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How my sist

Maris

Jessica

A sisterhood of strength

Jessica Brown, 40
Founder of Life Changing Experiences Foundation and the Sister2Sister program.

I was a school teacher for 10 years and worked with many kids struggling with problems such as abuse at home. It was heartbreaking seeing them left behind because they didn't have role models to guide them through life.

So in 2003 I left my job to start Life Changing Experiences Foundation. The Sister2Sister program came about as I had a wonderful network

of successful and inspiring women. I wanted to match each of them with a young girl, to give them the encouragement and love they'd never had.

'Most of us take that for granted,' I told friends. 'We all need someone to believe in us.'

Research shows that just one stable, constant person in your life can make a difference, and that's what I wanted to give the girls.

Goal-setting and life skills are a big part of the program, but it's also about having someone fighting in your corner.

Today, 250 girls have come

through the program and I'm constantly humbled by them.

Maris is one of our success stories, and we're so proud of what she's achieved. She is such a beautiful person and she'll be a fantastic hairdresser!

Sadly, we no longer receive government funding, so we rely on donations and fundraising.

Many young girls suffer abuse and neglect and we want to help as many as possible. Like Maris, they can become the next generation of inspiring women.

For more information visit www.lifechangingexperiences.org.

er saved me

Maris lacked all self-confidence – until her big sister Jessica appeared and gave her a new perspective **Maris, 20, Narwee, NSW**

The school bell rang and kids raced for the door, eager to get home. I imagined their mums making them an afternoon snack and asking what they'd done at school that day.

But I hated the school bell. I hated going home.

'What are you still doing here, Maris?' teachers would ask when they found me wandering in the playground.

'I'll go home in a bit,' I'd shrug. But the truth was, I'd find every excuse not to.

Mum and I didn't get along, and by age 13 I despised myself for it. I just wanted to escape. When a welfare teacher at school asked me some questions, I finally broke my silence.

'I'm not very happy,' I started, and the truth about home came flooding out.

That set off a chain reaction. Social workers were called and I was taken to stay at a women's refuge.



School was a refuge

The problem was, freedom was even worse. At 13, I was put with prostitutes, drug addicts and runaways.

'Try this,' one girl said, offering me marijuana. 'It'll make you forget everything.'

It took away my sadness. So did other drugs. As I moved from refuge to refuge, I practically tried them all.

I was quickly sinking into a black hole.

Then, when I was 16, someone special reached in to pull me out.

It was Jessica, a youth worker with On Track services.

'I'd like you to do the Sister2Sister program,' she said, explaining I'd be matched with a 'big sister' to talk and do fun stuff with.

'I'll try it,' I shrugged.

I wanted to take control, I just didn't know how.

Amazingly, Jessica herself volunteered to be my big sister, and we embarked on a week-long camp. Meeting

the other girls in the program, I felt nervous, like damaged goods. But as we got chatting, I realised they were just like me.

We had all been through something terrible, but were determined to make a change for the better in our lives.

The best part of the camp was getting to know Jessica.

I was in awe of her. She had a great career, a husband

and kids and a nice house. Most of

all, she liked the person she saw in the mirror.

I want that too, I thought.

I started opening up to Jessica, telling her

about my past and my dreams for the future.

'You can be anything you want to be,' she told me.

Jessica told me that with confidence and hard work, I could go anywhere.

The hard work I knew I could do, but finding the confidence to do it wouldn't be easy.

After the camp, Jessica and I

I wanted to take control, I just didn't know how



Jessica showed me I can achieve anything

stayed in touch once a week. I'd ask her for advice, and she would check how I was going.

'I'd like to be a hairdresser,' I told her one day. 'But I'm probably too dumb.'

'Don't be silly,' she replied. 'You're smart, you'd just have to learn the skills.'

No-one had ever said that to me before. I was stunned someone so amazing would care about me. Jessica believed in me, so eventually I started believing in myself.

Each month we all got together with our big sisters for art sessions and sport. One time we even all climbed the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

'That was amazing,' I gasped afterwards. A few years ago I could never have dreamt about doing something like that.

After a year, Jessica really had become like a big sister to me. She'd always be on my side. She helped me get started on my hairdressing training and I'd call to tell her how it was going.

'I'm proud of you,' she told me constantly.

Today, I'm even proud of myself. Having finished my Certificate 2 in hairdressing, I'm starting an apprenticeship and I've got an apartment.

One day I want to open my own salon, buy a house, and start a family. Because of Jessica, I believe that it's all within my reach.

Jessica is my rock now, and without her, I don't know where I would be today.

I'm just so grateful to have been part of the Sister2Sister program, and now I know I've got an exciting future.

I'm determined to be happy and successful, just like my big sister Jessica. ■

As told to Nikki Roberts