow this path and encourages organisations like UNAA to champion mentoring and pathways into international service. Her advice to aspiring global citizens: ***"Learn another language, it opens the world."***

Today, Jennifer continues her mission through Companion House in Canberra, supporting refugees who have experienced trauma and displacement. Her life's work reflects a profound truth: service does not end with retirement, it transforms into mentorship, advocacy, and care. It is thanks to Jennifer's insight, humility, and enduring commitment that this project ('***Dynamic Australian Women, contributing to the UN system***')was ignited, inspiring others to continue the work of compassion and connection she embodies.

Leanne Smith

Working for all humanity, guided by justice and integrity





Leanne's journey to the United Nations was shaped early by a deep awareness of injustice and a commitment to human rights. As a young girl, the film The Killing Fields exposed her to the realities of mass atrocities and ignited a determination to help prevent such suffering. This conviction translated into early action, including joining Amnesty International at high school, participating in Model United Nations at university, and pursuing studies in international law and human rights.

Leanne first encountered the United Nations in practice in the Balkans following the war, where she served as an Australian diplomat. There, she witnessed the UN's multifaceted work supporting peace, reconciliation, development, security, justice, and democratic institutions, and developed a deep respect for the professionalism and diversity of its civil servants. Drawn by the opportunity to work for all humanity rather than a single national interest, Leanne began her UN career as a Human Rights Field Officer with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the beginning of a lifelong commitment to multilateral service.

Leanne's work as a human rights officer in Afghanistan was among the most formative of her career. She learned deeply from her Afghan colleagues and the communities she served, their generosity, resilience, humour, and grace in the face of hardship. She drew enduring hope from the strength of Afghan women and remains convinced that the country's future lies with its young women.

Working as a foreign woman was often challenging. Being ignored, dismissed, or excluded was Leanne's first visceral experience of sex discrimination. Rather than allowing frustration to define her work, she redirected that energy into ensuring women's voices were heard.

Instead of seeking entry into all-male village shuras, Leanne chose to sit with women at the well, listening as they worked and shared their stories. Through respectful listening, women's experiences were reflected in UN human rights reporting. From this, Leanne learned that influence often emerges not from formal power, but from trust, listening, and relationship.







Leanne Smith

A life defined not by authority, but by integrity, justice, and service to humanity.



Australians are at their best in moments of crisis, and this is precisely the moment the United Nations faces as it approaches its 80th anniversary. Australia has a unique opportunity to play a principled and pragmatic leadership role in strengthening the UN and renewing its global impact.

Initiatives such as this one bring together the deep experience of Australians who have served across the UN system. This collective knowledge is a treasure that must be shared with the next generation. Echoing Dr H.V. Evatt's vision in 1948, Leanne advocates for providing every Australian schoolchild with a copy of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reinforcing understanding of both the UN's importance and Australia's foundational role.

Leanne remains hopeful that Australia will step into emerging leadership vacuums and help guide the UN back to its founding principles of peace, justice, equality, and shared humanity

Advice for future generations

Don't give up. There are many pathways into the United Nations. If you can, **learn a UN language**. **Study the world**. Travel as much as you are able. **Be curious** about others and **open to different ways of seeing, being, and doing**.

Join your local **UNAA** chapter. **Volunteer** with organisations that **embody UN values**. Seek **field experience** overseas while you are **young and mobile**. **Connect with people** who have worked, or are working, in the **UN system** and **learn from their journeys**.

The UN needs all kinds of skills: lawyers and engineers, nurses and gender advisers. But above all, **it needs people with a passion for justice, peace, and equality, and the determination to persist.**

Today, Leanne serves as Chief Executive of the Australian Human Rights Commission, continuing a career spanning UN human rights fieldwork, diplomacy, and national leadership. Her work reflects an enduring commitment to justice, equality, and human dignity, in Australia and beyond.

Brian Gleeson

Working for humanity, building institutions that serve people





Brian Gleeson's path to the United Nations followed more than three decades of service in the Australian Public Service, where he built deep expertise in public administration, human resources, and institutional reform. His transition to the UN began unexpectedly when he was invited to present at a UN conference in Salzburg on career management. That presentation led to an invitation to join an international expert panel in New York to develop a new UN career system. This work caught the attention of then Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who invited Brian to join his team leading UN management reform following his election. Brian subsequently left the APS and embarked on a distinguished UN career, serving in senior leadership roles across multiple UN agencies and countries.

