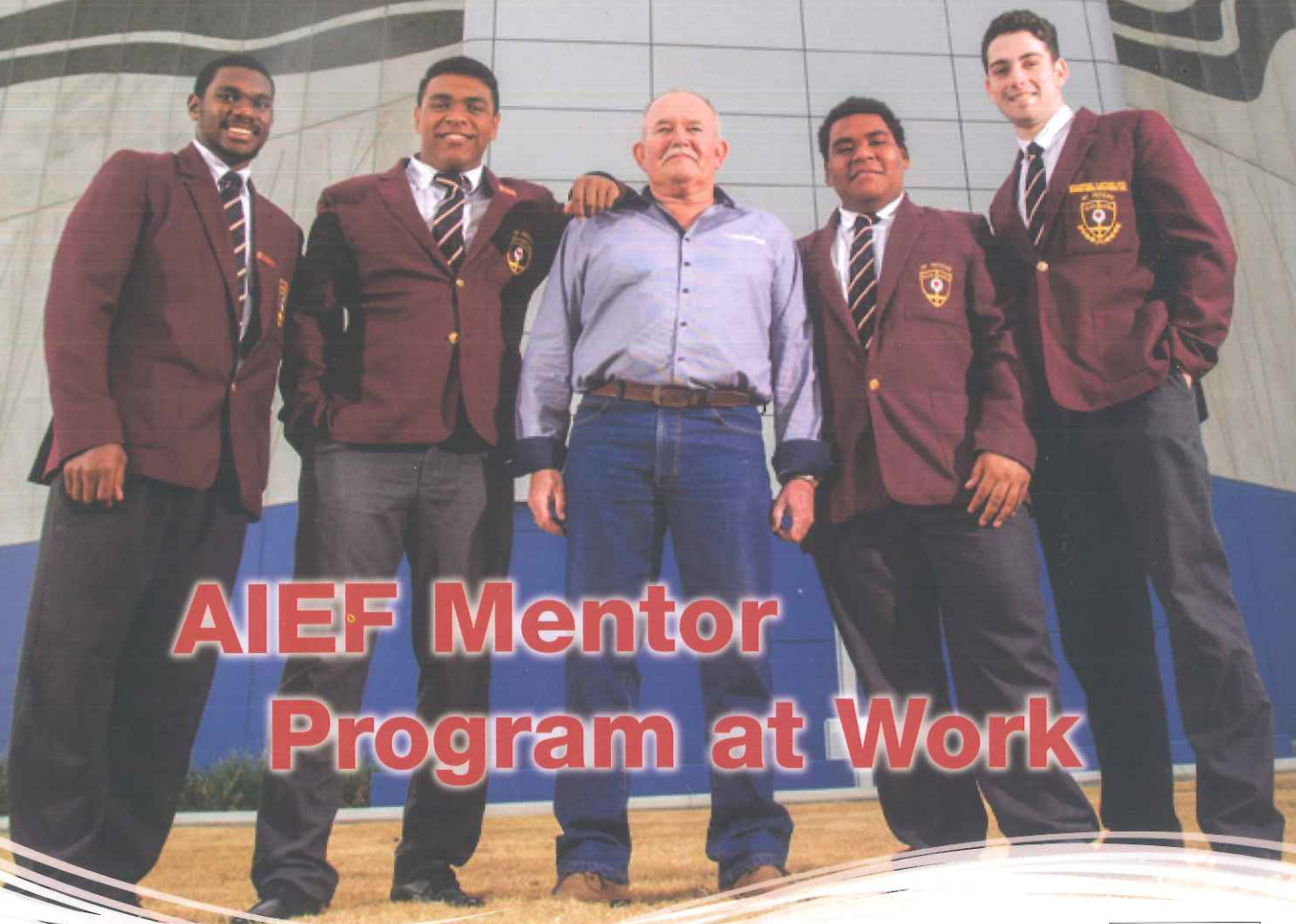


# Lights Out

Vol 07 | Quarterly Magazine

Issue 01 | March 2014



## AIEF Mentor Program at Work



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# The road well travelled

## Indigenous students navigate school, study and careers with the help of AIEF Mentors

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The journey through secondary school constantly challenges students with new experiences, environments and opportunities – challenges that Indigenous boarding students must navigate hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away from their families and communities. Indigenous boarding students need support to make the most of this experience – support a growing number of students are receiving from the AIEF Mentor Program.

The AIEF Mentor Program pairs Indigenous students on AIEF scholarships with volunteer mentors from AIEF's corporate partners. The program aims to create a structured and trusting relationship that will support students through their senior years at school and beyond.

