

Not 'just' school, it's a lesson for life



LYNDON MECHIELSEN

Indigenous education foundation scholar Miranda Fisher, centre, celebrates graduation with fellow indigenous classmates at St Saviour's College in Toowoomba

MIRANDA FISHER

DAY in and day out, growing up in my hometown of Cherbourg, about 250km northwest of Brisbane, I have seen things that would shock most people.

Twelve-year-olds smoking cigarettes, 15-year-olds drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana,



18-year-olds pushing needles in their arms while the men in my community abuse their partners on a daily basis.

This was part of "normal", everyday life for my family and me. We all knew these things were wrong but accepted it, and not much was done to discourage it because the children were only doing what their parents do.

Five years ago, I was given the opportunity to leave Cherbourg to study at boarding school in Toowoomba with a scholarship

from the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation. I now see things very differently.

Yesterday, I became the first person in my father's family to finish Year 12; next year I'm going to study social work at university.

Finishing Year 12 means everything. For some people, this is a small and normal thing but for my family and me, and even other

members of my community, it has given us a sense of pride and hope that things will change for other children in the future.

My life changed in my last year of primary school, when two of my teachers encouraged me and

Continued on Page 6

MORE REPORTS P6
ANDREW PENFOLD P20

6 THE NATION Not 'just' school, it's a lesson for life

Continued from Page 1

three other girls to apply for boarding school scholarships at St Saviour's College in Toowoomba.

My parents wanted me to go too. They have always wanted the best for me and done everything they could to help me achieve it.

When I started high school at St Saviour's in 2009, my attitude and way of life changed completely. For the first time in my life, I was in a community with people from different cultures, mostly non-indigenous, and I was forced out of my comfort zone into a more formal world where study was very important.

I felt like I was walking in two worlds, with one foot in boarding school and the other in the bush. Even though this was difficult, it was a sign that my Aboriginal culture was strong, always with me and would never change.

Being away from home for the past five years has been a struggle but has driven me to work hard and make the most of my opportunities.

I've also used my experience to mentor younger students in the boarding house, to make sure they are coping with being away from home.

One of the most important things I have learned living in and out of my community is that indigenous and non-indigenous Australians turn to alcohol and drugs for pretty much the same reasons.

They might feel alone in the world, or find it hard to live and provide for themselves or be dealing with being abandoned, having no family, grieving the loss of a loved one, or not knowing who they are or what they stand for.

I have seen the impact of alcohol and drug abuse in my own community and know how it leads to people ending up on the wrong side of the law. People I grew up with, including family members, do the crime, go to court, go into the detention centre and back home again in a continuous cycle that's repeated over years. This is the main issue I want to help change, working as a social worker in youth justice.

There are many good people

in Cherbourg and places like it doing their best to take care of the children and young people in their community. They try to show their children a good and healthy lifestyle but they don't have the skills they need to tackle the big problems.

Often these are the people who say to me: "Miranda, don't come back here after you finish school! Cherbourg is no good for you. Go out and live outside of Cherbourg and make a good life for yourself."

I know that would be a great thing to do and honestly I'd love to experience the world, but I'd only let myself down if I gave up on my family and the members of my community. So sometimes I agree with them but I know in my heart that a career of social work is something I was born to do.

I have a very deep passion for helping people to better their life and drive them towards getting a good education, especially my people, indigenous Australians, because so many of them talk themselves down and don't have many people to support them.

Without my AIEF scholarship, I could have become just another one of the lost and troubled teenagers I see every time I go back home. They have dreams, but they don't know how to pursue them, or they don't have people to support them, and they can't see the bigger life outside of home.

Going to boarding school changed my life dramatically. It was the best thing I could have done to get a good education, not only for me but for my family.

At times I felt like giving up, but I couldn't because no matter how weak my faith in myself was, my heart and the love for my family and culture stayed strong.

I hope young indigenous people in places like Cherbourg hear my story and realise that a better life is out there, and I hope AIEF will be able to support many more kids like me in the future to have similar opportunities.

I will come back to Cherbourg because I'd be letting myself down if I gave up on my family and the members of my community. Just like my grandfather, I live for my family. They are my treasure and I will always fight for them.