



Edna Coolburra and Cathy Freeman on Palm Island. 'Edna is such a wonderful role model in the community'

CAMERON LAIRD

In Freeman's footsteps, a path of endless possibilities

**AIEF**
AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS
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EXCLUSIVE

GINA RUSHTON

Olympic athlete Cathy Freeman and Palm Island teenager Edna Coolburra know the homesickness of boarding at a school with few fellow indigenous students.

"I was in the minority, which was the reality, and I absolutely struggled," says Freeman, who boarded on a sports scholarship at Toowoomba's Fairholme College on Queensland's Darling Downs.

"But I got to be part of the mainstream and see outside of the world I was used to, and being homesick actually held me in good stead because I ended up travelling and living abroad for most of the years I was competing."

Ms Coolburra recently graduated from Brisbane's Clayfield College, where she boarded on a scholarship jointly provided by the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation and the Cathy Freeman Foundation.

"Edna is such a wonderful role model in the community and she's got some solid plans," says Freeman, who returned to Palm Island to oversee the rollout of the foundation's work and visit family.

Ms Coolburra, 17, says: "If it wasn't for the scholarship I never would have left the island or been able to afford to go back and forth to Brisbane."

She says it also opened up job prospects that might not have been possible on Palm Island, where 49.8 per cent of the population is unemployed — the highest rate in Australia and well above the national rate, which fell to 5.9 per cent last month.

A bachelor of sport science degree awaits Ms Coolburra in Brisbane next year.

"Hopefully, I'll come back to Palm Island when I'm finished

because I want to teach the kids here sport," she says.

Freeman says that her ancestors were among the hundreds of indigenous people from more than 40 different tribes that were "banished from the mainland to Palm Island" by the Queensland government in 1914.

"So it seemed like a natural selection to trial the foundation where my maternal roots lay," she says, adding there is a "trust that comes with having family on the island".

"It takes a whole community to support these programs and we work very closely with parents and guardians," she says.

The Cathy Freeman Foundation works with 1600 indigenous children and their families in partnership with four remote communities.

The AIEF has helped almost 500 scholarship students and last year reported a 92 per cent Year 12 completion rate — well above the national average of 52.4 per cent for indigenous students.