

# Learning curve from bush to big smoke



NIKKI SHORT

Sarah Treacy has graduated from Sydney's Loreto Normanhurst school with the help of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation



**AUSTRALIAN  
 INDIGENOUS  
 EDUCATION  
 FOUNDATION**

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SARAH Treacy has long walked in two worlds. The daughter of a Kija woman from the East Kimberley region and a non-indigenous father from Tamworth, Sarah grew up in Broome, spending Christmas in Sydney with her father's family and July out bush with her mother's people.

"Broome is in the middle of both; it's a well-developed town... but I have experienced living in remote areas, going bush, fishing and camping with my mum's people," she said. "I get the cool stuff from Mum's side. Coming over here (to Sydney) is living from one extreme to another."

Even so, leaving her small school in Broome two years ago — where half the students are indigenous — for Loreto Normanhurst, a private girls' school on Sydney's north shore, where Sarah was one of only three Aboriginal students, was daunting, although having her father's family in Sydney, including a cousin at the school, was crucial support.

"I was scared. Aborigines down here (in Sydney) are so different and I was scared of the stereotype... But it turned out to be fine. A lot of them said 'You're not what we expected, you talk like us', so I changed a lot of their views."

The change prompted Sarah to apply herself to her studies for the first time. Having just graduated from Year 12, she plans to train as a primary teacher, inspired by her father, a teacher and school principal. "He's spent half his life trying to give back to Aboriginal kids, just teaching them and being involved in their lives. And now that I've been to Loreto and gone away from my community, I want to give back to it and teach out in an

Aboriginal community in the Kimberley region," she said.

Sarah, who started at Loreto Normanhurst in Year 10, is one of a booming number of indigenous students graduating Year 12 from private boarding schools with the support of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation.

With 33 students completing Year 12 this year, the AIEF expects 59 to finish school next year, giving it a Year 12 retention rate of 88 per cent, higher than the national rate for all students of about 79 per cent, and almost twice as high as the national indigenous Year 12 retention rate of 47 per cent. From just two Year 12 graduates in 2009, the AIEF pro-

gram has grown exponentially, with 24 and 26 graduates in 2010 and last year, and chief executive Andrew Penfold said this would grow 60 to 80 students graduating Year 12 every year from next year.

Mr Penfold said the foundation had raised \$40 million in 2½ years, which had enabled the rapid growth of the scholarship program, and growth depended on how much more money the foundation was able to raise.

"If we were to raise another \$100m we could go from supporting 300 students per year in secondary school to almost 1000 students a year, and then we would be looking at hundreds of Year 12 graduates every year," he said.