One of Brian's most significant contributions was during his time at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), where he led a major global restructuring of more than 135 country offices. The reform achieved a 20 per cent budget reduction, shifted UNDP's business model from project delivery to upstream policy influence, reduced staffing by approximately 1,000 positions, strengthened the organisation's brand and visibility, and improved relationships with Member States.

Brian travelled to more than 100 developing countries to train and support change management teams through the process. Notably, the restructuring was completed without a single appeal or legal complaint, a rare achievement in an organisation of UNDP's size and complexity.

Among Brian's many proud moments at the UN, one stands out in particular. With the support of Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Brian was asked by the UN Deputy Secretary-General to join a three-person transition team tasked with establishing UN Women. He subsequently led the recruitment process to select the organisation's inaugural senior leadership team, laying the foundations for what would become a globally influential UN entity advancing gender equality.
Another deeply personal moment occurred during an HIV/AIDS awareness session in Zimbabwe. Brian publicly hugged a woman living with HIV, helping to challenge entrenched stigma and misconceptions among more than 300 community members. The act transformed local understanding of HIV transmission and catalysed a shift from fear to compassion, an impact that rippled throughout surrounding villages.







Brian Gleeson

A life defined not by position, but by principled leadership, compassion, and services to humanity.

Brian believes Australians continue to hold strong credibility and respect within the United Nations system. Australians occupy senior roles across UN agencies, and their perspectives are valued for their pragmatism, integrity, and effectiveness.

With Australia seeking election to the UN Security Council and hosting COP31, Brian sees opportunities for the Australian Government to further strengthen multilateral engagement. As a trusted development partner in the Indo-Pacific, Australia is well positioned to leverage UN relationships to support regional development priorities and advance implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Today, Brian continues to contribute his deep expertise in public sector reform, institutional leadership, and human-centered change, drawing on decades of service across the Australian Public Service and the United Nations. His career reflects a defining truth of multilateral service: that lasting impact is achieved not only through policy and systems, but through leadership grounded in empathy, courage, and respect for human dignity. Through his work, from global organisational reform to moments of quiet human connection, Brian's legacy is one of building institutions that serve people, and people who believe in institutions.

Advice for future generations

Brian **emphasises** that a career with the United Nations is **deeply rewarding**, offering the opportunity to **contribute to solutions for global challenges that only multilateral cooperation can address**. He notes that entry into international professional roles typically requires a **postgraduate qualification, alongside strong practical experience**.

He encourages aspiring UN professionals to align their skills with specific UN agencies, **gain hands-on experience** through internships, volunteering, research, and fieldwork, and **actively build professional networks.** Staying **informed on global affairs**, preparing rigorously for competency-based interviews, and seeking mentors, particularly those with UN experience are, in Brian's view, **essential steps for success.**

Rod Henderson

Soldier. Peacekeeper. Humanitarian





Rod with his parents, Phil and Val Henderson, at Kapooka in 1995.

Rod Henderson joined the Australian Regular Army in 1995 and spent the next 22 years serving Australia during one of its busiest operational periods, first as a paratrooper in the infantry, then as a helicopter crewman on Black Hawk and Chinook aircraft. Deployed across some of the world's most demanding environments, Rod's path led him from Afghanistan and earthquake-struck Pakistan to three peacekeeping deployments in Timor-Leste. His journey is shaped not just by conflict, but by a quiet, persistent conviction that peace is worth fighting for.



Taking the locals for a ride in Nefolete.



Filling sandbags with locals whilst digging pits at Bobonaro.

From Soldier to Peacekeeper

As a UN Peacekeeper, Rod worked alongside military, specialist police, and civilian peacekeepers, together helping fragile communities rebuild peace from the ground up. Basic healthcare, education, and justice: things most people take for granted, but which take years of patient work to establish after conflict.

In Pakistan, Rod worked with communities where 80,000 people had been killed as a result of an earthquake in 2005. In Afghanistan, he witnessed the grinding complexity of the 'War on Terror'. Across every deployment, his mission was the same: to help those who were unable to help themselves.

