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Local heroes

Jennifer Bennett

THE Eastern Suburbs is well represented in this year's nominations for the Australian of the Year Awards, with three locals getting nods for their work.

Two are up for the Local Hero Award: Don Ritchie, a Watsons Bay resident nicknamed "the Angel of the Gap" who has spent much of his life talking people out of taking their own lives, and youth worker Jessica Brown of Rose Bay, whose SISTER2Sister program rescues at-risk young women from poverty and misery.

"I've been doing it for nearly 50 years. You can't just let people suicide or jump or sit over by the cliff with that in mind, so that's where I've been involved," Mr Ritchie, 84, said.

Ms Brown, 40, has seen 250 young women blossom under her care. The 12-month SISTER2Sister program, which matches its charges with successful women, has seen girls achieve at school, complete university degrees and own their own homes.

"Teens who've been abused or neglected, or are missing a positive role model in their life; they're quite complex issues the girls are dealing with," she said. "I'm just passionate about breaking the cycle. Many of the kids we work with don't know they have options,



Don Ritchie



Jessica Brown



Tara Winkler

they feel like it's their destiny to follow the same path... so it's all about giving them role models and teaching them that the world's their oyster and they have the opportunity to do whatever they set their minds to."

In the Young Australian of the Year Category, 25-year-old Tara Winkler, of Vacluse, has been nominated for her work with orphans in Cambodia. Ms Winkler left a promising film career to run an orphanage in Battambang when she realised the children who lived there were being neglected and the money raised for them stolen by their carers.

The NSW Australian of the Year, Senior Australian of the Year, Young Australian of the Year and Local Hero Awards will be announced on November 25. The NSW award recipients will then join recipients from all other states and territories as finalists for the national awards, which will be held in Canberra next year on January 25.