

Scholarship opens kids' eyes to all that is possible



JOHN FEDER

Growing in ways 'I never considered important or thought possible': AIEF graduates Jhdara Jones and Jasmin Barunga at Admiralty House in Sydney



JENNINE KHALIK

Jasmin Barunga struggled with English, maths and science lessons when she first enrolled at Perth's prestigious Presbyterian Ladies' College. But four years later she has her eye on a career as an occupational therapist.

Yesterday, after a ceremony at Admiralty House on Sydney Harbour, she contemplated how far she had come, after winning an Australian Indigenous Education Foundation scholarship, which is co-funded by BHP Billiton.

The Year 12 student, from the Kimberley and Pilbara region, was one of 37 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students graduating from Year 12 as part of the AIEF mentorship program. She was mentored by BHP Billiton senior ecologist Lucinda Ransom.

Jasmin said being a boarder at PLC was "hard, really hard, because I didn't understand English and all these board words. I failed a lot... I sucked at maths but now I'm really good. And in English I've achieved a level B."

Jasmin said her career options had broadened thanks to the AIEF scholarship. "I used to think you could work at the office in the community (in Pilbara), or the arts centre... Sometimes I think, 'oh my god, I could've been doing drugs': not everyone has this opportunity."

The indigenous students at yesterday's ceremony, attended by Governor-General Peter Cosgrove, hailed from the Torres Strait in the north, Tasmania in the south and the Pilbara out west.

The AIEF is a private sector-led, non-profit organisation that focuses on indigenous children in financial need. Its corporate partners include BHP Billiton, the Commonwealth Bank, Qantas, HSBC, BP, Perpetual, SAP, Swire, Tenix, KPMG and Allens.

Sir Peter said there was a significant gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, "a gap that still sees only six out of 10 indigenous students finish Year 12 compared to a graduation rate of nine out of 10 for non-indigenous students". Last year, the foundation's scholarship students achieved a 93 per cent retention and Year 12 completion rate.

Jhdara Jones, a Year 12 student at Scotch College in Melbourne, said boarding had allowed him to "grow in ways I never considered important or thought possible".

Jhdara, from Tasmania, said he had not known what he wanted to do: "I was just cruising... Having the opportunity to go to Scotch on a scholarship enabled me to test the waters a bit... I found a passion for legal studies and law.

"The most striking factor for me is the incarceration rates. We represent maybe 2 per cent of the population but almost half of the prison population."