

Former Jillaroo Libby Cook-Black launches enterprise to build 20 Indigenous millionaires

By HUMAIRA SAEED



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For Libby Cook-Black, who was born on Thursday Island and raised in Cairns, going to university was not a foregone conclusion. No one in her family except a distant uncle had done it.

When she accepted a scholarship through the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation to go to boarding school at Pymble Ladies' College in Sydney's Upper North Shore for years 11 and 12, it was the myriad social rules, not the school work, that proved most challenging.

Adults were called by their first names, rather than Uncle or Aunty; conversations were more direct; and life moved at a much faster pace.

Arriving at Pymble felt like being on a different planet, but the one thing that felt the same as home was playing competitive netball.

"I felt at home playing sport, I knew the rules," she said.

"It was the reason I could cope with everything else around me. I think it was a wellbeing tool."

Ms Cook-Black, who has been nominated for this year's Shine Awards sponsored by The Weekly Times and Harvey Norman, was awarded another AIEF scholarship allowing her to enrol into a dual degree in Law and Criminology at UNSW.

After transferring closer to home to James Cook University in Townsville, she switched to playing rugby and achieved her dream of playing for the Queensland Reds and the Jillaroos.

While donning the green and gold was a rare achievement, Ms Cook-Black said she felt she didn't "belong" on the team.

"I loved putting on the green and gold, but I didn't really know what it represented. I don't know if the team really knew what we stood for," she said.

"I'm really grateful for the opportunity and I think every athlete wants to play for their country, but I quickly got there and realised that there was probably more to life," Ms Cook-Black said.

Ms Black-Cook said her experience of moving to Sydney for boarding school and playing for Australia prompted her to start her businesses, Female First and Female Co, designed to create a space at the table for Indigenous women.

The non-profit has helped dozens of women and girls from Far North Queensland represent Australia internationally in netball, soccer and athletics.

Through Female First, Ms Cook-Black has hosted incubators for small businesses and start-ups and networking events to bring together like-minded women who share a common goal.

Now living on Southern Cape Farm, a business she co-founded that brings “paddock to plate” experiences, Ms Cook-Black said her aim was to help 20 Indigenous women become millionaires through Female First.

“I want to help them make the first \$100,000 profit and create financial wealth for their families,” she said.

Three years in, Ms Cook-Black said her goal so far has been “promising”.

“I think I’ve only really just started to sink my teeth into the stuff that I actually love, but it’s taken me a while, to be honest about it,” she said.

Nominations for the Shine Awards, which celebrate the work of women in regional and rural Australia, close on October 23

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