

Call goes out to the Sisterhood

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A volunteer group of women are helping their younger counterparts deal with some tough blows dealt by life.

Madeleine Collins

In today's career-focused world, where women are waiting longer to settle down and have children, many would admit to feeling a void creeping into their lives and feeling that it's time to 'give something back'.

And then there are those who are instrumental in bringing about those changes. Jessica Brown is one such woman. A schoolteacher with 12 years experience as well as an Excellence in Teaching Award, she made a life changing decision and risked taking that important step further. Two years ago, she founded the Life Changing Experiences Foundation which includes SISTER 2 sister – a 12-month mentoring program which helps underprivileged teenage girls realize their past, be it abuse or family breakdown, does not have to equal the future.

It was her experience helping students overcome behavioural problems in order to unearth self esteem that cemented her decision to take the plunge and make her dreams reality. Not surprisingly, it wasn't without sacrifice. She used her house deposit to start an organisation and still has to teach two mornings a week at her school in Bankstown to pay the rent.

'I don't think I did anything special, I just tapped into something that worked,' she says. 'Children need to know they're needed and important. And when I received the teaching award, I realized I wanted to be able to give this not only to kids in one school, but for kids on a wider scope.'

And she has her own 'little sister', 19-year-old Joshika Kishor. 'She's had a very tough life and despite all that she's going to be a superwoman!' Jessica says with pride. Joshika was enrolled in the program last April by her counsellor. 'My mother became an alcoholic through depression after my Dad died' she explains. 'After being with Jessica, I understood where my Mum was coming from. I'm not excusing her, but learning to deal with it. I never realized I could move out and be independent. I was too scared and Jessica was so positive and helped me and she taught me how to deal with things without judging me.'

Integral to the program is its ambassador Shelley Taylor-Smith. She knows a lot about overcoming obstacles, having been tagged disabled as a child when paralysed from the waist down and being told she would never walk again. Remarkably, she went on to become the seven-time world number one marathon swimming champion. She is also the

director and founder of Champions Mindset Consulting and a motivational keynote speaker and met Jessica at a dinner she was speaking at.

‘Jessica came to me and said ‘I’ve got this dream and I want it to become a reality’,’ she says. Impressed by her strategy and a plan and acting on it, Shelley agreed to come on board.

‘There was just something I saw in Jessica and I liked her vision. She’s very passionate and very committed about achieving her goal. More than that, she not only talked the talk, she walked it.’

Describing the key goals of the program in developing the girl’s lives, she says, ‘It’s all about them looking forward, committing while staying true to themselves. I don’t tell them what they want to hear,’ she says. ‘I tell them what they need to hear.’

‘This isn’t an organisation where you become a crutch. It’s about holding these women accountable for their lives and creating a future for themselves. It’s about giving them the skills so that they can defend themselves, move forward on their own and believe in themselves.

‘What motivates me is when I see them smile from within and they get it. They ask, ‘You mean I can have control? That that bad time doesn’t have to hold me back for the rest of my life and I can let it go?’

‘They look at me like a newborn baby with no dear, like you’re peeling off the layers of an onion and the shackles have been let go. It’s just amazing to see the girls blossom and grow,’ she says, pointing out that it’s as much about celebrating the highs as well as providing support during the lows.

And she’s clearly proud of her little sister Kristi Fuller, 17, who is winning the battler against her demons. Kristi joined the program a year ago.

‘My Dad had a liver transplant in 2000 which caused stress at home and I was going through a court case,’ she says. When she was 12, she was sexually abused by a neighbour, who eventually went to prison.

Of the impact The SISTER 2 sister Project has had on her life, she says, ‘I met a lot of girls who were having similar troubles and found it easier to open up and talk to them. Shelley came in to do a talk and what she said really hit home with me and she was the reason I stood up in front of everyone and told them what happened to me. We bonded from there and kept in contact mostly by phone. I know she’s always there for me.’

The program currently receives no government funding, something which Brown hopes may change soon. ‘We fund-raise for everything. I’ve got an amazing team of women. My big sisters are my fund-raising team and they run the company with me.’

Her main hope for the future is that the program goes national. She's also just been nominated by her team for Australian of the Year and admits 'that is sort of life changing because I realize I'm making a difference.'

The program starts with a five-day Butterfly Boot Camp in September, which acts as a bonding experience for the big and little sisters and includes activities such as BridgeClimb.

The organisation is looking for more inspirational women to come on board. There are 20 big sisters at present, but 30 more are needed.

The foundation will hold a special information night on the mentoring program in Darling Harbour on Tuesday 9 August.

For more details, call 1300 553 629 or see lifechangingexperiences.org