

MEDIA RELEASE

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Uni mates to head to Rome next month as Conaci Scholars

Since their first day studying teaching at Australian Catholic University (ACU), Zane Ratcliff and Ryan St. John have become inseparable.

From playing on the same team at Indigenous Nationals, to supporting each other at the Indigenous Higher Education Unit at ACU Banyo Campus, Zane and Ryan consider each other family.

“We’ve developed a bond in the past couple of years which goes much deeper culturally than just mates,” Ryan said.

“Zane is a big role model to me and a big brother, so we call each other Indigenous cousins.”

Now the best-of-mates are packing their bags for Rome, preparing for their first overseas trip next month after winning ACU’s prestigious scholarship for Indigenous students.

Named to honour the memory of an Aboriginal boy who in the 1850s travelled from New Norcia Western Australia (Nyoongar Country) to Rome to study in a Benedictine monastery, the Francis Xavier Conaci Scholarship offers an Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student to study at ACU Rome Campus.

ACU Pro-Vice Chancellor (Indigenous) Kelly Humphrey said Zane and Ryan were inspiring young men who would make ACU’s First Nations community proud.

“ACU’s commitment to reconciliation is embodied through the Conaci Scholarship, which not only presents an exciting opportunity but also serves to honour the significant story of Francis Xavier Conaci,” Ms Humphrey said.

“I congratulate Zane and Ryan on this achievement and look forward to their contributions to leadership and cultural sharing throughout their time in Rome and beyond.”

Keeping Aboriginal pride alive

Zane, 23, is a Wakka Wakka man with connections to Torres Strait Island, and grew up on country in Gayndah, while Ryan, 21, is a Gamilaroi man who grew up off country in Caboolture, on Brisbane’s north.

“I grew up on Country which is a really big deal for me, I go back there often for a reconnection to culture and country,” Zane said.

“I know where I’m from, who I am, and that I can always go back to my culture.”

Zane is completing a Bachelor of Education (Primary and Secondary) after being inspired by his teachers in Gayndah. Ryan is in his final year of a Bachelor of Education (Secondary), on a scholarship from Brisbane Catholic Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Both remember the nerves and uncertainty of their first day of lectures.

“We met on our first ever day at ACU, in a history class together,” Ryan said.

“I was looking around thinking I didn’t know anyone here, but this fella came in and had the same sort of hair as me and looked a bit lost as well. We introduced each other and about an hour into the class, we realised we were both mob. We have been mates ever since.”

Growing up in a small rural town with a predominantly Indigenous population, finding another future teacher with cultural connections was refreshing for Zane.

“It was a really big thing to bounce ideas off, and bounce our cultural connections off each other, and it was pretty awesome getting that in the first day,” he said.

Passing on culture and faith

As Conaci Scholars, Ryan and Zane will represent First Nations people during NAIDOC Week in Rome, hosted by Ambassador to the Holy See Her Excellency Chiara Porro.

“At the Australian Embassy to the Holy See, we are very excited to be welcoming Zane and Ryan to help us lead NAIDOC Week celebrations here in Rome,” Ambassador Porro said.

“The Conaci Scholarship pays homage to the role of our First Nations in the development of Australia-Holy See relations, while also strengthening the human connections that underpin them.”

In Rome, Zane hopes to tell the story of his culture through traditional Wakka Wakka dance.

“Our culture is the oldest culture in the world and sharing that with others is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Zane said.

“I’m open to any opportunity in Rome to share my culture and what I’ve learnt growing up with people who might not have even heard about it.”

Both men are also eager to walk in the shoes of their scholarship namesake and pay their respects to Conaci, who is believed to be buried in the Papal Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls.

“This is an opportunity for us to honour his legacy by going over (to Rome) and going through the journey he went through at such a young age.”

The pilgrimage to honour Conaci will also give Ryan and Zane, who both come from strong Christian upbringings, a chance to see where another Aboriginal boy studied religion.

“Ryan and I are both studying to teach religion in the classroom, and Conaci would have been one of the first Indigenous peoples from Australia to study religion, so it’s a full circle moment for us,” Zane, who was baptised Anglican, said.

“The Christian teachings are all about the morals and teachings of Jesus, I draw on that a lot, and I also want to bring those teachings into the classroom. I think everyone should learn from the teachings of Jesus, and it should be passed on to every student.”

Ryan, who received the Catholic faith from his mother and grandmother, believes the teachings of Jesus “even if you believe in him or not, are relevant today”.

“The main thing right now for me is ‘Love thy neighbour’, that to me is the most important lesson in the Bible and the Christian religion,” Ryan said.

“I believe there are a lot of instances today where people are not doing that especially people of high status, either government or celebrities, and that’s now pushing down into children and these younger generations, and if something doesn’t change, that’s going to fizzle through to the end of time.”

Advice to the next generation

As he prepares to show the world what it means to be a Wakka Wakka man, Zane is encouraging all ACU First Nations students to take up every opportunity to pass on culture.

“If you have that opportunity 100 per cent go for it,” Zane said.

Ryan’s own advice to Indigenous university students “is to be yourself”.

“For young people growing up, especially after the Voice, being yourself and being Blak is now looked down upon from a lot of parts of society today,” Ryan said.

“Getting through uni and getting through life, just be Blak and be proud of that, be proud that the old people survived and the culture survived and now it’s your turn to pass that on.”

Zane Ratcliff and Ryan St John are available for interview. Additional photos, including individual portrait shots of the 2024 Conaci Scholars, are available by request. Please credit 'Australian Catholic University (ACU)'.

Media Contact: Emilie Ng, 0475 963 606, emilie.ng@acu.edu.au

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