

Paradise found in world of learning



JOHN FEDER

The Mooka family, Adimin holding daughter Bawanab, and, from left, Cassandra, Thomas and Patricia in Sydney



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The Mooka family could be excused for never wanting to leave their island home.

It's paradise on tiny Dauan Island, southwest of Saibai in the Torres Strait and nestled under the northernmost granite peak of the Great Dividing Range.

But education's the thing and Thomas and Patricia Mooka know that the wrench of sending

your kids away to secondary school to board, with the local option ending at primary, is worth it for the outcome.

Daughters Adimin and Cassandra were the latest family members to head south, starting their journey in a 6m open boat — tide dependent — to get to Saibai, then a series of air hops to Horn Island, to Cairns, then Brisbane and finally Toowoomba, where St Saviour's College became their window to the wider world.

It was a round trip they each made four times a year as they grew into adulthood. Both young women have returned home permanently, bringing back to their tiny community of 250 some of what the experience gave them.

Cassandra, who finished

school last year, works part time but is planning a Certificate 3 in hospitality. Adimin, who graduated in 2014, has an administration role with the Torres Strait Regional Council. She recently became the island's only Justice of the Peace.

The older sister even has a daughter of her own now, one-year-old Bawanab, and she admits that when the time comes, it will be important to send the youngster off to school — even though it will mean her being jolted out of the laid-back island lifestyle for a time, just as she was a teenager.

"When I was in Toowoomba, the thing I really missed was the seafood," Adimin said, only half joking. "It was something to look

forward to every holiday home, going fishing and crabbing."

The family travelled to Sydney for the 10th anniversary celebration tonight of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, which, over the past decade, assisted hundreds of students with boarding school placements and recently has developed a tertiary education program. Its results are strong: a 94 per cent Year 12 retention and completion rate, and 96 per cent university retention rate.

But for Cassandra Mooka, boarding school was more than academic achievement. She made Darling Downs rep squads in basketball and rugby league.

Mum Patricia knows there is more to be done. "Families are the backbone of this," she said.