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The sisters of sincerity

One life-changing decision has become a life-changer for vulnerable kids, writes **Vanessa Bernardo**.

As a high school music teacher for a decade, Jessica Brown gained experience nurturing students to create something beautiful, a memorable musical moment, through perseverance and self-belief. Dedication to her students went beyond teaching, however, and Brown realised her calling transcended the classroom. There was a persistent urge to improve the lives of disadvantaged youth, the ones who fell through the cracks, had been hurt or forgotten.

Brown pursued her calling and is today the founder and chief executive of the non-profit Life Changing Experiences Foundation, which runs the successful SISTER2sister program.

The journey began with hours of daily flute practice proving fertile training ground for the commitment that was to come, while cementing the idea that you can build a career from something you love. Unsure of her direction on finishing school, Brown returned to her musical roots and landed a bachelor of music education scholarship to attend the University of New South Wales. With an interest in social work, her resultant teaching career fulfilled both interests, as Brown sought students who needed guidance.

Picnic Point High School, in Sydney's south-west, benefited from Brown's dedication as she built the music department into a successful performing arts unit. Students enrolled from outside the catchment area to be part of the choirs, dance

groups and school spectaculars.

While Brown filled her spare time sewing costumes and designing sets, supportive parents dropped off dinner along with their children. This mutual respect and appreciation led the school community to nominate Brown for a National Excellence in Teaching award. The award was a sign of things to come.

This year, Brown was named NSW Woman of the Year - Community Hero People's Choice, recognising the positive impact of the SISTER2sister charity.

SISTER2sister was born in 2003 shortly after Brown founded the foundation. The 12-month program empowers vulnerable teen girls to turn their lives around. Being paired with a successful female role model, or "big sister", helps the girls make better choices for a positive future.

"It's really about breaking the cycle and that's why I started [the foundation]," Brown says.

Starting a non-profit organisation is no simple task, as she attests.

"I was a bit crazy, actually. I left full-time teaching and went into casual teaching so I didn't have extra-curricular activities and could focus on [the foundation]. I would come back to my little cottage to make calls, which was a converted garage that had no running water and no kitchen. It was my first office and I lived in it. I did this for 2½ years."

These founding years provided income security as Brown used her savings to start the foundation. It wasn't until it was awarded deductible gift-recipient status that charitable donations were allowed, so Brown would drive to Canberra to lobby politicians. Eventually, she applied for a grant and the foundation was one of 15 national mentoring programs to receive funding. "I could then employ myself and leave teaching," Brown says. "The rest is history."

Starting a non-profit group isn't for everyone. The complex nature of the organisation means you will be running a business while relying on donations in a tough economic climate. If you are undeterred, Brown's advice is to partner with an experienced board, keep your day job while you pursue grants, and employ a great auditor, as finances are crucial. "Be willing to work really hard, wear many hats and do it all on a very limited budget," she says. "Yes, it's inspiring and may sound glamorous, but it's really hard work."

An alternative is to seek employment or volunteer for one of the 40,000-odd non-profits operating in Australia. A 2009 government report counted 2 million volunteers, 500,000 permanent part-time/casual employees and 368,514 full-time employees in the industry.

These numbers reflect a desire of many non-profits to hire qualified staff. While some salaries are beginning to reflect this demand, resource constraints and the enticement of public sector salaries can lure candidates away. Each dollar assigned to a salary is also money diverted from the community they aim to serve. A recent survey reveals most executives of non-profit groups don't receive bonuses or incentives, despite a significant number completing advanced education including master's degrees. So why work or volunteer for one? Brown has her reasons.

"It's a love job. I don't do it for the money because you aren't going to make a lot of money in [a non-profit] organisation."

You will, however, make a real impact. Graduates from the SISTER2sister program have received university scholarships, become published authors and presented at Parliament House.



press clip



**"It's a love job":
Music teacher
Jessica Brown
founded the
SISTER2sister
program.**

Photo: James Brickwood

WHAT YOUR HELP CAN DO

If you've been inspired by Jessica Brown's story and want to help, here's how. The impact you can have is literally life-changing.

- \$10 a month will pay for a Little Sisters lunch at the monthly outings for a year.
- \$30 a month will enable the recruitment and training of a Big Sister mentor in the year-long SISTER2sister program.
- \$50 a month will enable a

disadvantaged teenage girl to attend the four-day Butterfly Bootcamp, which marks the beginning of the SISTER2sister program.

- \$100 a month will enable a disadvantaged teenage girl to attend the monthly risk-management workshops and fund activities for a year.

You can donate at lifechangingexperiences.org/site/lce/cadonations.php.