From Fossils to the Future

Sally Hurst on Representation, Rural Access, and Reimagining STEM



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Dunmore Lang College alumna Sally Hurst is proving that science is about more than discovery — it's also about connection.

Now a palaeontologist and archaeologist at Macquarie University, Sally has been recognised internationally with the 2026 Zonta Women in STEM Award. This award celebrates women aged 18–35 advancing innovation and knowledge in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), with each recipient awarded $10,000 USD to support their work.

For Sally, the award journey began with encouragement from a friend and senior lecturer at the University of New England who recognised the impact of her work and urged her to apply — a decision that ultimately took her from local recognition to an international stage.

Beyond the title, the award will help expand something central to Sally's work: making science more accessible. Much of her outreach — from school visits to fieldwork workshops — has often been self-funded, limiting how far she can reach.

"The main aim has always been to get more people into science, particularly kids from rural and remote communities," she says. "It's about getting out there and actually talking to people."

That commitment has shaped her research approach as well. Alongside fieldwork in palaeontology, Sally has studied how field schools operate, gathering feedback from students and staff to improve how these experiences are delivered.

"A lot of scientists don't get to talk about their teaching experiences," she says. "I wanted to ask what works, what doesn't, and how we can make things better for students."

Her public engagement work has also grown organically. What began as sharing research online evolved into a wider platform, helping her connect with audiences beyond academia and leading to her involvement in the Superstars of STEM Program.

"I realised I was my own target audience," she reflects. "I didn't have people come to my school and talk about these careers. Now I want to be that person for someone else."







Sally's latest achievement is her recently released book: *Found a Fossil: Digs, Discoveries & Australia's Deep Past*

Quick**Fire** Questions

Q *What is the coolest thing you have ever found on a dig?*

The skull of a Hadrosaur next to a Tyrannosaur tooth.

Q *What piece of advice would you give to current students hoping to be successful in their fields?*

So many of the opportunities I've had came from just asking. Sending an email, putting myself out there. It's something I always tell students now: be brave enough to ask.

Q *Looking back, how did Dunmore Lang College help shape your journey?*

Living at College gave me a real sense of community. It made such a difference being surrounded by people, making friends, and feeling supported.

A former Dunmore Lang College resident, Sally credits her time at College with helping her build the confidence and connections that supported her academic journey — values she continues to carry into her work today.

With the support of the Zonta Award, she hopes to expand her outreach to smaller rural communities, where access to STEM experiences can be limited.

"I'd love to go to small towns, places with 20 students, and run workshops, talk dinosaurs, and spark that curiosity," she says.

For Sally, the goal isn't necessarily producing future palaeontologists, but opening doors.

"It's about showing people you can do this too — especially students from rural and regional areas who might not always see university or STEM as an option."