

# Proud graduates are an inspiration to all



MACKENZIE SCOTT

Jack Barnes knows he not only graduated from high school for himself, but for his community.

The 18-year-old is the only one of 10 Aboriginal students to have left Mornington Island, in the Gulf of Carpentaria, for Year 7 in 2016 to have completed their studies. Now, with the last few days of school at St Augustine's College in Cairns, Jack hopes he will be able to inspire his family and friends back home to follow in his footsteps.

"It's been a long journey, hey," he said. "In Year 7, I couldn't handle it because it was just too hard. But ... I had support from my dad and teachers at the school, and they just told me to do the best I can. Now I'm here graduating."

"All my younger siblings, all my cousins, all my nieces and nephews now all want to go to school 'cause they see me come



BRIAN CASSEY

St Augustine's students Jack Barnes and Caiban Thaiday

back from school happy. I always tell them to go to school and don't drop out because once you do, you're not gonna succeed in life."

Jack will be graduating on Tuesday alongside Torres Strait Islander classmate Caiban Thaiday, 18, who is the only one in his family back home at Darnley Island to have made Year 12.

"I feel like an idol," Caiban said. "Most of the boys and girls back at Torres Strait don't graduate, they move schools and they

can explode. So this is a pretty proud moment for me."

They will be two of 70 school leavers this year who were able to complete their education on a scholarship from the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) and who will join an exclusive club of 800 alumni around the country. This year marked 1000 scholarships awarded by the organisation since it was established in 2008, to support kids from Indigenous com-

munities in pursuit of education.

But the graduation is bittersweet for the boys, who will be unable to have their parents attend due to Covid-19 restrictions. Instead, the AIEF will hold the event for students around the country via video conference, allowing families to either be there virtually or watch later. A silver lining for Jack will be the opportunity to perform the didgeridoo at the event. He taught himself during the pandemic in order to be closer to his family and culture back home.

AIEF executive director Andrew Penfold said scholarship students have achieved outstanding results despite Covid. "These young Indigenous people are role models for their siblings, families and communities as they take their place in the world as future leaders in whichever fields they choose, changing the nation through education."

Jack is preparing to take on a carpentry apprenticeship to follow in his grandfather's footsteps. Caiban is considering a gap year with the Australian navy before taking up a trade and hoping to follow his dream to play professional rugby league.