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# Helping teen girls to thrive

UNDER  
STUDY

**JESSICA BROWN**

Chief executive and founder,  
Life Changing Experiences  
Foundation  
BMusEd (Bachelor of Music  
Education), University of NSW,  
1992

IT was a given in our house that the four children would all go to university, but I was torn between being a social worker or going on with music. I had started playing the flute when I was in Year Three and my high school in Sydney's northern suburbs was an "excellence in music" school. I was in the band, choir, dance groups — all the performing arts.

When I was deciding about uni, I thought that since I had been practising two hours a day for 10 years, I didn't really want to give my music away. I did an audition and passed with flying colours.

I could have studied music performance, but for me the bachelor of music education combined my desire to go on with music and to be responsible for the welfare of kids; to be there to help them with their self-esteem and to reach their potential as students.

I had a scholarship from the NSW

Department of Education and one of the conditions for retaining it was that I had to achieve really good results, so I was a bit of nerd; I was one of those students at the library as opposed to the pub around the corner.

While I was studying, I worked three jobs, running a band at one of the primary schools close to UNSW, teaching some of those kids privately and also giving lessons to kids near where I lived.

I wasn't in any clubs at uni but it was part of our curriculum to do public performances. So I was always practising in groups, particularly flute quartets, and we performed a lot. I also did a bit of singing in a rock band, which was fun.

After I graduated and started work I realised there was a lot more to education — a lot of life skills that need to be addressed — before a child can thrive at school.

I taught for 10 years, the last two as a casual while I set up Life Changing Experiences Foundation. We run mentoring and support programs for teenage girls from difficult backgrounds. We started with 16 the first year; since then 275 girls have been through the program. We work with 50 each year and we have a waiting list not just of girls, but also of "big sisters" — women volunteers — who mentor them.

The girls who came into those early programs are young women now and many have chosen to study first and get a stable partner and home before starting families. Among them are women studying to be dentists and doctors and we have some who went through nursing courses at uni, and a few in sales who have done communication or business degrees.

A few years ago I won a scholarship

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to do my MBA at Macquarie Graduate School of Management, but I haven't had the time to start that yet.

Coming from a teaching background, I was on a really steep learning curve when I made the transition to creating and running a not-for-profit charity. I knew I could write fantastic

programs and I could deal with tough kids, but I wasn't necessarily business savvy. But with a vision to take this program national, I knew as a CEO I needed that.

I look fondly back on the times at uni when I would just be jamming with all my muso friends. Even in our breaks

in the cafeteria we would always be playing. They were carefree days, although we worked hard. I loved uni because I was focusing on what I was passionate about, which was changing lives, teaching and playing music as well.

**AS TOLD TO JILL ROWBOTHAM**



**Jessica Brown, left, with a Life Changing Experiences Foundation 'little sister' Lyndsey-Fay Macnaught**