

Partnership stands test of time

RHIANNON DOWN

When airline worker Irene Fong and Indigenous high school student Eden Timbery met for the first time, they connected straight away, beginning a mentoring relationship that has been a source of strength and guidance to each of them.

The duo were paired together by the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, when Ms Fong was a customer service manager at Qantas wanting to give back, and Eden a student facing her final, pivotal years at St Catherine's School in Sydney's east, where she is on a AIEF Scholarship.

They enjoyed regular catch-ups over banana milkshakes – before these meetings became virtual when the pandemic started – where they discussed everything from HSC subject choices, career goals and life after school, as well as books and movie stars.

"I hit the jackpot," Ms Fong said. "We're both chatter boxes."

"The first time we met, we never had one of those moments where there's a lull, and you look at your phone. We just didn't stop talking."

"I had to say, 'Sorry Eden, we're meant to be doing a team-building exercise', because we kept distracting each other."

Eden, 17, who is a proud Dharawal woman who has boarded at St Catherine's since Year 7, hopes to go to university next year, and



RYAN OSLAND

Mentor Irene Fong and Year 12 student Eden Timbery



pursue her interests in film and journalism.

"My relationship with Irene has been incredible through Covid," she said. "With Year 12 being the focus of everything else, having Irene there, separate from school, but also attached to it, is such a nice way to talk about the big picture."

Though the formal mentorship has ended now that Eden is about to leave high school, the pair say they will keep in touch.

"Even if Irene wanted to quit, I wouldn't let her," Eden said.

To which Ms Fong agreed: "She's stuck with me for life."

Some have even asked if the pair were mother and daughter.

"As I have a Chinese background and Eden has an Aboriginal background, I'm not sure what they're thinking," Ms Fong said, with a laugh. "But I just said, yes, she's my daughter now."

In the three years since their mentorship began, Ms Fong has taken on a more significant role in continuing the program, joining AIEF as a co-ordinator, after she was stood down when flights were grounded during the pandemic.

She has also put her hand up to mentor another AIEF student from Year 10 to Year 12 next year.