

# ABC Stateline - New South Wales 10<sup>th</sup> December 2004

## Sister 2 Sister

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Reporter: Sharon O'Neill

QUENTIN DEMPSTER: Many young people, through circumstances beyond their control, suffer from trauma of some kind -- a death in the family, physical or sexual abuse, family breakdown, impoverishment.

All this before they get a chance at life.

The trauma can destroy self-esteem, self-confidence and be psychologically crushing.

Fortunately, many Australians want to help young women facing these hard emotional times.

A newly established mentoring program for teenage girls, supported by groups including Rotary, has devised a method known as 'Sister to Sister'.

It involves successful women in their 20s and 30s spending precious time to help teenagers rebuild their psyches and their outlook on life.

SHELLY TAYLOR-SMITH, 'BIG SISTER': So how's your study going?

KRISTI FULLER, 'LITTLE SISTER': I haven't really been studying lately much but after next month, I'm going to settle into that.

SHARON O'NEILL: They could be sisters, but it's not blood that binds these two.

It's a shared experience.

KRISTI FULLER: When she first came in, you instantly knew that everyone was going to get along with her.

SHARON O'NEILL: So did you feel a connection with her?

KRISTI FULLER: Yeah, I did.

SHARON O'NEILL: In her everyday life, it was unlikely that Kristi Fuller -- a 17-year-old from western Sydney struggling to cope with a sexual assault case -- would ever cross paths with world champion marathon swimmer Shelley Taylor-Smith.

But in April this year, they met at the Sister 2 Sister project, a week-long mentoring program.

SHELLEY TAYLOR-SMITH: Kristy and I just had a rapport and basically it was because I could empathise with a few of the girls in the room on similar experiences that I'd experienced in my life and yeah, that's where the bond began and it was very interesting.

JESSICA BROWN, PROGRAM FOUNDER: Shelley's involvement in the program started off as minimal.

She came along and she was talking to the girls and she presented to the girls about how to overcome obstacles and because Shelley has been through some enormous obstacles in her life, she is really a great role model.

SHARON O'NEILL: In her career as a marathon swimmer, Shelley Taylor-Smith set 15 world race records and was world champion seven times.

Yet as a child, she suffered severe scoliosis and wore a back brace for many years.

Overcoming such incredible odds has left her determined to help others do the same.

SHELLEY TAYLOR-SMITH: I think it was probably driven by Jessica and she shared a passion and I couldn't help but want to jump on board.

I love someone who's really dedicated to a cause in the sense that she wants to make a difference in these girls' lives and that's what we're doing.

JESSICA BROWN: Today we're going to be learning about goal-setting and planning our future and why it's so important that we do set goals.

SHARON O'NEILL: Jessica Brown is a former music teacher who now runs life skills courses for teenagers.

Today, she's working with a group of Year 11 students from Fairvale High School.

JESSICA BROWN: If you believe in yourself, you're halfway there.

SHARON O'NEILL: Through her work as a teacher, Jessica Brown saw the need for a more specialised mentoring program -- a program that would be targeted at girls in need of extra help.

JESSICA BROWN: I could see the difference between students that had confidence and high self-esteem and in regards to reaching their potential and sometimes it only takes one person to change someone else's life and to be able to give them somebody, a positive role model, makes all the difference.

SHARON O'NEILL: Who told you about the project?

KRISTI FULLER: My deputy principal at high school.

SHARON O'NEILL: What did he say about it?

KRISTI FULLER: He said that there was a course for girls round my age and that it would be good to meet new people and it could help me to boost my confidence.

SHARON O'NEILL: In fact, Kristi Fuller needed a lot more than confidence-boosting when she was introduced to the Sister 2 Sister project.

KRISTI FULLER: I was having a hard time -- I wasn't concentrating at school, I was failing a lot of my subjects and everyone could see that I wasn't doing very well.

SHARON O'NEILL: Kristi's problems at school were the direct result of the trauma she was facing away from the classroom.

She was about to give evidence in court that she was the victim of a sexual assault at the age of 12, while at home her father was recovering from a liver transplant.

How hard was it to be going through all of that?

KRISTI FULLER: Really hard.

I had good days, but I had some really bad days as well.

I just didn't like talking about it.

I thought if I didn't talk about it, I don't think about it and it'd go away.

SHARON O'NEILL: So did the Sister 2 Sister program help you at that time?

Was it helpful?

KRISTI FULLER: It was because, like, I met a couple of girls who had been through similar things.

Because once I opened up and told my story, a few other girls come to me and told me about themselves and I helped them and they helped me.

JESSICA BROWN: She explained here that dad walked out after struggling with a long-term drug addiction.

He doesn't have any contact with her, so I think that she'd be a really good candidate SHARON O'NEILL: The aim of the program is to choose a group of teenage girls in need -- the little sisters -- and match them up with their big sisters.

