A chance to kick ahead

or most of the year the rest of the world is the place beyond the water from Gunbalanya in west Arnhem Land. The East Alligator River stops being a river and becomes a sprawling floodplain. The small community pokes up from the mud like a small island, the only way in and out is by plane. But for many locals, getting to the world takes far more in a plane ride. It takes more than a plane ticket to commit to leaving the community to further their education to be able to access it.

The Djaygurra did it. She left the community of 1600 in Gunbalanya (or Ngurrpa), went to secondary school, then university in Darwin and has returned as principal of the school. "There are some who have jobs, but it is very, very limited, very high employment," Ms Djaygurra said. "It is like keeping the kids at school when they have no adults with them. But we have tried to change the whole attitude of the parents to education for their kids. We have educate the students but also the parents continue working with them in a positive way so that one day they can see their kids' future.

from here I went away and got educated, but I had wonderful relatives, old people, who worked with me. It was the most important asset I had, they worked with me. I didn't organise to be a principal, why did it? It is satisfying, it is a long way to go to be a principal, it is a lot of pressure, a lot of hurdles but I had to be right to be able to be where I am today, it's easy to do that.

Gunbalanya School is well equipped, with young, enthusiastic teachers. Last year they had two students graduate high school. It was widely celebrated. This year the hope there will be five.

The school incorporates a football program, run by the Clontarf Foundation, into the regular curriculum. It uses sport to help foster an enthusiasm for physical activity and to teach life skills. The Clontarf Foundation provides a valuable mentorship program, which offers support and guidance to the students.

them in a broader education about diet and healthy living.

"One of the biggest interests of people which they can all relate to in the community is football, so using that as a vehicle to get students to school and the community involved in a positive way is really good," said Lee Stewart, director of the Clontarf Foundation in Gunbalanya. Precious few of the kids at the school own or have access to footy boots. Most play football as a barefoot sport. The school has a synthetic turf playing area, as well as a large open-air basketball gym. There is an oval nearby, which in recent years has been watered and is now green, as well as red dirt roads and play areas where the kids kick balls all day between classes. When they play structured games for teams on the main oval, the vast majority of the kids are barefoot. Yet some of the kids from the community have been capable enough to make the Territory team and the shortlist for the Flying Boomerangs national indigenous under-16 team.

The Age has now launched the Boots For Kids campaign, asking people to donate their kids' footy boots at the end of their junior season by dropping them into boxes in Coles supermarkets, from where Linx will truck them to remote destinations across Australia to take them to kids who have none.

"Walking through the community here you have one shop and one store, so the possibility to even purchase boots if you did have the money to spend on them is just not there, especially considering the community is cut off from Darwin for six months a year, it means they can't afford to have access to boots in the area," Stewart said.

"There is definitely a high level of natural talent in all sports here but especially football. Teaching the football program is about nutrition and their general health, which in the communities is a problem. The average life expectancy in remote communities like Gunbalanya for example is significantly lower even than indigenous Australians across the rest of Australia.

"There are a lot of issues but clearly a big issue is nutrition, when you look at year 9, year 10 boys here and compare them to year 9 or 10 boys in major centres, there is a physical difference just looking at them and that is nutrition based."}

"So the football program connecting the love of football to broader education is fundamental in these life lessons. Thus donating boots to the community through The Age's Boots For Kids campaign is not only about putting a smile on a face by putting boots on feet and feeling good about giving to someone who has nothing, it is about the idea that harnessing enthusiasm for a game might have untold