



Eye-opening ... Loreto Normanhurst students Caitlin Illek and Kristie Stewart connect with their peers from Djarragun College during their far north Queensland experience.

# Spiritual connection

PLAYING chess with a stranger for six hours or holding a concert for the elderly may seem unlikely experiences to engage teenagers. For the girls from Loreto Normanhurst, however, these are among the many experiences that have enriched their lives.

In a tradition now in its fifth year, each August year 9 students from the all-girls school travel to far north Queensland for a two-week "outreach experience".

The girls visit indigenous communities, local schools and aged-care facilities as well as undertake community work.

Year 12 students Sophie Peyton and Selina Foo attended and describe it as a "remarkable and character-forming" experience.

Learning about Aboriginal spirituality while encouraging students to make a difference in their world had an impact on Foo. "We came to understand indigenous people, their respect for the environment and the dignity with which they treat it," she says. "I was inspired by nature and feel that is something we lack in our culture."

During her community work, Peyton witnessed a rare and moving moment. "We visited an aged-care facility for Alzheimer's sufferers and put on a concert. During a rendition of *You Are My Sunshine* they remembered the words and began to sing along," she says. "To witness change in [the] spirit of the community is remarkable but to be the cause of that change stays with you long after the experience."

The simple acts of learning cultural dance, basket-weaving and having their hair braided became positive eye-openers for the girls.

"One of the schools had a hair salon," Peyton says. "It wasn't just ordinary maths, science. They encourage their students to do anything they want." School has a much wider focus than aspiring to be a lawyer or a doctor, she says.

Foo says: "It taught me how to experience differences for what they are. I came to understand and forge connections with different people from all walks of life."

**Stephanie Bates**