

Life's better with a big sister

Matching older women who can provide positive female role models to girls aged 13 to 18 is paying dividends for both of the sisters involved.

Story: Wendy Kay.

THE old saying goes that you can't choose your relatives, but Bronwyn Allan had no trouble choosing her little sister.

Ms Allan is a big sister to Tamara, a 17-year-old in need of a big sister when times get tough.

Both met through the the SISTER2Sister program run by Life Changing Experiences. And for Bronwyn, a 32-year-old team leader at the University of NSW, the experience has been nothing short of life changing.

"I wanted more from life than working long hours," she said.

"I was originally trained as a nurse but over the last 10 years I have professionally moved far away from helping others.

"I wanted to be part of a community program and volunteer my time and energy rather than just money."

SISTER2Sister has been operating for four years matching older women who can provide positive female role models to girls aged 13 to 18. The little sisters have problems ranging from abuse or neglect to parents drug addicted or jailed.

"They do a great job matching us," she said. "Tamara has an ill parent so with my nursing background I can instinctively understand the issues she faces."

The sisters are orientated at a three-day Butterfly Bootcamp where they participate in team-building activities.

"It was really nerve-racking meeting Tamara for the first time," she said.

"I was afraid she wouldn't like me and that we wouldn't connect."

Tamara was just as nervous, but days joined at the hip canoeing, rope climbing, talent quests and yoga helped the girls find their connection.

"Learning about some of the obstacles my little sister faces has been heart-breaking," Bronwyn said.

"But the rewards lie in seeing her set personal goals and achieving them."

"The big sister mentors attend a comprehensive three-day training course before being matched to their little sister.



PERFECT MATCH: Unlike most sisters, Tamara and Bronwyn had a choice to be together.

Once they are matched all the sisters meet monthly for a day out.

"But we are always there at the end of the phone," Bronwyn said.

It is not the big sister's role to fix the problems in the girls' lives but to listen to them when they need support. By the end

of the year the aim is for the little sister to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to increase their confidence and help them break the cycle of trauma and or abuse.

"At the moment Tamara is a bit stressed out because it's her HSC year and she has exams.

"She wants to be a chef and she's had a bit of a rough week.

"But I think I'll be more nervous than her when the exams start in October."

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