JESSICA BROWN: The girls come for an initial first five days, which is an intense mentoring

program and then the 12 months that follow we give each of the girls a role model, which is a bigger sister who takes on the role of being a sounding board for the girls, someone to steer them in the right direction, to give them advice when they need and to encourage them and basically give them someone to aspire to that's really positive in their life.

SHELLEY TAYLOR-SMITH: You've got to know that in yourself you have the ability at any time to be able to help these little sisters.

SHARON O'NEILL: The big sisters in the program are all career women in their 20s and 30s who volunteer their time over a 12-month period.

JESSICA BROWN: We get a lot of corporate women who are obviously very good role models for the young girls and basically they might have been working in the corporate world for quite some time and have decided that they want to be able to give back their knowledge and give something back to the community.

SHARON O'NEILL: The big sisters meet regularly and talk with counsellors and psychologists about the best ways to help their honorary little sisters.

BIG SISTER #1: I'd like to be able to talk to her a bit more, and to help her maybe get some resumes going to get a job.

But she just -- I ring her and she'll say, "Oh I'm just heading out, Mum, tell her I'm on my way out" and I haven't talked to her much at all, which is a big shame.

BIG SISTER #2: Write her a letter.

BIG SISTER: I've thought about that.

BIG SISTER #2: Just a little letter saying, "Hi, I just thought I'd make sure you got the message that I'm thinking of you".

And then ring next time.

SHARON O'NEILL: At tonight's meeting, there is also concern about Kristi, who's just heard her court case is to be adjourned and she is not coping.

JESSICA BROWN: And, of course, we got the text messages saying, "Something needs to be happen -- I'm just about to crack".

So that circumstance is quite alarming.

SHELLEY TAYLOR-SMITH: I'll put my hand up and have her for a weekend in my place, because I know that I want to work with Kristi.

JESSICA BROWN: That'd be great.

SHELLEY TAYLOR-BROWN: We all know what she's been through, because she knows that I've been through similar experiences that I think that will be a strength for her, you know?

SHARON O'NEILL: Although she doesn't want to talk publicly about certain elements of her past, Shelley Taylor-Smith has been happy to draw on her own life experience to help the little sisters.

SHELLEY TAYLOR-SMITH: What was really interesting -- the feedback I got from the girls was "Oh my gosh, she's just like me, she's just a normal, ordinary Australian and look what she'd done with herself, she's a -" It gives me goose bumps and makes me realise that how far I've come, but more so that the work I'm doing not only these girls and other projects, is so rewarding that being able to come down, not so much to their level, but being able to relate and know that, no, you don't have to stay where you are.

KRISTI FULLER: I was surprised because I know she was 7-time world champion marathon swimmer and I didn't think she'd had so many problems when she was younger and to get where she is today -- and she also told a lot of personal stories as well, which I knew that not many other people knew, so that she trusted us all and really got along with us and opened up with us so that gave me the need to open up as well.

LITTLE SISTER: This is a poem I wrote called 'Sister 2 Sister'.

(Reads) "A girl sits alone in her room as tears stream down her face "She doesn't know who or why she is.

She cannot run this race."

SHARON O'NEILL: As part of the program, the girls and their big sisters get together for regular outings.

It's an opportunity to enjoy the friendships and the progress they have made.

LITTLE SISTER: (Reads) "I know who I am now the answer has been won "For though there have been hard times "There are much greater times to come."

JESSICA BROWN: I know that the girls in the program's lives have changed and I know that the choices that they make now -- in being educated how to make those choices -- will definitely benefit.

SHARON O'NEILL: Last month, Kristi Fuller was spared having to give evidence in court when the defendant pleaded guilty to the lesser charge of sexual intercourse with a child under 16.

KRISTI FULLER: He made a deal and he pleaded guilty to a slightly lesser charge, but that was probably the best we were going to get, really, without me having to give my full evidence, which would have been hard.

SHELLEY TAYLOR-SMITH: You're on that ship and you're just sailing away to that perfect life of quietness and stillness.

What would it give you?

KRISTI FULLER: I'd be happy.

SHELLEY TAYLOR-SMITH: Happy?

KRISTI FULLER: Before the course, I didn't think much about my future, but now that I've done the course and I've got through court and I'd like to see myself doing nursing in the future.

SHARON O'NEILL: When you look at somebody like Kristi, what sort of a future do you see for her?

SHELLEY TAYLOR-SMITH: One that's very bright and, you know, I can relate to her pain and she doesn't have to live with it anymore.

I'm just so proud of her because I've seen how far she's come in such a short period of time.

And that's the thing -- how we may have been brought up or what's happened to us in our past, it does not determine our future.

SHARON O'NEILL: Do you look forward to the things that are ahead for you?

KRISTI FULLER: I do, yes.

SHARON O'NEILL: That must be a good way to feel.

KRISTI FULLER: It is.