Girl Academy has its first principal

By RUDIMAXWELL

MURRi woman Jessa Rogers has been appointed principal of a new boarding school in Cairns for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers.

The Girl Academy is Australia’s first boarding school specifically designed for young mothers and their babies.

And Ms Rogers understands perfectly the difficulties of trying to finish school while pregnant, because she did it herself.

“I was about to start Year 12, running for school captain, auditioning for the school musical and on a scholarship when I found out I was pregnant,” she said.

“It was terrifying. I knew without Year 12 I wouldn’t be able to go to uni and I didn’t know what would happen to my scholarship.

“I worried as hard as I could at school without telling anybody, but three months into pregnancy the wheels started falling off. I was sleepy in classes, wasn’t performing as well, so I told the guidance counsellor.

“Then I had to tell my parents. My dad wasn’t so happy and said I couldn’t stay at home, but the school executive said I could keep my scholarship and they supported me to finish my education.

“True power”

“It was at that moment I understood the true power of being an educator and I decided I was going to be teacher.”

As well as regular school subjects, the Girl Academy will offer vocational education and training opportunities in Certificate III Children’s Services, a Diploma of Child Care and certificates in Business Administration and Hospitality.

The idea for the school came from the auntsies and grandmothers of Cape York, who were concerned that too many young women weren’t finishing their education because of pregnancy.

It was made possible by the Cape York Partnership, and Cape York women.

Ms Rogers, who is also studying for a doctorate in education, cannot wait for first term next year.

“Since I got pregnant at 16, I'd always wanted to see a school that offered opportunities to girls like me, that had a culturally safe space, and was centered on family,” she said.

“The Girl Academy is all about empowering women. We’re taking a wraparound approach, so wellness, culture and family, are central to every part of education.

The Girl Academy’s first principal Jessa Rogers and, inset, with her sons Fox, 3, and Eden, 13.

“I’m so excited, looking forward to everything I’m doing, enrolling girls.

“I was really lucky to be raised up connected with my own community, but there was a lot of trauma and destruction in my family. Education was a way for me to manage living in the white man’s world but without losing my cultural connections.”

The Girl Academy is accepting enrolments from Indigenous girls aged 12-17 who have babies or are pregnant.

“We will also focus on healthy, household, life skills, but we’re not here to tell kids how to behave or women how to be mothers. We’re here to help girls grow and learn,” Ms Rogers said.

“We’ll be teaching the girls skills for life, so they can grow on and be leaders in their communities, in their families and in their own lives.”