

Big Sisters Needed

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A new mentoring program is helping disadvantaged girls get a head start. **Report**
NICOLE TRIANTAFILLOU

When Vaucluse resident Jessica Brown gave up full time teaching to start the Life Changing Experiences Foundation, a new mentoring charity to help teenage girls, she had already been exposed to the glaring inequities between public and private schools from the western and eastern suburbs.

She had witnessed first – hand the difficulties faced by some teenage girls struggling to keep up with their education while facing extreme hardship at home.

‘Many of the girls come from dysfunctional homes and many are playing the role of the parent in order to keep the family together,’ Ms Brown said.

“These are bright girls who have the potential to excel in life and they know that their life is not the life of a normal teenager. Some stay at home to protect their younger siblings from abuse and therefore are subjected to abuse themselves.”

During her 10 years as a teacher, Ms Brown realised the difference between students who succeeded and those who struggled depended on the encouraged they received at home.

“Kids have more confidence because their parents believe in them,” she said.

“Parents might not have much money but if they can encourage their kids to build up high self – esteem, they are much better equipped to cope with life’s challenges.”

Ms Brown started the charity in September and is seeking volunteers to become “ big sisters” for a year for up to 20 teenage girls. She has already enlisted the support of local students from public and private schools who will sell 2000 lavender bags to raise money for the mentoring program.

“Big sister” volunteer Adrian Clark, 24, says young girls are under increasing pressure to be perfect. “There’s heaps of peer pressure to look goofy, be skinny. I want the girls to know there are more interesting things in life. It’s important to find something in life that makes you happy and sometimes that means having to try a few different things.”

Former marathon swimmer Shelley Taylor – Smith, personnel experts from Julia Ross Personnel, *Home and Away* actor Sebastian Elmaloglou and former *Home and Away* actor Graeme Squires are volunteering their time to teach the girls self – esteem skills.

Anyone wanting to help can contact Life Changing Experiences Foundation on 1300 553 629