The Meaning of the Blue Helmet

The decision to become a UN Peacekeeper to wear the respected blue beret in East Timor stands as one of Rod's defining choices. It was a commitment to optimism over cynicism; to building rather than breaking.

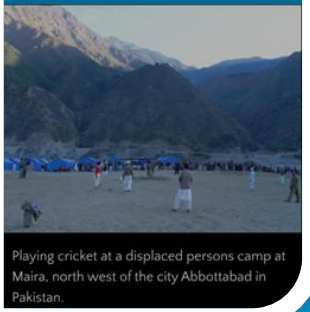
But it was fatherhood that transformed Rod most profoundly. When his three sons arrived, he understood, truly understood, compassion, and empathy. He became a man who listens before he acts, who considers every angle before taking any step. “My time in the infantry did not teach the gentle approach," he reflects. “Fatherhood did.”

Rod Henderson

A life shaped not by rank, but by resilience, empathy, and service in the name of peace.



Rod Henderson on the ramp of a Chinook at Zabul in Afghanistan. Photo: John Hunter Farrell



Playing cricket at a displaced persons camp at Maira, north west of the city Abbottabad in Pakistan.

Women, Children & A Different Kind of Role Model

One of the things that troubles Rod most is witnessing cruelty toward the vulnerable, particularly where cultural or religious systems permit physical force as a means of control against women and children. Peacekeepers offer these people an alternative vision of strength: not loud, not forceful, not armed.

Rod is a firm advocate for women in peacekeeping; their perspectives often provide unique insights all while they can frequently face the greatest personal risks.

Australia's Opportunity

Rod believes Australia has a real opportunity to invest in long-term peacemaking, proactive but patient, trusted rather than feared. Some places may need twenty years of steady engagement before a new generation can feel genuine hope. Although this would require long term strategic government thinking and funding.

Advice for future generations

Rod's message to young Australians: I would say: truly listen to what people are saying, rather than planning your response while they speak.

Be open-minded — don't assume you know what is best for someone just because you have deployed to their country.

If you have the opportunity, sit with people. Share their circumstances. Ask what they truly want to help them in their time of need.

Rod Henderson is CEO of the Australian Peacekeepers and Peacemakers Veterans' Association and author of his memoir ***Stop Screaming I Am Scared Too***. He lives near Canberra with his wife, three young boys, and an unwavering belief that ordinary people can do extraordinary things for peace.

Dr Donnell Davis



Builder of futures. Champion of communities. Architect of sustainable change.

Dr Donnell Davis's path to the United Nations was not a straight line, it was forged through adversity, determination, and an unwavering belief that good policy can change lives. Beginning her career in the Queensland public service in 1976, studying by night and correspondence while living rurally, she built expertise across audit, program evaluation, international law, and coastal governance. She escaped a violent marriage with young children, rebuilt her life in a distant city, rising steadily through the ranks, carrying the UN's values into every role she held.





From Public Servant to Policy Architect

Donnell's early career in Queensland government gave her a remarkable grounding. As a Programme evaluator, she used international law, World Bank indicators and COAG methodologies to benchmark Australia against the world, ensuring no state was left behind.

Her work on UNCLOS (the law of the sea) transformed maritime enforcement for the Great Barrier Reef, reversing a 95% case-loss record to a 95%-win rate through evidence and satellite technology and introducing four new pieces of legislation.

In 1998, she led the complex amalgamation of six government departments across 76 locations, without losing a single staff member.

A New Chapter: UN Habitat and Global Impact

Retiring early, energised rather than exhausted, Donnell founded Envirobusiness and Greening the Boardroom, registering international patents and travelling widely.

When UN Habitat split from UNEP in 2001, she became an Australian Representative to UN Habitat, a role she held until 2014. A defining moment came when NGO delegates from across the world voted her to deliver closing remarks at the UN Habitat Governing Council 22 in Kenya.

She also presented at the UNODC in Vienna on Urban Design to Prevent Femicide, with toolkits spanning five scales of impact. She delivered that address during cancer treatment. "As one does," she notes with characteristic pragmatism.

