



The changing face of Aboriginal Australia

By Claire Harvey Page 111

Bridging the divide between the haves and the have-nots



World at his feet: Jetstar flight attendant Matthew Shields
Picture: Anthony Reginato

Indigenous students pioneering new path

By CLAIRE HARVEY

ALMOST 85 per cent of Aboriginal children who take scholarships to prestigious city boarding schools finish Year 12 — nearly double the rate for other indigenous students.

And at least 60 per cent of these boarding school graduates go on to university, while the remainder all find work or traineeships.

These are the findings of a new study by the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, a \$40 million scholarship fund that annually funds at least 126 children from remote bush communities to private schools, including Sydney's Kincoppal-Rose Bay and Presbyterian Ladies' College.

A survey of graduates from all Foundation partner schools over 10 years shows 63 per cent have gone to university, 20 per cent have done



apprenticeships or traineeships, and 17 per cent went straight into jobs.

Among the graduates are teachers, executives, landscapers, bureaucrats and youth workers, including several who have returned to their hardscrabble bush communities.

Attending Sydney's St Joseph's College opened a new world, said Jetstar flight attendant Matthew Shields, who grew up in remote Walgett, in northwestern NSW.

"It's an incredible opportunity for young people like me to get out

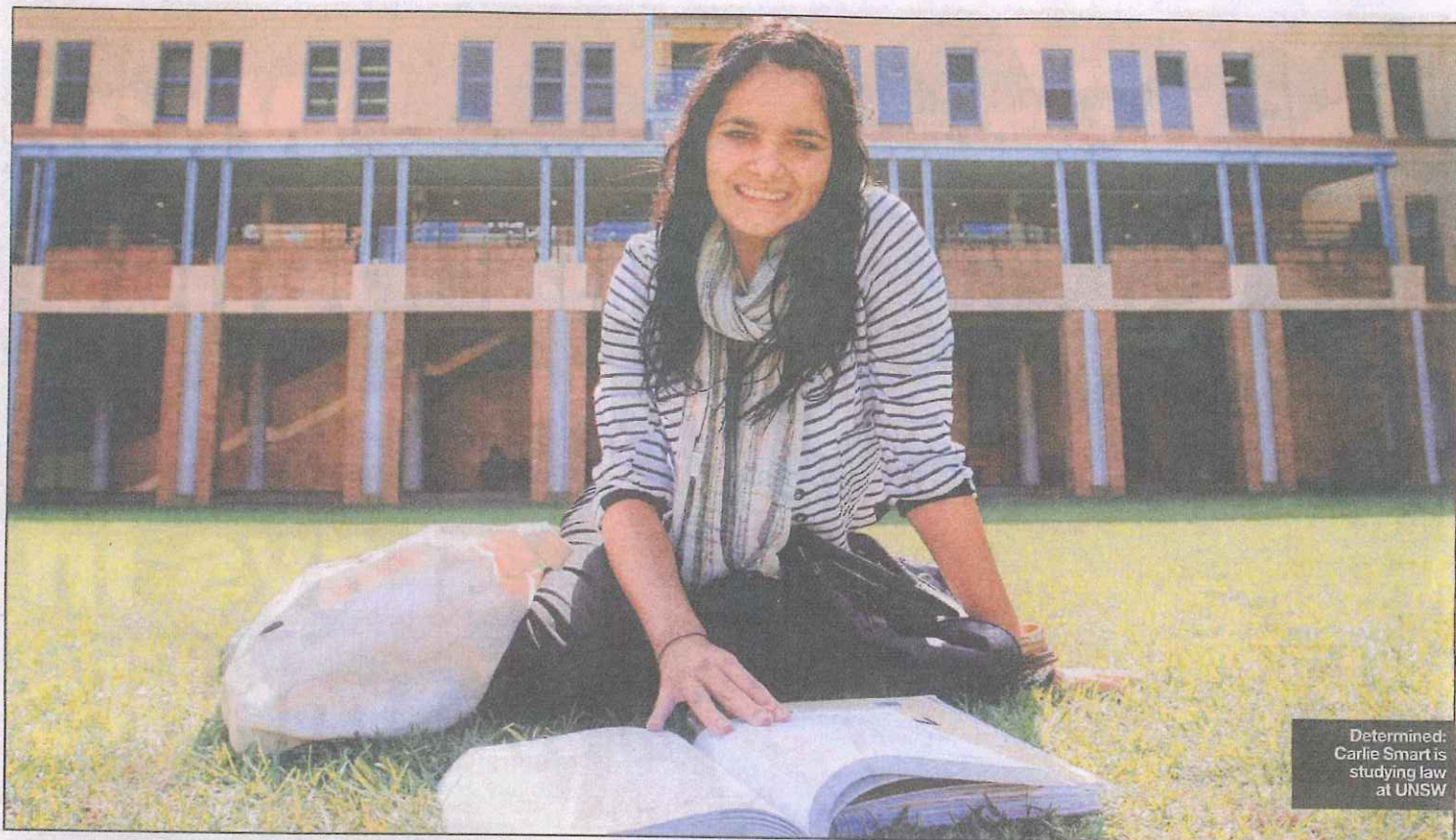
of their communities and be marvellous in their lives," Mr Shields, 24, said. "I never would have had the same opportunities if I'd remained in Walgett."

Law student Carlie Smart, 19, who grew up in Bowraville, on the NSW North Coast, said she feared that she would be a young mother already if she had not won a scholarship to St Vincent's College in Sydney.

"There are so many people at home who are my age and younger who have had babies, who haven't even finished Year 12 and are really doing nothing," she said.

