

Scholarships offer new path



JAMIE WALKER
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Frances Blackman loves her remote home town of Charleville, 680km west of Brisbane. But she and kinship cousin Jamika Shillingsworth know their decision to leave for boarding school was the right one as they eye a new world of opportunity.

The young women are products of a decade-long partnership between government and corporate Australia to help indigenous teenagers from the bush complete their secondary education in some of the country's most prestigious schools.

When the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation was launched in 2008, it had a single scholarship student on the books. Today, the fund supports more than 480 young people at boarding school and has blazed a trail for hundreds more to go on to rewarding jobs or university.

"It saved me," said Ms Shillingsworth, 20, who is working at a community radio station in Charleville until she enrolls in law.

"I was on the verge of dropping out of school, giving up on everything when this came along."

Ms Blackman, 18, who is working towards a double degree in psychological science and criminal justice at Brisbane's Griffith University, said: "I wouldn't have thought of uni. I absolutely adore Charleville but my life would have been more like helping my family and staying at home."

The AIEF is the brainchild of former corporate high-flyer Andrew Penfold, who made most of the mistakes a teenage boy could make until his widowed



LYNDON MECHEISEN

'I was on the verge of giving up on everything when this came along': Jamika Shillingsworth, left, and Frances Blackman

mother sent him to board at St Joseph's College, in Sydney's Hunters Hill. He arrived bottom of his Year 9 class and turned it around to be first in his year in maths, economics and history by the end of Year 12.

That was the springboard to a glittering career in corporate law and investment banking.

At 38, Mr Penfold decided to do something else with his life. He reasoned that if boarding school had helped him it could do even more for indigenous kids who most needed a leg-up.

He approached his alma mater to set up a scholarship fund, the forerunner to the AIEF. A conversation in 2008 with then prime

minister Kevin Rudd and deputy PM Julia Gillard set the wheels rolling. The government kicked in \$20 million and Mr Penfold promised to match that dollar for dollar from corporate donations.

"We want to open the door for those knocking on it," Mr Penfold said yesterday. Backed by the likes of BHP, Qantas and Common-

wealth Bank, the foundation covers the gap between what families can afford and the cost of sending a child to boarding school.

Today, AIEF's 2018 annual report will showcase 10 years of progress: the fund has raised a total of \$173m and 77 students graduated from Year 12 last year on scholarship, a 92 per cent

retention and completion rate. Another 73 students were being supported at university.

Ms Shillingsworth said she had been in a "very dark place" before her scholarship came through to attend Ipswich Girls' Grammar School in 2014: "I think I would have gone down a troubled path... I probably wouldn't be here."