

# Mikasa's role in record retention



### EXCLUSIVE

RICK MORTON

SOCIAL AFFAIRS WRITER

MIKASA Donald is part of an astonishing cohort: the 93 per cent of students supported by the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation who finished Year 12 last year.

No other government-funded indigenous program has done better.

The 18-year-old Cairns woman graduated from Sydney's Pymble Ladies' College last year and will speak tonight at the launch of the foundation's annual report where the organisation will reveal its record performance.

The 93 per cent is the group's highest retention rate since it began in 2007. Graduates are "productively engaged" in work, study or other pursuits.

The promising result came as the number of scholarships jumped 43 per cent last year to 421.

Crucially, while the foundation receives some federal funding, it is remarkably successful at attracting private investment and has raised \$82 million on the way to a goal of \$140m to educate 7000 students.

"They are making an impact more than statistics can explain," Ms Donald, a Torres Strait Islander, said.

"There is so much talk about them now and just in Cairns there are a lot of people that know about the AIEF and know there is an opportunity if they want it."

Ms Donald's story began when she was at Cairns State High School and an older cousin told her about applying for boarding school in Sydney and a foundation scholarship.

"I was very against it, it took a lot of convincing. There was no way I was going to leave my mum," she said.

"Looking back, yes it was an education, but I met all these amazing friends from around the world. I didn't realise how much more came with it."

Ms Donald is preparing to study nursing at university.

Chief executive and founder Andrew Penfold said students



BRIAN CASSEY

### Pymble Ladies' College graduate and AIEF scholarship holder Mikasa Donald

were not hand-picked for the scholarships. "We don't go searching for students to fill places but meet the demand that is already there," he said.

"There are some programs that select top academic achievers or

sports stars for scholarships. We are not that program. The really critical criteria is that the students be highly enthusiastic and have a supportive family.

"We're very proud of what we have achieved."

The foundation, which employs 22 staff, spent only 2.4 per cent of its scholarship fund on running costs which "continues to set a benchmark across the non-profit space", according to its annual report.