"It's frightening to think that if I'd stayed there, I would have gone nowhere. Coming to Sydney for me was really hard at first, but it was an amazing experience.

"It's not for everyone — it's for students who want to learn, who are really ready to commit to this."



Determined: Carlie Smart is studying law at UNSW

Faces of the future

Small-town Aboriginal students are thriving at elite city schools, writes **Claire Harvey**

A boriginal boys from Walgett don't generally grow up to be flight attendants. Matthew Shields did — and he knows exactly why.

Shields left one of the country's poorest indigenous communities to attend St Joseph's College in Sydney, one of the nation's wealthiest private schools, on a scholarship.

He got an education, and a sense of life beyond. He calls everyone "darling". He is deeply involved in traditional and modern indigenous dance. He's applying for drama school, which is Part Two of his life's dream. And he hasn't forgotten where he came from.

"There are so many talented young people in Walgett and they don't know it," says Shields, now 24. "They don't know what life could hold for them. For me, going away to school meant I had a chance to work out what my talent was. I think it's a good thing for young people to go away, to get an education, to find their talent, so they can be marvellous in their lives."

Shields is just one of hundreds of indigenous children who, over the past 10 years, have been educated in big-city private schools thanks to a network of scholarships run by a band of priests, nuns, principals and private philanthropists.

Research shows 84 per cent of those scholarship recipients complete Year 12, compared with the national indigenous retention rate of 47 per cent and the non-indigenous average of 76 per cent, as reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2008.

In the past five years, 62 indigenous students enrolled at these schools have completed Year 12, with 126 still



Changing lives: Teacher Craig Ashby at Scots College, and a chilled out Matt Shields growing up in Walgett



progressing. A new tracking survey of the indigenous graduates over the past 10 years shows 20 per cent have done apprenticeships or traineeships, 17 per cent went straight into jobs and 63 per cent have gone to university.

People such as Carlie Smart, from hardscrabble Bowraville on the North Coast, now studying Arts/Law at the University of NSW. Smart fears if she'd stayed at home she could have ended up a young mother like many hometown peers.

"I'm doing development studies as part of my degree, and I'd really like to go overseas and help people in Third World countries — although when I look at some of our communities, like the mission at home, they live in similar conditions. I'd really like to help."

A private education is not cheap but it's a lot cheaper than paying for a lifetime's welfare, says Andrew Penfold, chief executive of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, an independent fund that co-ordinates the scholarships, backed by \$20 million in federal funding. The AIEF,

launched last year out of St Joseph's own indigenous fund, will raise another \$20 million for the next 20 years of scholarships. Enrolments at AIEF's partner schools have grown from 40 to 83 per cent in recent years, and in 2010 there are 126 scholarship students in class, plus another 40 at St Joseph's, which funds its own scheme.

It has been suggested by critics — including educator Chris Sarra — that removing bright young kids from remote towns is detrimental to the remaining children, and may disconnect the boarding school students from their Aboriginal heritage.

"I'm suspicious of the capacity of some of these elite schools to establish a cultural environment that is receptive to the need of such kids," Sarra says. "I don't want to sound too harsh because I'm tremendously proud of these (boarding school) kids, who have made huge leaps and sacrifices. I just worry that it's the sexy, highbrow option — and it is good for less than one per cent of the indigenous student population."

Sarra says a better model is foster-

ing quality education in regional areas, like the 60 school "hubs" he's developing nationally through his QUT Stronger Smarter Institute, with \$16 million in federal funding. "We want all kids to have the chance for a quality education," he says.

Ex-boarder Ricky Macourt, now studying law at Bond University, has heard all the criticism. "Someone once asked me if the scholarship program was like another Stolen Generation. I'm here to tell you, it's a completely different ball game," says Macourt, from the NSW North Coast. "Yes, you might be physically taking young indigenous men out of their communities and putting them into a white-dominated environment, but we choose to go."

"Many of us go back to our communities. I've got friends who would have no career goals if they'd stayed at home. But because they've been to school they know exactly what they want to do. And not only do you enhance their lives, but all the other young people in town say, 'Hey, I can do something with my life.'"

Macourt is eyeing further education at Cambridge, a career in law and politics, and has written a children's book, to be published next year.

The boarding school environment actually fosters Aboriginal pride, with dedicated indigenous advisers and support groups, says ex-St Joseph's student Craig Ashby, now teaching at Scots College and St Scholastica's College in Sydney.

Ashby, 22, has a dream of returning home to teach in Walgett, which he left as an illiterate 15-year-old.

"When I went to Sydney I knew absolutely nothing about Aboriginal history," Ashby says. "You have to move away from your community to see what's really happening because, when you're in it, you think it's normal. Now, every day I talk to the students at Scots and Scholastica's about Walgett, about our culture."

Carlie Smart's grandmother, Ann Edwards, rubbishes any Stolen Generation comparison. Edwards, 64, left school at 13 after six years of mainly domestic servant training at the local Catholic primary.

"I don't know whether you call me stolen or what, but the police and the welfare came to Mum's place one afternoon and got me and my sister and took us down to a home for children. School finished for me then. So I know about going away — but this is totally different."

"My grandchildren know who they are, where they come from. They're really good role models for the generation that come up next. They're absolutely beautiful little people when they come back home, little gentlemen and little ladies. There's so much opportunity down in Sydney. There's absolutely nothing for them up here."

What's more, says Edwards, it's good for the white kids, too. "White people have got this idea that Aboriginal people are drunks, drug addicts, lazy lookin' things. They get to meet these lovely Aboriginal kids at school; they play, they go home together at weekends. It's a good thing."