



My name is Melissa Silva, actually now it's Saunders, I just recently changed my name. My Mob is Gamilaroi and Dunghutti, so my Pop is from Kempsey and my Nan is from Moree. I grew up Western Sydney and then moved to Redfern when I met my husband Jacob, so I've lived in Redfern for about 12 or so years now.

My community and my Culture means everything to me. I'm a high school teacher in the Western Sydney area. I practise my Culture every day and I also run Aboriginal programmes as part of my teaching as well. So my Culture and my Mob is an everyday thing for me and it makes me proud. I'm very involved with my family, with my nephews, nieces. Jacob's got a really big family and my mom's side of the family is smaller but we're very active in helping one another.

Jacob and I both started volunteering for Redfern Youth Connect when they first started out on The Block. Every Friday night we'd have a youth night where we would cook, feed the kids, play different sports and just sort of hang out in a safe place. So that's kind of where it all started and then we built connections out of there. Even though we're not involved as much with RYC anymore, we still have so much love for Margaret & Sol, and they reach out to get my son involved in some of their programmes. It's good to stay connected and see what they're doing.

With my day-to-day activities at the moment I'm organising the NAIDOC Ceremony, so we're practising Aboriginal dance every lunchtime. I'm giving up my time to teach all students, not just Aboriginal students. I'm also learning some Dharug Language because I'm gonna be teaching that as a course as a Language teacher towards the end of this year, which is a bit scary but it's exciting. I would say more than 50% of my time is unpaid volunteer work. I give up my lunch times, my afternoons, sometimes even the weekends. We are the role models for students and if we don't show up, then the kids sort of wither away and our Culture is lost.

We have the support of our family, of the children and of the Elders that are around us. So, we try to make sure that even though we're helping everyone else, that we're still getting some sort support. In the school, my principal is highly supportive, and she encourages Aboriginal education and she's sort of the driver of Aboriginal education within our school. So, I feel like I'm really supported in my workplace which makes it all worth it to know that she'll back me with whatever we need, and she gets things done for us, which is nice. Funding for the programs is a tricky time at the moment because our public school funding has been cut – so those things that my Principal would be more than happy to splurge on is cut back this year. Even though there's not a lot that we can sort of splurge on - in her words, she'll find a way. We're solely dependent on the government for funding, so with the cuts it's not easy and hasn't been a fun year funding-wise. Future support is something that the union always fights for and we're quite hopeful that we will get more next year, but it's sort of uncertain at this point.



I always find that within volunteer work, the people are probably the nicest people that you'll come across and you'll find that they're always putting others first. They're people driven and coming together over a common goal. For example, Margaret & Sol? They're so selfless. Even previously in moments of doubt, or if they weren't sure if they had money for the next program, they just made it happen. I think that their faith in God really blessed them and helped them so they can deliver successful programs which you can see now. RYC is now really flourishing and it's beautiful to see that. They're just different people, always putting other people first, making sure that the kids are safe, happy and fed. And that's why the kids keep coming back I think, because they know that they're valued and cherished.

Giving back is something that we do every day, we never stop being Aboriginal. I feel like I'm constantly trying not to exhaust myself so balancing time, and wanting to put 100% in, and do everything for the kids, and for my mum, it's an everyday thing. Sometimes it does sort of get exhausting, but we just keep going because we know that's what helps our people; so there's that as momentum to keep moving forward and keep going strong.

Some of the hardest and challenging things we've come across are being able to have a permanent space, so that we're not relying on other organisations or people. If I draw back to RYC, they have a permanent hub now and that's due to years of hard work, fighting and advocacy of all of the Redfern community, families and Mob who came together to make that happen.

Burning out is something that I probably have struggled with over the years, but now I do allow myself to take time, whether that be going to the gym or even just a little debrief with Jacob when he gets home, or just sort of putting myself and my needs first so I know that I can better and my battery is full to be able to keep giving the next day. Connecting with Country is important, we went to the farm a few weeks ago and that was just such an energising time to be able to sit back and just enjoy Country.

The best part of it all personally, is just seeing the kids happy and succeed in whatever they do. That really brings me joy. For example, one of my students when I was a year advisor, he lost his Dad who had passed away. I did all that I could to ensure that he didn't fail year 12, without him knowing that I knew because his mum sort of banned me from telling him. So, I would just give him food here and there, and make sure that he gets his assessments done and sort of push him over the line. Then at the graduation, his mum came up to me and bawled her eyes out and she said, 'Thank you so much for supporting my kid.' The extra work we put in for kids goes a long way and I think that's really beautiful for me.



I think the best thing people can do to support Mob initiatives is to check it out and to show up. See what it's like for themselves and just talk to the kids and see how much of a positive impact these non-profit organisations have on their wellbeing and the community. I'd encourage them to be prepared to have no expectations and to just be themselves and surround themselves with our Culture and embrace what our Mob is doing. Some of my best memories are giving my time and just serving people, especially our Mob, so just by showing up for the people, I think you'll feel a little part of you that you never thought needed feeling.



If I had any advice to anyone looking to volunteer, it's just to get out there and see what you can do with the talents and interests you have, then, later on you might get work from that. I started off volunteering with doing music and just helping out and doing what I love doing. And if you just do whatever your interests and hobbies are, then just share it, soon everyone will see it. Find your skills and build them and eventually get paid to do what you love doing.