The inaugural winner of ACU National’s 2007 Outstanding Community Engagement Award for students, Melbourne Campus social science student Coni Forcey, thinks big.

Concerned about the planet her three children will inherit, Coni, with her community group, the Bayside Climate Change Action Group, created a human sign on Victoria’s Sandringham Beach earlier this year with the help of 2,500 people, who spelt out their demand via the media to a waiting world.

The “HALT CLIMATE CHANGE NOW!” message included a sinking “T”, representing concerns for the people of Tuvalu whose Pacific home is disappearing as sea levels rise.

Coni formed the Bayside Climate Change Action Group (BCCAG) with her neighbour, Lucy Allinson, more than a year ago “to influence any relevant organisation or individual that can have a positive effect on reducing the impact of climate change”.

Coni and her family reduced their own carbon footprint by 23 per cent, by swapping to Compact Fluorescent Light Bulbs (CFLs) and making other small changes. The BCCAG successfully applied for a grant from the local council to train 15 volunteer “carbon cops” to go into their neighbours’ homes and point out ways of saving power.

Other initiatives have included quizzing their local MP and rival candidates prior to last year’s state elections, media interviews, public speaking engagements, and political forums.

“We have grown from a handful of concerned parents to more than 450 families,” Coni said. “Now we have raised awareness on climate change, our next priority is about teaching people how to live more sustainably.”

Acting locally but thinking globally, Coni remains concerned for the people of Tuvalu. An immigrant herself, from the US, Coni believes the Australian Government should grant Tuvaluans special migratory status as environmentally displaced people.

“These people are our neighbours, and part of the Commonwealth. I believe we need to assist them by creating a dignified way for them to migrate to Australia.”

ACU National celebrates outstanding community engagement through a range of awards. Visit http://www.acu.edu.au/community_engagement for details and features on winners, including 2007 Staff Award for Outstanding Community Engagement School of Arts and Sciences (Queensland) Head of School Dr Lindsay Farrell.

Ocean echo

The Pacific Calling Partnership, another new not-for-profit venture, is run by the Edmund Rice Centre (ERC), with collaborators including ACU National’s Institute for Advancing Community Engagement, Good Samaritan Sisters, Christian Brothers, Catholic Religious Australia, Catholics in Coalition for justice and Peace, Punake Pasifik Artistic Solution, the Catholic Education Office (Wollongong), Pacific Wave Arts Organisation and diverse volunteers.

“We want to support our low-lying neighbours in the Pacific,” said ERC Earth Charter program coordinator Ms Jill Finnane. “Tuvalu will shortly become unliveable. It is happening already with worse storm surges and longer droughts.

“People are having to move their dwellings back from the shoreline. Salt water inundations during storm surges and king tides are damaging food sources such as breadfruit, coconut and banana. The 33 tiny Kiribati islands only reach two or three metres above sea level at their highest points, and many other islands are under threat.

“We are networking, campaigning and fundraising to raise awareness and encourage Australia to support cooperative international efforts which recognise the significance of climate change and address the concerns of the peoples of the Pacific.”

A Pacific Calling Partnership education kit for schools and community groups, $35 including postage, may be ordered by telephoning the ERC on (02) 9745 9700, where donations are also accepted. Visit www.erc.org.au for more information.
Rich with symbolism, the original poetry and artworks of mature age, second-year visual arts student Dr Robert Hoskin of ACU National's Melbourne Campus chart reflections on grief, spirituality, art and culture, born of a decade-long engagement with an Indigenous community in the Kimberley in Western Australia.

The retired Uniting Church minister said his decision to study Visual Arts at ACU National's Melbourne Campus had taken his engagement to ever deeper levels. Always interested in art and able to draw and paint, Robert rarely had time to indulge his gift during his busy career as a parish minister. It was only when he recently established an art gallery at his final posting that Robert wondered why he was denying his own creativity. A meeting with the late Indigenous artist and author David Mowaljarlai AO “had a profound impact”.

“I decided to travel to the Kimberley, to join in the work of the Mowaljarlai people’s July festival of arts and culture,” Robert said. “David began to share with me parts of his life and culture that resonated so deeply with me that I had to explore further.”

Robert has returned to the Kimberley each year, assisting in the festival as a compere to explain dance sequences to non-Indigenous audiences, and working alongside Indigenous artists to present the festival. Robert has recently been assisting Mowanjum artists to exhibit their work in Melbourne.

At ACU National, most students are required to carry out up to 20 days of voluntary community work. For Robert, engagement with the Mowanjum people was an obvious choice, and he took the opportunity to inquire into his experiences by joining a reflection group.

Robert holds a doctorate in ministry in which he researched the relationship between the work of psychoanalyst Carl Jung and the gospel of St Mark. He believes that, in spirituality, symbols and imagery are as important as the written word.

Robert said he cannot visit the Kimberley without feeling the grief of the people. “The Indigenous peoples of the Kimberley have suffered dislocation and losses from many sources, including early deaths and chronic illness. The children and younger people face extraordinary pressures.” Through his study at ACU National, Robert has been able to express and respond to that grief. The following haiku from his journal underlines his journey.

I stand at the edge
Waiting for the light to emerge
Many currents heal the grief

Robert chose to share his journal, reflective poetry and artwork with Melbourne Campus mission engagement officer Ms Mary McInerney, who is completing a doctorate of experiential and creative art therapy with the Melbourne Institute. “It has been a privilege for me to journey with Robert,” Ms McInerney said. “Through our conversations, Robert has gone to the next edge and produced new art, leading him to further inquiry and meaning.”