

FOR THE LOVE OF LEARNING

WORDS // TAFE QUEENSLAND SKILLSTECH

Distance isn't a barrier for this Indigenous father and son duo.

The next time you complain about getting up to go to work, school or TAFE on a Monday morning, spare a thought for a dynamic father and son duo who travel more than 2625km to receive training at TAFE Queensland SkillsTech.

Robert 'Rocky' Tamwoy and his son Rodney live in Bamaga Far North Queensland, and for the past three years they have been making the trek to TAFE Queensland SkillsTech's Bracken Ridge Training Centre to study Certificate III in Outdoor Power Equipment.

Their decision to study at TAFE Queensland SkillsTech was simple: it's the only training organisation in Queensland which offers the qualification.

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"It's certainly a journey, but life is a journey, and when you get a calling you just have to follow it and see where it takes you," says Rocky.

"Normally my son Rodney makes this trip with me but he's already finished his training and gone back home to Bamaga to work for the Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council."

Rocky's story is remarkable, with life experiences and career choices that read like something lifted directly from a film script.



An active Australian Army Reservist since the 1970s, Rocky has also worked as a stunt driver with a specific passion for motorbikes. In the 1980s, however, he was involved in a serious motorbike accident that left him without the use of his lower limbs, but he didn't let this stop him.

"It didn't kill me so why stop when there's still so much life left," he says.

At home in Bamaga, Rocky doesn't have much need for mobility devices like wheelchairs.

"They're not real good in sand," explains Rocky. "Because I live in a hut that's less than 20m from the edge of the ocean, I manage to get by with my arms, pulling myself along the beach when I want to fish at the water's edge. You have to keep your eyes open for crocodiles though," he chuckles.

The fact that Rocky is wheelchair-bound makes the trip from Bamaga to Brisbane very difficult.

"Rodney can fly direct from Bamaga to Cairns, but I can't access those flights because the light aircrafts used to service the route are not wheelchair friendly.

"It means I'm in transit for at least two, sometimes three days," he says.

Familiar with big city life from stints

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in Sydney and Brisbane during his youth, especially when he was an Army Reservist, the contrast between his home and his place of study couldn't be more marked. The Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council occupies an area of 1071.9 km² and incorporates the Indigenous communities of Bamaga, Injinoo, Umagico, New Mapoon and Seisia. Considered the gateway to the Torres Strait islands, its location at the very northern tip of Queensland and the



Australian continent is one of the most sparsely populated areas in the country.

"SkillsTech is good, and they have made it easy for me in many ways, so I thank them for that, but I really can't wait to get home," says Rocky.

About the only downside of life in Far North Queensland, according to Rocky, is the fact there aren't many people around to fix things if they break, especially mechanical things like motors on outboard boats and chainsaws.

"If something breaks down it can be hard to replace, let alone fix or repair. The way I see it, my son Rodney

and I are going to be able to go back to our community with skills to help the community – no one there has experience fixing things like chainsaws or small engines.

"I've been encouraging my son Rodney to start his own repair and service business which I can help him with when he gets established. At the moment he's working for the Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council, but that's our plan," says Rocky.

TAFE Queensland SkillsTech teacher John O'Shea says Rocky and his son Rodney are inspirational. "They're both so passionate about their apprenticeships. The fact they travel more than 5000km return to receive training twice a year is amazing in itself, but their passion for learning is truly awesome," says John.

"Rocky and Rodney's will to overcome life's challenges and keep moving forward has inspired many around them, including me. It's a privilege and honour to have known and taught these men. They've actually taught me more than I think I've taught them." **OED**

SCHOOL COMMUTE

For Rocky, his journey from Bamaga in Far North Queensland to TAFE Queensland SkillsTech's Bracken Ridge Training Centre can easily take in excess of 24 hours. Able-bodied people can fly direct from Bamaga to Cairns, but because the light aircraft servicing the route doesn't cater for the wheelchair bound, it can sometimes take Rocky two or three days travel time.

Day 1: Ferry from Bamaga to Thursday Island (sometimes requiring an overnight stay on Thursday Island, depending on ferry schedule).

Day 2: Ferry from Thursday Island to Horne Island. QantasLink flight from Horne Island to Cairns (sometimes requiring overnight stay in Cairns depending on flight availability).

Day 3: Commercial flight from Cairns to Brisbane. Taxi to motel.