

Finishing school is a family first



LYNDON MECHIELSEN

Jerome Pang, 17, and cousin Chloe Cameron, 16, are finishing Year 12 in Brisbane under AIEF scholarships

JUSTINE FERRARI
NATIONAL EDUCATION
CORRESPONDENT

AT the age of 17, Jerome Pang, from Mount Isa in outback Queensland, has notched up quite a few firsts: moving to Brisbane to go to school, travelling to Cambodia to work in a village, a trip to France with the Australian indigenous rugby team, becoming vice-captain of his school. But his most significant achievement to date will be becoming — this week — the first in his family to finish school.

Next year, he hopes to top it by studying law at university with the aim of becoming a barrister specialising in native title.

Jerome is one of 65 indigenous



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students graduating from Year 12 this year with the support of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, which provides scholarships and mentoring to send indigenous students to private boarding schools.

About 40 per cent of the class of 2013 are the first in their family to finish school, and the retention rate of AIEF students to Year 12 is more than 90 per cent, well above the national average for all students.

About 93 per cent of the 84 AIEF alumni to date are either studying or working, with half

going to university, while the remaining 7 per cent receive one-on-one help until they find a job or course.

Jerome left Mount Isa to attend Marist College Ashgrove in Brisbane three years ago, a decision he said was a testament to his “great parents”.

“My parents were always driving me to succeed.

“Dad always says, ‘We’re proud of you and what you have achieved, and you’re going to do bigger and greater things,’” Jerome said.

“A lot of schools in Mount Isa encourage you to go towards a trade, because of the mines up there, and go straight into a job, whereas these ones down here are more focused on academics.”

Jerome’s cousin Chloe Cam-

eron also graduates this week, after leaving her home on Mornington Island to attend Clayfield College in Brisbane four years ago.

Chloe, who turns 17 next month, already holds a certificate II in community recreation and certificate III in childcare from TAFE, but is yet to decide whether to pursue a career in childcare next year or join her family working in the mines in Western Australia.

AIEF chief executive Andrew Penfold said Jerome and Chloe demonstrated what indigenous students can achieve when given the opportunity.

“It would not be possible without the hard work, determination and enthusiasm of our students,” he said.