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Big-sister act hit by downturn as sponsorship ebbs

Cosima Marriner

A MENTORING program that pairs successful corporate women with teenage girls at risk of abuse and neglect has become the latest victim of the economic meltdown.

The Sydney-based non-profit Sister2Sister program is facing an uncertain future because corporate sponsorship – historically the backbone of the foundation – has not been forthcoming this year.

Like other charities, Life Changing Experiences, which runs Sister2Sister, is slashing costs in an attempt to ride out the downturn. Its chief executive, Jessica Brown, and her handful of staff sit in their Surry Hills office without the lights or the air-conditioning on. "That's the extreme of what we're doing to cut in every possible way," Ms Brown said.

Big sisters, who are all volunteers, must now bring lunch for themselves and their little sisters. They must pay to participate in monthly activities like

flying trapeze aimed at fostering bonding. More expensive activities like whitewater rafting have been scrapped in favour of cheaper options like bowling. Sister2Sister cannot afford to provide coaches to transport the little sisters to activities.

"We're trying to do whatever it's possible to do without affecting the girls themselves," Ms Brown said.

Started in 2004, Sister2Sister matches successful women with disadvantaged girls aged 12 to 18. The big sisters act as role models for the girls during a 12-month personal development program.

Caitlin Ward, 17, said she would be "in bed" if she hadn't met her big sister Sally Stanley. Encouraged to believe in herself, Caitlin now plans to travel overseas researching indigenous cultures before setting up a foundation for indigenous students. "[Sister2Sister] is an opportunity to really make a difference in [your] life," she said.

Ms Stanley, who works in advertising, said it was impossible to put a value on the benefit of the program. "It makes young girls aware that there is so much potential out there."

The global financial crisis has caused the major banks to scale back grants to Sister2Sister. The timing couldn't be worse, as \$340,000 Federal Government grant, which supplied 30 per cent of its funding, runs out in June.

However, Ms Brown is confident Sister2Sister will withstand the economic turmoil by rapidly expanding its own fund-raising network. Corporate women are being recruited to set up fund-raising teams at their workplaces to help Sister2Sister become self-sustaining.

"Our own infrastructure for fund-raising is the thing to save us," Ms Brown said. "We've got a solution – what we're looking for is people to implement the model that we know works."



Sibling support ... mentor Sally Stanley, left, with "little sister" Caitlin Ward. Photo: Jacky Ghossein