Dr Donnell Davis

A life defined not by circumstance, but by courage, curiosity, and commitment to humanity



Community, the SDGs, and a Voice for 707 Groups

Donnell's proudest domestic achievement was co-founding Friends of South-East Queensland (FOSEQ), uniting 707 community groups under one voice. Using the UN Earth Charter and UN Habitat benchmarking, FOSEQ shaped a regional plan with sustainability policies and measurable outcomes. For nearly 14 years, community voices shaped development before political change stripped that participation back.

Shaping the Next Generation

As UNAA Queensland President (2016–2020), Donnell built a community spanning 3-year-olds to 103-year-olds, introducing SDG Awards, lectures, and pathways for young professionals and returning UN workers unrecognised at home. Since 2020, as Programme Director across 13 Asia-Pacific countries, her federation's work reached 88,287 women and girls in 2025 alone.

Advice for future generations

"You don't have to work as a bureaucrat at the UN, there are at least eight ways to work within and alongside the system to make the world a better place."

Go explore. Go volunteer. Do a scholarship in another country. Learn new things every day.

One act of kindness and understanding can change an attitude, show another pathway, or leave a lifetime legacy.

"Go and live a little and walk in someone else's shoes for a while. It's enriching."



Today, Dr Donnell Davis serves as National President of the UNAA and Programme Director for Soroptimist International across South-East Asia and the Pacific. Her Doctorate in Urban Climate Governance, adopted in the Netherlands and UK, reflects a career spent translating global values into local action.

Carlisle Richardson

Diplomat | Small Island Advocate | UNAA Board Member



Carlisle Richardson's United Nations journey began not as an Australian, but as a young diplomat for St Kitts and Nevis, one of the world's youngest nations. Through his country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its Permanent Mission in New York, he helped shape landmark outcomes on climate, oceans and international justice. A meeting in New York with an Australian diplomat, now his wife, brought him to Australia, where he continues to champion the UN.



Motivation to the United Nations

Three moments set Carlisle's course. At 11, the week after independence, he watched his Prime Minister walk across First Avenue as the new national flag was raised at the UN, and began asking why this place, with all its flags, mattered so much to a new country.

As a university student in Barbados, the first UN Conference on Small Island Developing States put island issues, climate change, disaster risk reduction and the ocean before the world, with an Australian link through Penny Wensley. Ambassador Wensley chaired the Preparatory Committee, presiding over the negotiations that produced the conference's outcome document, the Barbados Programme of Action. He felt there was a place for him in this organisation.

Then, amid the horrors of Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, a newspaper image of a UN peacekeeper carrying a child to safety was the decisive moment: "I need to work within this system because they're doing something good." On graduating, he joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and asked specifically for the UN desk. He worked on implementing Agenda 21 and drafted statements for the Millennium Summit, before being posted to his country's mission in New York.

Key Achievements | Creating Impact

An early highlight brought his story full circle. Carlisle helped campaign for a St Kitts and Nevis judge to be elected to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, one of the smallest countries winning a place on an extremely important body. Speaking with Rwanda's ambassador and seeing a delegation of Hutu and Tutsi sitting together, made the moment deeply personal.

He went on to work on the Sustainable Development Goals, focusing on SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 14 (oceans), priorities for small island developing states, and on the Paris Agreement on climate change. He recalls looking up from his desk at 10pm on a Friday to see colleagues all around him still working: "No one's looking at the clock," each aware that the next generation would benefit from getting it right.

Carlisle Richardson

A life defined not by borders, but by belonging, bridge building, and service to humanity.





Meeting Challenges as Opportunities

Carlisle's proudest moment carried deep emotional weight. With St Kitts and Nevis chairing the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) for the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, he drafted the Caribbean statement and persuaded a hesitant Prime Minister to include a call for a permanent memorial: "Either they say yes or they say no, but at least we've made the call." In March 2015, the Ark of Return was unveiled at UN Headquarters in New York. For Carlisle, it honours the sacrifices and legacy of that history, a monument for future generations, ensuring we do not forget.

