

Turning points

Following your heart can allow your hidden potential to flourish, but sometimes your unseen frailties are laid bare first.

Melisande Clarke and Josephine Brouard

Jessica Brown, 35, left her full-time teaching job to start Life Changing Experiences, a charity that helps disadvantaged kids to reinvent themselves.

‘We used to put on musicals at Picnic Point High School, where I worked as a music teacher, and one day the deputy called me into her office and said, ‘We have a boy who has been kicked out of class; we can suspend him or put him the musical.’ They sent me all the ‘problem’ kids, and I put them to work.

‘I felt I was having the most success with kids outside the classroom. We were able to get the kids’ confidence up doing extracurricular work, and then we could apply that to the classroom.

‘The rewards were huge. A boy who was in our choir –he had a schizophrenic father, a mother who wasn’t coping, and he had to look after his three siblings – rang me out of the blue recently and said, ‘Guess what? I got into medicine!’ He said he couldn’t have done it without me, but all I did was get his confidence up so that he believed he could do it.

‘In 1998 the school, kids and parents nominated me for a national Excellence in Teaching Award and I won. It was a wonderful honour and I thought, ‘I’m obviously making a difference.’ From then on, I really wanted to reach more kids. I left teaching and started presenting seminars at schools, working on self esteem, goal setting and motivation.

‘After each session I’d talk about the holiday workshops that I did; the kids were really keen but couldn’t afford them – some were working two jobs because their parents were alcoholics – and I thought, ‘These are the kids who need it.’

‘I went back to teaching two mornings a week and started my own charity - Life Changing Experiences. My mum was horrified when I said I was leaving full time teaching to start up a charity, and that I was putting a lot of my own money into it. But I explained that I had made the choice; no one was forcing me to do it.

‘My first project was SISTER 2 sister. I started off with no money, no business loan – nothing. I put an ad in the local paper and had all these wonderful old ladies helping me make lavender bags then selling them in their church groups. And I went out to Rotary groups and begged them to sponsor girls. That’s how I financed the program for the first year.

‘We now send letters to principals in NSW and ask them each to nominate a girl. We also ask the girls to write a supporting letter. Reading some of their stories is gut-wrenching, but these are girls who want help – girls who have said, ‘I desperately want to change my life.’

‘I’m passionate about breaking the cycle. I used to go to parent teacher nights and be excited about talking to the parents about strategies to help their kids and then I realized that the parents were the problem. When kids are in that cycle they need someone to pluck them out and show them they have other choices.’

Sister act [inset]

‘I believe everyone is born with the same amount of self esteem’, says Jessica. ‘When I talk to kids I use a jar of jelly beans as an analogy. I tell them that when people have been abused or harmed, someone takes jelly beans out of their jar. Some people have no jelly beans left, some people’s jars are smashed. But it’s up to them to put that jar back together and, yes, there will be scars and cracks, but you can refill the jar with jelly beans and have it full.’

Through her work with Life Changing Experiences, Jessica has seen many young people blossom. Aided by volunteers and funded by public donations, the charity runs The SISTER 2 sister scheme, a 12 month mentoring program that matches committed ‘big sisters’ who are underprivileged or disadvantaged, as well as organizing creative workshops for talented kids without financial or emotional support.

The hard working team may struggle to raise the funds to make their good work happen, but Jessica says the rewards are simple: ‘Seeing girls who have been abused, neglected and their self esteem crushed, rise above their circumstances and see the possibility of happiness.’ Visit www.lifechangingexperiences.org