



# A dream to make a difference

Written by Meni Constantinou

Growing up on a rural property in the Southern Tablelands town of Braidwood, Jallamara Gardner harboured a dream to become a lawyer or social worker focused on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

With the encouragement of her father and two mothers, one of whom was a mental health lawyer, she worked hard at school and stayed dedicated to making it happen.

"I'd see my mum doing her legal work and helping people with all these things, and that really inspired me," says Jallamara, a proud Gunditjmarra and Gumbaynggirr woman.

"I remember thinking, 'Wow, I want to do that. I want to help people in situations, people experiencing disadvantage, and kids in the justice system who don't have that support network around them.' Since then, I've had this dream to become an Aboriginal social worker or lawyer, to really help to make a change."

And yet, as a schoolkid in a small town that lacked the opportunities of the big city, sometimes her dream seemed out of reach.

"I love Braidwood," she says. "It's beautiful and a great place to live and grow up. But there aren't a lot of opportunities there."

When the time came for high school, Jallamara and her mums decided she should transfer to St Clare's College, a Canberra-based Catholic school for girls. This required a longwinded daily commute and multiple bus transfers, with Jallamara setting off at sunrise and returning home to Braidwood at nightfall.

"The travel was really hectic and it took a couple of years to fully adjust to that whole new school, city lifestyle thing – but in the end, it was so worth it," she says.

Since graduating from high school in 2023, Jallamara has embarked on a Bachelor of Social Work at ACU, with a plan to join the double degree program with a Bachelor of Laws.



Jallamara Gardner is a proud Aboriginal woman who is making the most of her opportunities.

She was also awarded an ACU Accommodation Scholarship, aimed at students from rural or remote areas who face barriers to higher education.

Jallamara now lives in Canberra at ACU's new on-campus Blackfriars Residence, and travelling to class is a breeze.

"Getting that scholarship has honestly changed my life," she says. "Instead of commuting for hours each day to get to Canberra, I'm living here on campus. I've met lots of friends and other Aboriginal students, so I just feel like I fit in. Sometimes it's hard to believe I'm on my way to a career in law and social work. I just love it so much."

When she's not in class, Jallamara enjoys spending time at ACU's Dhara Daramoolen unit, an on-campus hub that provides students with a culturally safe space that promotes positive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity.

Although she was raised on Yuin country, Jallamara forged a connection with her own country and culture during trips to visit family members in Victoria and other parts of NSW.

"My mums and my dad always used to say, 'This is where you're from, and don't ever forget that. This is your country and these are your people'," she says. "They really enforced that strong cultural feeling on me, making sure that I embraced my identity and knew who I was. It allowed me to be strong and proud, and I've always held onto that."

While she considers herself lucky to have had opportunities to study and pursue her interests, Jallamara remains conscious of the challenges that many others face.

"A lot of us Aboriginal kids get told that we'll never amount to much, that we won't get the chance to achieve the things that other kids do, and I feel a strong urge to challenge that," she says.

"I want to help those people and communities that don't have good access to opportunities, who don't have the support network, because I think that these days, a lot of Aboriginal people want to challenge those old stereotypes and turn them around."

"We can pursue the careers we want to pursue. We can go to university and become a lawyers and social workers. And if we succeed and achieve our dreams, maybe we can show other Aboriginal kids that they can do it, too."



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