Advice for future generations

Know yourself. The UN is one of the few organisations with space for every professional background and personality type: the people person in the field, the analyst at the desk, the great orator. Don't change yourself to fit what you think the UN wants, because ***"the UN actually wants you as you are."*** Once you know yourself, prepare, build on your strengths, and seek out the piece of the UN that is all you. ***"If you ask 100 people how they got into the UN, you'll get 100 answers."***

Influence

Carlisle draws inspiration from Australia's UN legacy: among the first boots on the ground in UN peacekeeping, helping to frame how peacekeeping evolved, an early deployer of women peacekeepers, and a trusted bridge builder when negotiations polarise. That middle-power, consensus-building instinct is, he says, "***in the DNA***" of Australian diplomats, and he believes that one day there will be an Australian Secretary-General***. "Hopefully someone listening will say, yes, I could be that person."*** Today, Carlisle is an Australian Citizen. He and his wife, who represented Australia while he represented St Kitts and Nevis, met in New York, ***"one of those UN success stories",*** and moved here so their daughter could grow up surrounded by family. As a UNAA Victoria board member, he helped create the study tours initiative and worked on the first group of Australians to the World Food Forum in Rome. He sees UN associations as vital in closing the UN's public relations gap, helping communities understand why the UN matters.





Dame Ada Norris, DBE and CMG (1901- 1989)

Australia Schoolteacher, Women's Rights Campaigner & Australia's Delegate to the UN Commission on the Status of Women

Dame Ada May Norris was one of the most influential Australian women of the twentieth century in disability, ageing, immigration and the status of women. A trained teacher who resigned on marriage in 1929, she built a six-decade career in voluntary and public leadership: national president of the National Council of Women of Australia (1967–70), Australia's delegate to the UN Commission on the Status of Women (1961–63), and chair of the UNAA's national committees for International Women's Year and the UN Decade for Women (1974–80). The first Australian woman appointed CMG (1969), she was made a Dame in 1976 for distinguished community service.

Steps to the United Nations

Norris came to public life almost by accident. A trained teacher with a restless intellect, she found the domestic role expected of a barrister's wife unsatisfying. As she recalled of her early married life, her husband spent every evening absorbed in his legal work, and when she sought his company, he told her simply that he was busy, so she "went and found something to do". That search led her first to the Children's Hospital Auxiliary and then, at the urging of Ella Latham, to become founding secretary of the Victorian Society for Crippled Children in 1935.

Her path to the United Nations grew directly out of two decades building expertise in migration and women's status through the National Council of Women and the International Council of Women. That accumulated authority led the Australian Government to select her, from nominees put forward by the country's major women's organisations, as Australia's delegate to the UN Commission on the Status of Women, a role she held over an unprecedented three sessions, from 1961 to 1963, representing Australia in Geneva and New York.

"In those days a middle-class married woman had all the help in the house that she needed …
I welcomed the opportunity that prompted me to do something that was really worthwhile."

Key Achievements | Impact

At the Commission on the Status of Women, Norris contributed to resolutions later adopted by the UN General Assembly on the minimum age of marriage and registration of marriages, and to studies on married women's right to work. Australia ratified the UN Convention on the Nationality of Married Women during her first session, in 1961.

Her international work had lasting impact at home. She presented the National Council of Women's equal pay case to the Arbitration Court in 1969 and 1972, drawing on UN and International Labour Organisation standards, and helped end the bar on married women in the Commonwealth public service in 1966.

As chair of the UNAA's committees for International Women's Year and the Decade for Women, she devised and lobbied for the National Women's Advisory Council, established in 1978 to give Australian women a voice in federal government.



Dame Ada Norris, DBE and CMG | 1901 - 1989

Meeting Challenges as Opportunities

In her UNAA role, Norris brought together a million Australian women across the political spectrum, from the Women's Electoral Lobby to the Girl Guides. Rather than treat their differences as an obstacle, she used her reputation for measured, well-informed leadership to find common ground.

Over twenty years on the Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council, she guided the shift from the White Australia Policy towards multiculturalism, arguing that acceptance should not be "clouded with emotion". Her approach helped secure naturalisation for Japanese wives of Australian servicemen.

A chance agenda item became a lifelong cause. A 1961 UN meeting in Geneva sparked her commitment to Papua New Guinea, and she chaired the appeal that built Luavi House, the territory's first residential college for women tertiary students: "if I hadn't gone to that meeting in Geneva … I would never have been interested in New Guinea."

