

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a maroon long-sleeved top and black pants, stands on a rocky bank next to a small stream. She is looking off to the side with a slight smile. The background is a lush green forest with trees and foliage.

Dreams COME TRUE

By Jeremy Lasek

The Illawarra Indigenous Business Expo is marking its third year with new management, a new larger venue and a record number of exhibitors.

That new management is the energetic and enthusiastic Gemma Lloyd, a proud Dunghutti and Gumbaynggirr woman with ancestral ties to Country through her mother and English-Welsh heritage through her father.

Gemma is the founder and owner of Sacred Country Consulting. Based at her home in Otford on Dharawal Country, she is building the biggest and what's shaping up to be the best Indigenous Business Expo to date.

Wollongong Lord Mayor Councillor Tania Brown said she was pleased to see the event transition into the hands of a local Aboriginal-owned and -operated business. "The ultimate goal for the event has always been self-determination and we're glad it is a step we can all take with the utmost confidence," Cr Brown said.

The third iteration of the event, showcasing local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned and -operated businesses, will shift to the Novotel at North Wollongong on Friday, 31 October.

Number of participants up 80 per cent

A joint initiative of Wollongong City Council and Illawarra Indigenous Business Network, last year's event saw 35 local businesses exhibit to more than 300 keen attendees at the town hall.

This year the number of exhibitors has swelled to 60, including a focus on design, photography, education, construction, policy research, the arts and a whole range of tasty treats from chocolate to vodka.

Describing the transition from a Council-managed event to her own business as "very smooth", Gemma says the expo's goals fit perfectly with Sacred Country, which specialises in business development support for Indigenous entrepreneurs, start-ups and organisations to allow them to thrive.

Before taking on the project, Gemma met with and sought the support of local Dharawal Elders. Once she received their blessing, Gemma led a working group that has been "phenomenal in helping me build the event, involving everything from decision-making to getting sponsorship. We now have what we consider to be a flagship event for the local First Nations calendar".

Gemma is excited about the move to the Novotel, arguably our city's most prestigious venue, and she gave a shout out "for the hotel's overwhelming support, so much so that they've come on board as a major sponsor and provided the venue pro bono".

Return home is a dream come true

Living and working back in the Illawarra is a dream come true for Gemma, who spent many years working away with the federal government before taking a 12-month sabbatical "visiting every continent on the planet".

"I spent the first 17 years of my life living here on mum and dad's (Tim and Donna Lloyd's) Otford horse farm. Farm life is my absolute favourite. I guess suburbia doesn't sit so well with a girl who grew up on such a beautiful farm," Gemma said.

"It's such a treasure to be back living on Dharawal Country again. I absolutely love what I do and I'm living the dream doing it in such a special place."

Gemma is pleased that all of last year's participants will be back for the 31 October expo, including Caressa Murphy from Caressa Designs with her distinctive artworks being showcased in a special range of children's clothing.

Gemma is even more excited that the 2025 event has attracted so many new First Nations businesses.

'Proud to be a part of it'

Mitch Lowrie, who started Dharawal Distilling Company at Bellambi two years ago, and whose business is booming, had no hesitation registering to be a part of the 2025 expo.

"It's a great way to showcase our product and work with other Indigenous businesses," Mitch said. "We will be very proud to be a part of it."

Dharawal Distilling is enjoying a stellar 2025 to date. Their unique range of gins and vodkas, using local botanical ingredients, are now on the shelves of 40 Illawarra and Sydney bars.

"We're so excited that our product is now being served in the Qantas First Class Lounge and we're now being stocked in the duty-free stores at the international airport," the proud Wiradjuri man said.

"Our vision is to create an experience where Dharawal Country can showcase all its beauty to the world."

Committed to purchasing from Indigenous businesses

"We solely use Aboriginal community members to forage for our ingredients, and we pay them for their work," Mitch said.

"We respectfully forage for Weeping Grass, Saltbush, Lemon Myrtle, Wattle Seed and Macadamia on Country, working with the land to ensure longevity and sustainability of our practices. All throughout our journey we are committed to purchasing as much of our raw input from Indigenous-owned business as possible."

Our Lord Mayor hopes a big crowd will attend the upcoming expo. "It is a truly energising event, and I encourage anyone looking to broaden their professional network and to learn more about procuring from Aboriginal-owned and operated businesses to come along."

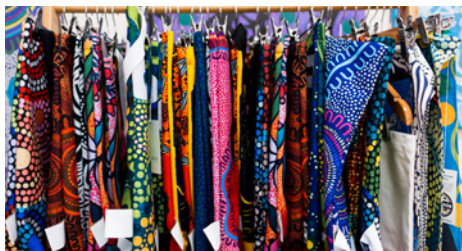
As for event organiser extraordinaire, Gemma Lloyd, she wants to deliver an event to remember and she's already turning her mind to the 2026 event and beyond.

"I really took this project on in the hope of finding a young Indigenous person in the Illawarra who's prepared to take this on. Of course, I'll be very happy to mentor them for the next few years to ensure it has the best chance of success."

The 2025 Illawarra Indigenous Business Expo will be held at the Novotel on Friday, 31 October from 11am-2pm and is proudly sponsored by Wollongong City Council, Gulanga (Rick Higgins' Aboriginal business), BY Group (Aboriginal business), Illawarra Aboriginal Corporation,

Indigenous Business Australia and Novotel Wollongong North Beach.

The Illawarra Flame is proud to be the media partner for this event 🌟



Products with purpose by the artists of Coomaditchie will be on show at the expo