THE AUSTRALIAN

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2026 SHINE AWARDS WINNERS



BELIEF (Overall winner) *Libby Cook-Black, Qld*



PASSION *Jessica Eckford-Aguilera, NSW*



DEDICATION *Liz Bird, NT*



GRACE *Elizabeth Sinclair, Vic*



COURAGE *Vanessa Wellman, Vic*



SPIRIT *Briana Pring, NSW*



YOUTH *Emma Gallagher, SA*

Women who shine for their communities

MATTHEW DENHOLM
NATALIE KOTSIOS

The overall winner of the 2026 Shine Awards – Torres Strait Islander entrepreneur and former Jillaroo Libby Cook-Black – is aiming big.

"In 20 years we could have 20 Indigenous companies making millions," says the former rugby star who is helping Indigenous and other remote women make it in sport and business.

The awards, in their 10th year, are a joint initiative between Harvey Norman and The Weekly Times. They celebrate and recognise the achievements of rural and remote women helping their communities.

Ms Cook-Black, a Zenadth Kes woman who made of the most of scholarships to advance her own life, is giving back via two ambitious ventures. Her Female Co business has helped dozens of women and girls from Far North Queensland represent Australia on sporting fields. And her not-for-profit venture, Female First, hosts incubators for small business and start-ups, plus networking for events for women with shared ambitions. "I want to help them make the first $100,000 profit and create financial wealth for their families," she says.

Ms Cook-Black believes women, particularly in rural and regional Australia, are often overlooked, and this can be addressed via networks, visibility and practical opportunities.

"Visibility is key," she says. "We don't have proximity. We don't have the same level of eyes on us, so we need to create it."

Ms Cook-Black says it is important not to just focus on the barriers, but also to highlight opportunities for ambition and success. "The negative narrative is not the only story," she adds.

Female First's free online community already brings together 41 Aboriginal women, seven Torres Strait Islander women, 12 Pacific Islander women, three Papua New Guinean women and six non-Indigenous women, with digital platforms helping to level the playing field.

Judges said Ms Cook-Black's determination to create opportunities for others and to elevate those around her made her a worthy winner for this year's Shine Award for Belief, as well as the overall winner.

Harvey Norman chief executive Katie Page said the women whose stories were told via the awards were "transformative".

"Their stories stop you in your tracks," Ms Page said. "As we read nominations, it is hard to fathom the scale of what has been achieved. Their success is unequivocal, but is even more remarkable when the accomplishment is considered in the face of immense personal adversity.

"This year's finalists and winners continue to reflect the depth and scope of the impact of women in rural and regional Australia – in health and safety, remote education, entrepreneurial endeavour, as well as lifesaving and community contribution."

News Corp Australia Community Ambassador Penny Fowler said the women featured in the awards had wide-ranging and positive impacts.

"Through their selfless efforts, these women have had a critical impact on their communities, from organising drought-relief efforts to swimming lessons for country kids to increasing awareness of road safety," she said.

"Amplifying their stories reflects our company's commitment to creating positive change through news and advocacy."

Ms Cook-Black said Australian Indigenous Education Foundation scholarships helped her go to Pymble Ladies' College in Sydney's Upper North Shore, and then on to university.

At James Cook University in Townsville, she excelled at rugby, going on to play for the Queensland Reds and the Jillaroos.

"I'm really grateful for the opportunity and I think every athlete wants to play for their country, but I quickly got there and realised that there was probably more to life," she said.

Despite her achievements since, she believes the best is yet to come. "I think I've only really just started to sink my teeth into the stuff that I actually love," she said.

All finalists' stories – across categories including Courage, Dedication, Grace, Passion, Spirit and Youth – feature in a 32-page Shine magazine inserted in The Weekly Times, and in The Australian.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING: HUMAIRA SAEED