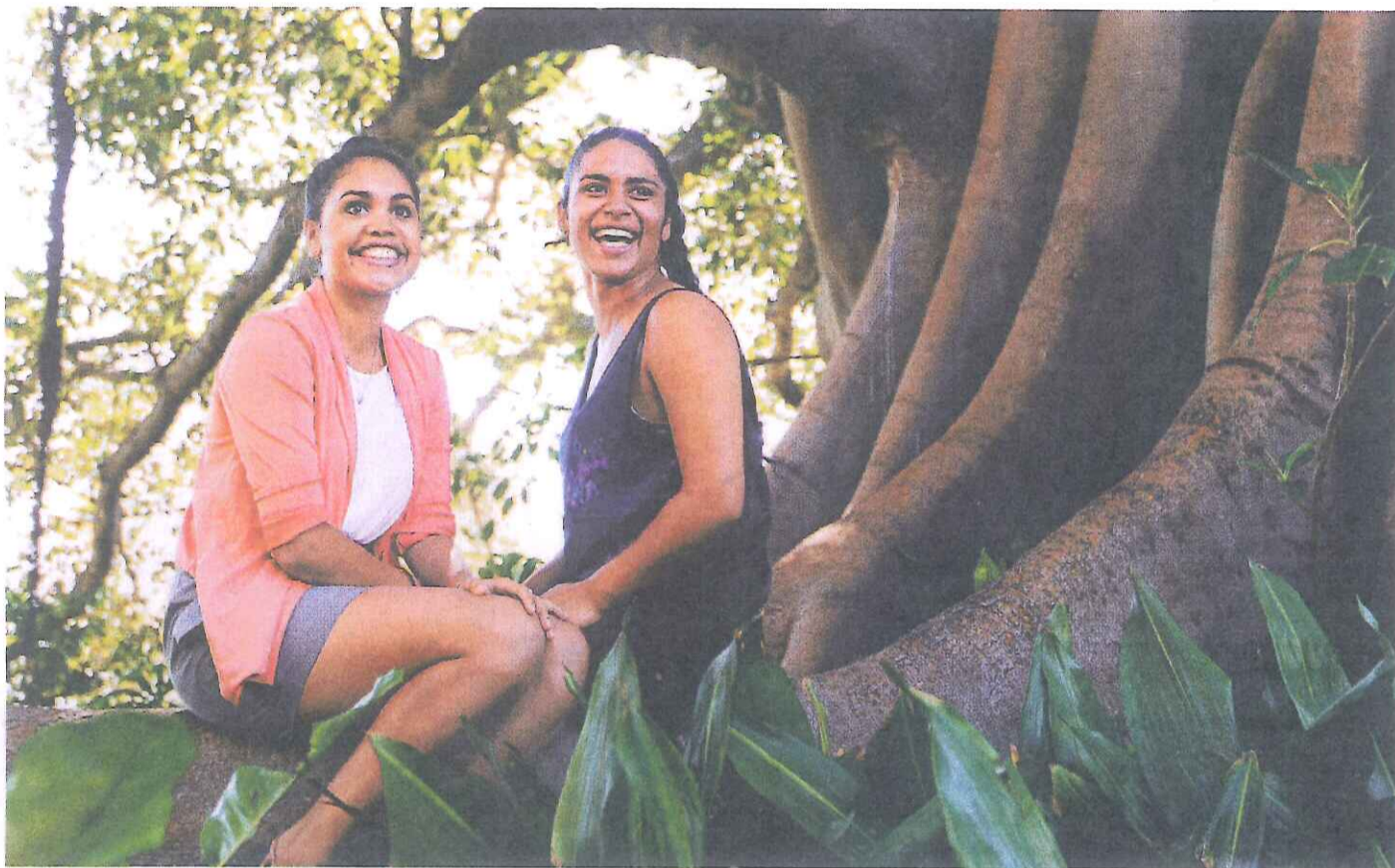


From locked-up to looking up . . .



SAM MOOY

Nahdia Noter, right, with Sarah Treacy at NSW Government House yesterday on the anniversary of the National Apology

RICK MORTON

FOR the longest, most crucial stretch of Nahdia Noter's life, role models failed her.

She dropped out of school and turned to booze to stave off the boredom, a decision that led to a lot of "silly little charges" accumulating over time and landing her in the Juniperina juvenile detention centre in western Sydney.

There, seemingly beyond rescue, Ms Noter was told about an Australian Indigenous Education Foundation scholarship.

"People need to know that it doesn't matter about where you have been, it matters where you're going and what you want to do with your future," she said.

"A series of people decided I was worth it. They saw potential and they believed I could go back to school to finish Years 11 and 12, and I did."

Ms Noter, now 21, who grew up in the northern NSW border town of Tweed Heads, had been in detention for a year and first had to convince St Vincent's College, a boarding school in Sydney's Potts Point, that she was ready to change her life.

"I just needed support and they were there.

"The AIEF is still supporting me now as I prepare for university this year."

Ms Noter told a packed room at NSW Government House yesterday, side by side with former prime minister Kevin Rudd, that she was initially ashamed about her past when she started back in Year 11 at the age of 19.

"Going back to school was a big challenge, but (also) to do it at that age as well and to come from where I was," she said.

"I wasn't allowed to tell the



other students at school where I had been, so that was tough, too, because I felt ashamed of who I was and where I had been.

"Now I am proud of what I have achieved."

Ms Noter joined another AIEF graduate, Sarah Treacy, in lauding the program that has shown them a way forward in their own communities.

"It has opened my eyes and now I want to go back into the Kimberley region in Western Australia and teach in the remote communities to give back to my people," Ms Treacy said.

AIEF founder and chief executive Andrew Penfold said that programs like his were often criticised as selectively handing out scholarships.

"Our program is not about cherry-picking the best and brightest kids, it's about giving opportunity to kids of all walks of life who want to make the most of those opportunities, irrespective of where they come from," Mr Penfold said.

About 400 students have completed or are studying on scholarships to various schools since the foundation was set up in 2008.

The foundation aims to raise a further \$60 million on current funding so it can support 1000 students a year.

"I have no doubt I'd still be locked up without their help," Ms Noter said.

"Instead, I'm studying arts and social work at university.

"I never thought life could be this good."