Advice for future generations

"It is from the champions of the impossible rather than the slaves of the possible that creative evolution draws its force."

When she stepped down from the UNAA's Status of Women and Decade Committee in 1980, she handed the role to a much younger woman: "I felt it was time that some of the younger people chaired these things … I think that is what you need to be able to do." Build patiently, make space for the next generation, and keep extending what is thought possible.

A life defined not by protocol, but by patience, persistence, and an unshakeable belief in the champions of the impossible.

Influence

Norris's influence rested on the trust she built across generations. Jessie Scotford, her successor as NCW national president, remembered her "logical and unshakable determination" and described her as "generous in her support for younger women".

Her expertise was sought internationally, including by the American Academy of Political and Social Science, for which she wrote on women's political participation in the South Pacific in 1968. As her son-in-law said in his eulogy, so much of what she and her colleagues achieved for women has since "simply been taken for granted".

David Purnell OAM



Quaker | Meaningful Mediator | National Administrator, UNAA | Champion of Quiet Diplomacy

David Purnell OAM is a Canberra-based Quaker, mediator, and long-time steward of the United Nations Association of Australia. Raised in the Congregational Church, he joined the Religious Society of Friends in 1966 and went on to serve as the Quakers' National Secretary; a role that deepened his connection to the Quaker United Nations Office in New York, one of the few NGOs holding accredited status with the UN's ECOSOC. In 1989 he became UNAA's National Administrator, a position he held for over a decade, and he later helped found the Canberra Conflict Resolution Service, now in its thirty-fifth year. He was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1998 for his contribution to peace activities and remains an active advocate for dialogue and mediation in international affairs today.

Steps to the United Nations

David's path to the UN was rooted in the values of his faith. Raised in the Congregational Church, he was aware of the UN through school; but it was joining the Quakers in 1966 that set his course, connecting him to a tradition of quiet, principled diplomacy and to the Quaker United Nations Office in New York. When fellow Quaker Harold Wilkinson, who had himself worked at QUNO, returned to Canberra in the 1980s determined to revive a dormant local UNAA branch, David joined him; later serving as branch president, and helping build a small ACT branch into an active national network through the decade.

Key Achievements | Impact

In 1989, David became UNAA's National Administrator, initially part-time, with funding secured from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through the strong personal commitment of then Foreign Minister Gareth Evans. The role soon grew to twenty hours a week and came to encompass preparing material for the National Council, taking minutes and following up decisions, lobbying government, arranging seminars and conferences, representing UNAA on the Australian Council for Overseas Aid, and maintaining contact with UNAA's state and territory branches. He was also a regular contributor to UNAA's national journal (Unity), supplying material to editor Ian Matthews across those years; in an era before email, when a printed, mailed publication was the organisation's principal means of reaching a dispersed membership, this kind of steady written contribution was part of the same unglamorous, connective work that kept a national, volunteer-driven organisation speaking with one voice. It was largely unseen work, and it placed David, at various points, in the company of visiting UN Secretaries-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Kofi Annan.

David Purnell OAM

A life defined not by noise, but by patience, quiet diplomacy, and service to humanity



Meeting Challenges as Opportunities

David's most defining lessons came not from grand diplomacy but from the quiet stubbornness of showing up. When he and Harold Wilkinson visited Canberra's American embassy to lobby on disarmament, as part of an ecumenical delegation, they met a perfunctory, dismissive reception, treated, in David's recollection, as though suspected of communist sympathy. The Soviet embassy, by contrast, welcomed them to a full luncheon and hours of conversation on philosophy, politics, and religion; a revelation that reshaped his sense of where genuine dialogue could be found. Decades later, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, David and Harold returned to the Russian embassy, twice, to press for a negotiated path out of the war; an engagement that again drew an unexpected invitation, this time to the embassy's National Day. Throughout, his conviction held firm: that two individuals willing to listen can open doors that governments cannot.

Advice for future generations

Listen before you speak, and trust that people can find their own solutions once given the space to do so; a lesson David draws directly from decades as a mediator. Get involved early, through school Model UN programs and through UNAA's branch network, which can connect newcomers with UN agencies operating in Australia, including UNHCR and the UN Information Centre. And recognise that influence need not be loud; some of the most consequential diplomacy happens quietly, between two people willing to sit down and talk.

