

Closing the Gap is a matter of family pride



STEPHEN FITZPATRICK
INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS EDITOR

For Libby Cook-Black, Closing the Gap isn't some random set of numbers in an annual report. The strategy to tackle indigenous disadvantage ushered in a decade ago under Kevin Rudd is, quite literally, part of the family.

"This is my sisters and my brothers it's talking about; Kevin Rudd was talking about a thing that's real to me," the young Torres Strait Islander from Cairns said.

Ms Cook-Black is lucky and admits it. She went through an elite schooling system, thanks to the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation established the same year as the former prime minister's Stolen Generations apology.

A high achiever — she's a member of the national Jillaroos rugby league team and halfway through a law degree at Queensland University of Technology, while also expecting her first child — Ms Cook-Black nonetheless knows that, at 23, she's in a vastly better position than her parents or grandparents were at the same age.

Like fellow AIEF alumni Bernard Kelly, Nathan Bassani and Lowanna Moran, Ms Cook-Black represents an undeniable fact of Closing the Gap success: at higher levels of educational attainment, there is almost no employment gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

The quartet travelled to Canberra yesterday to hear Mr Rudd deliver a 10th anniversary apology address at the National Press Club.

While there, they reflected on how the AIEF — one of several such programs that aim to give disadvantaged indigenous students an elite education, often creating a knock-on effect for their families and communities — had utterly changed their lives.

"I never forget where I've come from, but we've been given an opportunity we could never have otherwise had," said Mr Bassani, a fully qualified diesel fitter who, at 23, already has a mortgage on a four-bedroom Rockhampton home ("and three cars and two dogs").

The AIEF scheme began with one scholarship at a Sydney boarding school, and has since expanded to support more than 500 indigenous girls and boys each year from 261 communities at 34 schools across the country, with a retention and Year 12 completion rate of 94 per cent.

Importantly, it doesn't stop at high school graduation; all four alumni were adamant the "family" nature of their network was critical. "AIEF provides ongoing holistic support — you get asked to events as alumni, and it's empowering to be with other successful indigenous people," Ms Moran said.



Nathan Bassani, Lowanna Moran, Bernard Kelly and Libby Cook-Black at Parliament House in Canberra yesterday

KYM SMITH