

A thousand reasons the nation is better



AIEF scholarship students Kiarra Billy, Lilly Ana See Kee and Kailang Ware from St Monica's College, Cairns. The girls are in Sydney for their year 12 graduation

MICHAEL BILBE-TAYLOR

Indigenous student scholarships have hit a significant milestone

LILLY McCAFFREY

Lilly Ana See Kee, a proud Torres Strait Islander woman from Thursday Island, is lucky 1000.

Joining 57 of her fellow year 12 scholars at a graduation ceremony at Sydney's Taronga Zoo on Monday night, Ms See Kee will be the 1000th student to go through the life-changing Australian Indigenous Education Foundation scholarship and will be making a speech on behalf of the graduating class.

She will be a small but crucial part of a night that will celebrate 1000 Aboriginal children whose lives have been changed by education, and look forward to the next 1000 that AIEF will support in the future.

"Everybody should be able to get a quality education like I have," says the year 12 student, who is set to graduate from St Monica's College in Cairns this year.

Ms See Kee is a descendant of the Dauareb tribe from Dauar Island which is part of Mer (Murray) Island and the Saisarem tribe of Erub (Darnley) Island in the east of the Torres Strait.

The 17 year-old said it was initially "really hard" to be away from home when she started studying at St Monica's College and boarding at St Augustine's College in year 7.

But six years later, Ms See Kee is "100 per cent" happy that her parents encouraged her to apply for an AIEF scholarship.

"They understood that going to school on Thursday Island could only take you so far, so they wanted to give me the best opportunity that I could have," she said.

"I've loved the past six years. Even though I am away from my parents, it's worth it in the end."

Ms See Kee is very grateful for the AIEF's support, which she said had given her "tonnes of opportunities".



During her time at St Monica's College, Ms See Kee has been an avid reader, dedicated herself to her studies, excelled in maths and science, made great friends, and was elected to the inaugural position of First Nations Student Representative.

After graduation, Ms See Kee hopes to study a Bachelor of Speech Pathology, and in the future she would like to return home to Thursday Island and work as a speech pathologist and help out her community.

But right now, Ms See Kee's focus is on studying for her upcoming year 12 exams.

Established in 2008 in response to community demand from Indigenous families who choose to enrol their children in boarding schools, AIEF now supports more than 1200 young Indigenous people from more than 400 communities around Australia.

The not-for-profit organisation provides funding to enable Indigenous students to pursue their education at leading Australian boarding schools and universities, as well as career support.

AIEF executive director Andrew Penfold AM said the organisation was established to support young Indigenous people to harness their education and build a brighter future for themselves and Australia.

"We have a 15-year proven track-record of successfully helping Indigenous students finish year 12 and go on to university and careers, and are proud to celebrate reaching the milestone of more than 1000 Indigenous graduates," Mr Penfold said.

"The more Indigenous graduates we have, the more impact they will make, and the more positive change they will generate for their families and communities."