

ARIA award rocks Wilcannia

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With Sarah Donnelley being voted the Telstra ARIA music teacher of the year came deserved recognition but not, she says, for herself. She claims those winning votes are for the children of the remote western NSW town of Wilcannia on the banks of the Darling.

“Thank-you to everyone who voted, it’s because of you that you’ve shown our kids they matter, that people are listening and people care about them,” she said via video link on receiving the award at the annual ARIAs on 25 November.

“I want to thank past students and students of Wilcannia Central School who trust me to go on a learning journey with me every day. They teach me something every day and make my job the best in the world.”

When Sarah, a Federation member, arrived at Wilcannia in 2019, she realised students and parents were not strongly connected to the school and set out to rectify this by creating a music program for the students.



“Music is incredibly important to this community, it draws people together,” she told *Education*. “So many of our students have intrinsic musical ability and like all students, love music.”

“During NAIDOC Week our students performed alongside community members in an amazing Wilcannia Community NAIDOC concert. The sense of pride amongst community was so strong as the kids stood up and performed confidently.”

The COVID-19 pandemic may not have affected most of remote NSW but the lockdown period provided a number of challenges in a community where computers, let alone stable internet access, is a luxury.

Home learning was not an option for the majority of students in the community, said Sarah, deputy principal at the school.

“The primary team wanted to remind our students that while many of us were working and learning from home, we were all still very much connected,” she said, so they created a video, [Big Things Grow in Wilcannia](#) (from Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody's classic, *From Little Things Big Things Grow*) and connected students across town with the visual cue of caution tape.

“The video shows how our school staff supported kids to continue learning at home, delivering home packs and running programs and lessons on our local radio station. The video caught the hearts of people across the country, as I think it resonated with everyone working and learning from home.”

It led to an anonymous ARIA nomination but unfortunately COVID-19 meant an ARIA Ambassador was unable to visit the community. So instead, Christine Anu, Paul Kelly, Kev Carmody, Jessica Mauboy and Andy

Grammar sent special video messages to the students.

“They were so excited to receive these, and then see the way that their video was shared on the *Today Show* and other media outlets,” Sarah said.

“The positive reaction to our students, our school staff and the work they are all doing, as a result of this nomination, have been an amazing way to acknowledge how special Wilcannia is, and to show our kids that people believe in them and care about who they are.”

Also among the four nominees from around the country, was another Federation member, Thomas Fienberg of Evans High School, Blacktown. “Over a number of years I’ve been fortunate to collaborate with a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander musicians and build relationships with our local Aboriginal community in Western Sydney,” he said. “This was the driving factor behind the nomination, but I’d like to think it was also for my broader contribution for supporting music education as a teacher/researcher.”