When the AIEF Mentor Program last featured in Lights Out back in 2012 it had just expanded from New South Wales into Queensland with 60 mentor-student pairs, after launching in 2010 with six pairs.

Since then the program has doubled in size to over 120 pairs, including 50 new pairs in 2014. The program runs in four states (NSW, QLD, VIC and WA) and will commence its first regional program in Cairns this year. Many pairs continue their relationship long after the student graduates from school, and around 80% of the 2013 graduates involved in the program are continuing this year.

The selection of mentors who are experienced, professional individuals is key to the structure and success of the program. They have travelled the road through school, study and work, and as a result, they can offer valuable insights, advice and guidance on life and career options.

Mentors also undertake a comprehensive screening process and are matched with students based on factors such as personality and interests. They attend training and receive ongoing support from AIEF.

The program is not simply geared to provide career and study advice – it's also about having fun, with a strong and lasting relationship between mentors and students the ultimate goal. Mentors and students meet each month and also participate in group activities. Eventually, mentors can act as a sounding board for students, who are encouraged to discuss anything and everything they encounter as they progress through school and begin to consider further study or work options.

AIEF scholarship student Kai Lowah from Brisbane's St Peters Lutheran College joined the AIEF Mentor Program in 2012 and two years on he says he's happy to chat and open up with his mentor Jim Ruane, a Maintenance Supervisor with AIEF corporate partner Leighton Contractors: "I'm very comfortable talking with Jim just about anything really".

Kai, who is from the Torres Strait, appreciates Jim's support as he boards at school far from his family and community: "it's good having someone to talk to, especially if you have no family here...just someone that supports you and gives you advice on life, it's really comfortable".

Early in their mentoring relationship Jim showed great interest in learning about Kai's home and culture. This strengthened their rapport as Kai was able to share stories and experiences with Jim, including when Kai took part in a traditional initiation ceremony; "it was great sharing that with Jim, I was really excited because that was the first step I could take to become a man in my culture... he was so happy to hear what I had to tell".

After two years spent in the program together they now describe each other as good mates, and they share a dynamic different from other relationships in Kai's life.

Kai and Jim admit that, like all mentor relationships, theirs is a "work in progress". It takes time to get to know one another and the relationship requires effort from both parties. But for Kai and Jim, the longer they have known each other the more comfortable Kai is to share and ask for help, and he admits already that "if I don't have anyone to turn to I can always turn to my mentor".

For many students, simply realising that a variety of options are available to them, and that a successful career is possible and accessible are great benefits from the program. To see someone working and succeeding is motivating and encouraging – as one student commented; "my mentor is my role model".

In 2013, Kai and other Indigenous students from his school were invited to visit Jim's workplace, another opportunity organised as part of the program. The students visited Leighton Contractors sites and were able to experience what it is like to work there and explore the opportunities available should they chose to pursue a career with the company.

The experience was a positive one for Kai, who said that while the visit was daunting at first, he enjoyed the opportunity to meet Jim's colleagues and explore the different types of work Leighton Contractors offered. Not only were students inspired by the visit, but one

Leighton Contractors staff member who attended on the day has since applied to join the program as a mentor this year.

Kai feels he has received valuable advice and great insights into work from Jim, who has been a "really good support". Jim and Kai are looking forward to continuing their mentoring relationship over the next year as Kai undertakes Year 12. They're positive that their relationship will grow deeper as they've now known each other for a greater amount of time, and are confident their relationship will continue well beyond Kai's schooling. "I'd love to be a mentor for life" says Jim, "just because Kai's left school doesn't mean to say an old man can't give him a bit of advice now and then!"

In recent feedback sessions the Mentor Program has received an overwhelmingly positive response from students. This feedback, and the program's rapid growth over the last two years attest to the hard work of the mentors involved and positive impact that mentoring relationships can have on the lives of Indigenous students.

The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) is a private sector led, non-profit organisation focused on empowering Indigenous children in financial need to build a future through quality education and career pathways at Australia's leading schools, universities and companies. A product of strong partnership between the Australian Government and the private sector, AIEF is building a

**"Indigenous boarding students need support to make the most of this experience"**

\$140 million fund to open the doors to leading schools and universities for 7,000 young Indigenous Australians.

AIEF partners with leading boarding schools across Australia to provide scholarships for Indigenous students. These schools have established Indigenous education programs and close relationships with Indigenous families and communities, providing high-quality educational opportunities to students who are enthusiastic about learning and eager to unlock their potential.

