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THE NATION 7



AIEF graduating students Jaxson Taylor and Larvo Nona at an event in Sydney's Taronga Zoo to celebrate completing year 12

GLENN CAMPBELL

'Just want to help my mob': Students do nation proud

GEORGIA PALGAN

Jaxson Taylor swapped a mango farm in Tully, far north Queensland, for a boarding house almost 2000km away in Brisbane, while Larvo Nona left Badu Island in the Torres Strait in her first year of high school, travelling 1000km to board at St Patrick's College in Townsville.

For the two young students, the long distances and the pain of leaving families and loved ones behind, were worth it for an opportunity to chase their dreams.

On Monday, the 17-year-olds stood among more than 80 fellow graduates at Taronga Zoo, celebrating the completion of year 12 as part of the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation's Class of 2026.

Their cohort was drawn from 58 communities across the country, crossing thousands of kilometres to learn and follow their passions as part of the scholarship.

The decision to leave her Badu Island community and close-knit family was not easy to make for Ms Nona, a proud Torres Strait Islander woman.

"It was very hard in the beginning because I'm so close to my parents," she said. But the opportunities to learn at St Patrick's Col-



lege in Townsville and train to become an Indigenous Nurse Officer were too great to pass up.

Her sights are set firmly on giving back. "I've had so many opportunities, learning opportunities, meeting new people ... I just want to help my mob out and be an Indigenous woman in health," she said.

Six years on, Ms Nona is completing a school-based traineeship as an Allied Health Assistant, rotating through hospital wards while juggling her HSC subjects.

She plans to pursue a Certificate IV in Allied Health Assistance before further study at TAFE.

"They (my parents) feel really proud of me," she said.

"On graduating ... I feel really happy and proud of myself."

For 17-year-old Jaxson Taylor, the opportunity arrived unexpectedly when a teacher pulled him aside at school in Tully about an open spot in the scholarship.

"At first, we were scared and hesitant, but in the end we all decided it would be better - it opens up a lot more opportunities," he

said. Arriving at St Peter's Lutheran College, an early interest in hands-on construction work evolved into a passion for engineering. Mr Taylor has since applied for an apprenticeship in Qantas's Engineering Maintenance Program, one of AIEF's corporate partners.

"It's something different to cars - it's working on planes, so it's interesting, it's something new," Mr Taylor said. He said AIEF had opened his eyes to "a bigger world than sugar cane and mangoes and bananas".

"Back home I feel like I wasn't making the most of my potential," he said. "Coming down to Saint Peter's has really allowed me to further grow myself and reach my potential."

His advice to other Indigenous students considering the same path is to "reach out, do your research, find out what's available, make the most of your opportunities and really take the step to grow yourself."

Both students will graduate alongside classmates preparing for careers spanning medicine, law, teaching and trades, reflecting the organisation's growth from a single scholarship recipient in 2008 to more than 1500 students today, drawn from over 400 communities across the nation.