



Trouble in all the right places

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Throughout her 10-year teaching career, **Jessica Brown** was drawn to the wayward pupils in her class. Rather than punishing them for disobedient behaviour she wanted to get to the root of the problem.

"I WAS really passionate about helping the naughty kids. I thought if people are playing up, truanting or getting into trouble, it would usually stem from something. So rather than looking at their behaviour and sending them out of the classroom, I would look into where the behaviour stemmed from," says Ms **Brown**.

She believes she was able to make a difference in her students' lives by supporting them through their issues and refusing to judge them. In 2003, she took her interest in troubled teens even further by forming the Life Changing Experiences Foundation to help vulnerable young girls break the cycle of destitution and abuse.

The Sydney-based Foundation's SISTER2sister program matches troubled teenage girls - or little sisters - with big sister mentors who support them over 12 months. A four-day boot camp at the start of the year is followed by seminars and workshops aimed at empowering teenage participants, with topics such as depression, self-harm, eating disorders and bereavement and loss.

"I felt there was no use giving them textbooks and telling them you want them to achieve academically if they are not sleeping at night because they're being beaten up; they've been kicked out of home; or mum and dad are drug addicts. I believe anyone can achieve what they want to if they believe they can, but these kids - because of all the emotional stuff and the chaos in their lives - it was a really hard ask," Ms **Brown** says.

Little sisters aged 13 to 18 years are nominated for the program by school counsellors, the Department of Community Services or welfare groups. As well as providing participants with the knowledge and skills required to break the cycle of trauma and abuse, the program encourages them to have fun like normal teens.

"The impact the program is having is just unbelievable," says Ms **Brown**. "The changes in the girls are really overwhelming and it's great to see how just providing them with support can make such a difference.

"We also give them opportunities that they wouldn't ordinarily have if they weren't in the program so that they can have some fun too. A lot of them miss out on being normal teenage girls so we provide them with a safe environment so they can have fun." A recent activity involved making a CD with Australian Idol vocal coach Erana Clark and singer-songwriter Amy Pearson.

Setting up a charitable foundation is no easy task. For 212 years Ms **Brown** juggled teaching full-time with her work for the foundation, spending most nights making presentations to community groups to attract support. She plans to take the program to a national level, with Melbourne on the agenda in the near future.

Ms **Brown** says the process was a steep learning curve.

"But I guess when you're that passionate about something you do whatever it takes to make it happen. It wasn't easy and that's why I say to people starting up a business that they need to be extremely passionate because it's not an easy road."

The SISTER2sister program's intake of troubled teens is increasing each year, however interest from volunteer mentors is so great Ms **Brown** has introduced a fund-raising program to keep them involved while they wait for their turn.

She says she is contacted daily by women wanting to become involved, however spaces are dependent on additional funding.

Last year Ms **Brown** was a finalist in the national Centre for Leadership for Women Achievement Award, which recognises women who create and implement projects for the community. Applications for this year's award close on December 22. -- DEBI TAYLOR