Influence

David's influence sits less in headline achievements than in the institutions and habits he helped establish. He served on the National Consultative Committee on Peace and Disarmament, created by DFAT under Foreign Minister Bill Hayden at the urging of UNAA Peace Program convenor Stella Cornelius; a forum that gave peace-focused NGOs direct, regular access to DFAT officials ahead of Australia's UN sessions, and whose format went on to shape later government consultations on human rights. Alongside his UNAA work, David trained as a mediator and helped form the Canberra Conflict Resolution Service, now thirty-five years old, and has continued to lobby government, including recent correspondence to Foreign Minister Penny Wong, to make fuller use of the United Nations' own mediation expertise in resolving international disputes.

Dr Herbert Vere “Doc” Evatt (1894-1965)

A founding Voice of the United Nations



A former High Court judge and Australia’s Minister for External Affairs, Dr H.V. “Doc” Evatt was one of the most influential figures at the founding of the United Nations. He led the Australian delegation to the 1945 San Francisco conference, became the first chair of the UN Atomic Energy Commission, and in 1948 was elected President of the UN General Assembly; still the only Australian to hold that office. His belief in international law and the rights of smaller nations helped shape Australia’s place in the new world order.

Steps to the United Nations

Evatt led the Australian delegation to the San Francisco conference in 1945, becoming the leading spokesman for smaller and middle-ranking nations who wanted the new United Nations to be more than a forum for the great powers. He argued that the General Assembly, representing every nation, should carry real weight alongside the Security Council. He did not succeed in removing the Security Council veto, but his advocacy helped broaden the Assembly's powers, and his delegation secured a stronger commitment to full employment in the UN Charter than had originally been planned.

He carried that same conviction into the UN’s early institutional life: serving as the first chair of the Atomic Energy Commission in 1946, and in 1947 chairing the General Assembly’s Ad Hoc Committee on the Palestinian Question, whose work led to the partition plan the Assembly adopted that November.

Key Achievements | Impact

Evatt’s proudest moment was almost certainly his election as President of the UN General Assembly for its third session, from September 1948 to May 1949, presiding as it adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Paris on 10 December 1948. He remains the only Australian to have held the UN’s most senior elected office. Under his leadership as Minister, Australia was also among the first non-permanent members of the Security Council, serving in 1946 and 1947.

As the Australian Dictionary of Biography later assessed his legacy:

"By enabling the U.N. to develop in its early years as a forum whose outcomes were not always predictable, Evatt's Australia may have helped to secure legitimacy for the new organisation and perhaps allowed the U.N. to act as a force for restraint in the Cold War."

Dr Herbert Vere “Doc” Evatt

A champion of smaller nations, international law and human rights at the birth of the United Nations.



Meeting Challenges as Opportunities

Evatt’s time in the President’s chair coincided with the first great crisis of the Cold War. As the Berlin blockade divided the great powers in 1948, he used the authority of the Assembly presidency to call on the Soviet Union and the Western powers to enter into direct talks, insisting that the UN must be a place where even bitter rivals could be brought to the table. A year earlier, as chair of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Palestinian Question, he had steered one of the most contested debates of the UN’s early years, through to the partition plan adopted by the General Assembly on 29 November 1947. At San Francisco, too, he had fought a long and public battle against the great-power veto. He did not always win, but Evatt treated each setback as a chance to widen the space for smaller nations, the General Assembly and international law, never losing his conviction that the UN should belong to all its members, not only the most powerful.

Advice for future generations

Evatt’s own record offers an answer. He arrived at San Francisco not as a career diplomat but as a lawyer, academic and legislator who had spent two decades building expertise before ever entering the international arena, and he brought a capable team of advisers with him, several of whom went on to shape Australian foreign policy for decades. His example suggests grounding yourself deeply in a discipline, such as law, policy or economics, before stepping onto the world stage, and being willing to argue an unfashionable case, as he did for smaller nations’ rights against the great powers, even when the odds of full success are slim.

