

## Indigenous fund breaks barriers



JOHN FEDER

Onyi Nwamadi is the first indigenous head girl at Pymble Ladies College in northern Sydney



SASCHA O'SULLIVAN

After becoming the first indigenous head prefect at one of Sydney's leading schools, Onyi Nwamadi is setting her sights on the world.

The Pymble Ladies College Year 12 student is aiming to study at university in the US when she leaves at the end of next year and one day hopes to work for the UN.

Onyi applied for a scholarship through the Australian Indigenous Education Fund when she

was in Year 4. Two years later, she received a phone call inviting her for an interview for a place as a boarder, walked into the tree-lined gates on her first day of Year 7, and hasn't looked back.

"It was like out of a movie," the 17-year-old student said of her first day at the prestigious northern Sydney school.

Tony Abbott, the former prime minister who was appointed a special envoy for indigenous affairs, this week urged the government to boost funding for the AIEF, praising the fact that it was "creating an indigenous middle class".

"This is of priceless benefit to our country and Aboriginal people in the medium and long term," Mr Abbott said of the scholarship that has helped more than 500

students study at top Australian schools.

On Thursday in parliament, Mr Abbott outlined an agenda to boost indigenous education, including enhancing the quality of remote schools, waiving HECS debts for teachers who stayed at remote schools for at least four years, and boosting attendance of indigenous schoolchildren.

Onyi has taken advantage of every opportunity Pymble Ladies College has to offer — rowing, basketball, rugby and the school's production of *Alice in Wonderland* — and she still wants to do more. The young woman, whose mother is from Mer Island in the Torres Strait, grew up in Sydney's inner-west. She said her time at the school has not come without challenges.

"Sometimes it was a bit challenging (to be an indigenous scholarship student), there are some misconceptions — we have different cultural ways of living," Onyi said. But the star student has taken it in her stride, and saw it as an opportunity to reconcile the differences between her classmates and teach them more about herself and indigenous culture.

Onyi is not daunted by the prospect of the HSC — for her it is a stepping stone to international tertiary studies. "I'm really interested in human rights law, and would love to work for the UN," she said. "I knew from when I was a little girl that when I thought about my future it would always be somewhere overseas."

TONY ABBOTT P16