

UP CLOSE

It's a family affair

Home and Away star Raechelle Banno on growing up as a twin and 'finding herself' in her much-loved North Sydney



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Left: Raechelle Banno enjoys a coffee at Oski, her favourite local cafe. Right: shooting Home and Away on a wintry Palm Beach, the hot-so-glamorous side to acting. Below right: Banno in a scene from the long-running Channel Seven soapie.



Up Close



By Caroline Jumpertz

Raechelle Banno grew up in a very close, female-dominated family in Sydney's western suburbs, never far from her twin sister Karina, but she believes that living by herself in North Sydney is where she's truly "found herself".

"I can't explain how much I love this area," Banno said. "I've really learned the value of my own company, it's my safe zone here."

Banno has played the character Olivia Fraser Richards on *Home and Away* for two years, and when we meet one spring afternoon at her favourite cafe, Oski, in Kirribilli, she has returned from a trip out to Palm Beach on Sydney's northern beaches at 4am to shoot a scene. The television series had already been running for six years when Banno, now 24, was born.

She discovered Oski on the day she moved in to her apartment 18 months ago, and found there was plenty on the menu to suit her vegetarian sensibilities. Banno is an animal lover and on the day we meet she is wearing jelly shoes, denim overalls and a pink T-shirt. She's petite, energetic and has the upbeat manner of someone who'll happily turn life's lemons into a health drink, then share it with friends.

She's known for thoughtful and elaborate gifts — for a friend's recent 25th birthday she planned 25 activities for the day, which began by watching the sunrise beside Sydney Harbour, a short walk from her home.

The actor admits to having been nervous about living far from her family in the west at first, but when she shared a flat with a friend in the Greenwich-Artarmon area, she fell in love with life across the bridge.

"You've got the suburban feel and you're still close enough that it's convenient to whatever you need to get to," she said of the apartment she shares with her ragdoll kitten called Holly. "I'm central to where I need to be, whether it be the northern beaches or the studio."

"There's beautiful food, there's beautiful people. I wanted to be somewhere that I could go for walks and I had a little village near me, and this fell in my lap."

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While Banno moved around a lot growing up, her mother made sure she and her twin sister stayed at the same schools, firstly Fairfield West Public School and then Fairvale High School.

"I've been an actor since I was very young, since I was 8 or 9, and I was always auditioning and doing little jobs," she said of her school years. "In high school I did drama and dance, and I always felt very supported, no matter the teacher."

Her childhood was centred around a close knit household of females — her mother Joanne, whom she talks to everyday and describes as "the best person I know", her sister Stephanie who is four years older and currently lives in London and works in public relations for Saatchi &

Saatchi, and Karina, also an actor. "It's always just been us girls," Banno said of her family. "We're all very very close, and I can't imagine any other way, so I was very lucky."

She and Karina have worked together on short film projects including one called *Exposure*, another titled *Second Best*, in which she and Karina play twins, and another upcoming short called *Phenomena*.

"We were never brought up to be a unit," she said of her relationship with her twin. "We've very much on the same wavelength, but we're very different as well. Very much ying and yang."

"She is on the acting path as well, but by virtue of her personality and skill set, she's going about it in a different way," Banno said of Karina, who has a small role in ABC TV's *Easybeats* series.

Working on *Home and Away* for 46 weeks of the year, Banno has made the cast and crew into her work family, and is appreciative of the support and the opportunities a long-running role can give.

"It's such a great place to experiment, as an actor and as a professional, to learn from the writers or crew members. You have such a consistent training ground to be able to try to hit your marks better," she said.

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When Banno talks about her beloved neighbourhood, her enthusiasm and gratitude could equally apply to *Home and Away* role, or her emerging acting career.

"I've got everything at my feet. I couldn't ask for more."