Influence

Evatt’s influence is written into the UN Charter itself. His delegation’s advocacy helped broaden the powers of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, strengthened the Charter’s commitment to full employment, and gave greater weight to the provisions on trusteeship and non-self-governing territories. He set a pattern for Australian diplomacy that endures: an energetic middle power, ready to argue for the rights of smaller nations and to stand behind a rules-based international order. And as President of the General Assembly that adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he links Australia permanently to one of the UN’s most enduring achievements, marked every year on 10 December as Human Rights Day.



Dr Keith Douglas Suter AM (1948-2025)

Communicating the United Nations to Australia



Foreign affairs commentator, human rights advocate and futurist, Dr Keith Suter AM spent more than five decades helping Australians understand the world, and the United Nations' place in it. Born in London in 1948, he left school at 15, became the first in his family to attend university, and came to Sydney in 1973 on a scholarship, going on to earn three doctorates. He served 13 years as president of the United Nations Association of Australia at national and state levels, sat on the executive of the World Federation of UN Associations in Geneva, and was made a UNAA Life Member in 1999.

Steps to the United Nations

Keith's path to the UN began in London. Working as a clerk at the Ministry of Defence, he met mentors including suffrage campaigner Dame Kathleen Courtney and Vice Admiral John Hughes-Hallett, who sparked his lifelong commitment to peace and human rights. He joined the UK's United Nations Association and, as a leader of UN Youth Action, challenged Prime Minister Ted Heath over Britain's neglect of UN Security Council resolutions on South Africa and apartheid.

After studying political science at the University of Sussex, he arrived in Sydney in 1973 to write a doctorate on the international law of guerrilla warfare. From 1978 to 1999 he served at various times as UNAA national president and as state president in Western Australia and New South Wales.

Key Achievements | Impact

Keith's great gift was making world affairs understandable. Those close to him marvelled at his energy: in a single day he might speak on international affairs on Channel Seven's Sunrise, deliver a university lecture, share a cup of tea at Wesley Mission's Edward Eagar Centre and give a keynote at a corporate dinner. He wrote 12 books, including the bestselling Global Notebook, and was recognised with the Australian Peace Medal (1986), an Australian Red Cross Distinguished Service Medal (2007) and appointment as a Member of the Order of Australia (2019).

As the UNAA remembered him:

"An engaging intellectual, with a great wit, who could communicate complex issues to a wide general audience."

Dr Keith Douglas Suter AM

The "peace campaigner in a three-piece suit" who helped Australians understand the world.

Meeting Challenges as Opportunities

Keith described his early education as "disastrous", yet he turned a clerical job into a calling. In London he practised his oratory at Speakers' Corner, and The Times more than once noted his sharp dress and sharper one-liners. In Sydney he took temporary work at the Central Methodist Mission and stayed 32 years, as Wesley Mission gave him a platform for causes that were rarely easy or fashionable: justice for Indigenous Australians, peace and disarmament, and economic justice for the long-term unemployed. In the late 1980s he helped build the Uniting Church's Trinity Peace Research Institute in Perth. Even through a long illness he kept commenting, preaching and mentoring until weeks before his death, which came, fittingly, on UN Human Rights Day, 10 December 2025.

Advice for future generations

Keith's own words offer an answer: "Change is going to occur anyway, so make the most of it. Change your thoughts and you change your world." He lived that advice, leaving school at 15 to become the first in his family at university and going on to earn three doctorates. His example suggests knowing your subject deeply, sharing it in plain language, and bringing good humour to hard conversations. Faced with a committee deadlock, he would propose "the opportunity to introduce a little glasnost which may lead to perestroika".

Influence

Keith's influence lay in connecting Australians with the wider world. Through the UNAA and the World Federation of UN Associations, he gave the UN a strong civil-society voice in Australia, and from 1985 to 2009 he was one of 20 members of the Foreign Minister's National Consultative Committee on International Security Issues. His voluntary service was prodigious: 34 years with the Club of Rome, 32 as chair of the Australian Anti-Slavery Society, 31 as chair of the International Commission of Jurists (NSW), 29 as director of studies at the International Law Association, and 25 as chair of the Australian Red Cross International Humanitarian Law Committee.

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Thank you for reading this selection of profiles of dynamic Australians who have made and continue to make significant contributions to the United Nations System.

Please let us know what inspired you so we can develop this collection over time.

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