

Shoulders to lean on

The Manly Daily
Tuesday 17th January 2006

Sue Hoban

Allambie Heights IT professional Donnelle McCann heard about The SISTER 2 sister mentoring program when its founder, Jessica Brown, spoke at her Rotary Club.

By the end of the talk she was determined to be part of it. And now, as a team leader, with her own 'little sister' to mentor, she admits she gets goosebumps even talking about the difference she knows it can make in the girls' lives.

Jessica, a former Forest High student and award winning teacher, set up the Life Changing Experiences Foundation, which runs the program, to reach out to more disadvantaged children than had been possible when she was teaching. She has now enlisted 49 motivated women like Donnelle as 'big sisters'.

They support the girls and help develop the self esteem and confidence needed to overcome obstacles life has put in their way.

The mentors include women like Shelley Taylor-Smith, *Cosmo* editor Sarah Wilson, model Chloe Maxwell and broadcasters Jacinta Tynan and Bianca Dye.

The first 12-month program had 16 girls; the second, this year, expanded to 40.

But both Brown and McCann struggle with the fact that each year they receive applications on behalf of hundreds of girls for whom they cannot cater.

They have been pinning their hopes on receiving a Federal Government grant to get the program better established but another focus is to find businesses and community groups prepared to sponsor more girls on the program.

Businessman Jeremy Rice from North Shore Stainless at Brookvale has already done that and has been impressed at the results.

'Being a business owner, giving my time was not realistic so sponsoring a girl seemed a practical option for me,' he said. 'The difference with this organisation is that you actually get to meet the people you sponsor face to face and see the dramatic changes the program is having on their lives.'

Jessica could site many examples of the impact the program can have in turning lives around, but the example closest to home is her own 'little sister', a victim of crime and family abuse who became known to the foundation when her life was off the rails.

‘She had a great school counsellor and some good teachers who were looking out for her,’ Jessica said.

Twelve months after joining the program she is now studying law and is going to be using her (crime) compensation money to buy a property.’

Donnelle, who describes her own younger sister as ‘challenging’ said she was attracted by the fundamental notion of supporting and helping someone enjoy the same chances she had.

‘I can see where I could quite easily have taken the wrong path in life but I was very fortunate to have the right people around the help me make the right decisions,’ she said.

‘My favourite saying is that the past doesn’t equal the future and, by getting these girls to look at the goals they want to set, we can help facilitate that, whether it’s by putting a role model from that area or that career in front of them or just supporting them and showing them how they can get there.’

‘It’s really about showing them their options because a lot of them don’t know any different from the way they have been living,’ she added.

For more information about The SISTER 2 sister Project go to www.lifechangingexperiences.org.