

She's got **your back**

Professional photographer Melissa Histon put down her camera and rolled up her sleeves to help women and children subjected to domestic violence.



Supporters include Newcastle Lord Mayor Nuatali Nelmes, pictured at the Knights 'Say NO to domestic violence' event in 2018.

Melissa Histon is the Founder and CEO of Newcastle-based charity Got Your Back Sista (GYBS), which for the past three years has provided relief and support to hundreds of women and children across the region. While that has meant countless hours of work and stress for Melissa, the positive outcomes she sees first-hand make it all worthwhile.

"When I see the women change, start to glow and find joy again it is wonderful," Melissa reflects.

"It can be difficult, hard work, and emotional at times but I do find it rewarding. Especially when our ladies, part of the GYBS community, drop in for a cuppa and say 'thank you so much', 'this is changing my life', or 'I feel so much stronger now.'"

It's fair to say Melissa's life has changed significantly in the past few years. She started The Sista Code in 2014 when her work as a professional photographer took her to Nepal. It was there she witnessed first hand sex trafficking and abuse of women and she returned home feeling disillusioned about the treatment of women and children.

Melissa set up The Sista Code, a digital platform for women to uplift, support, inspire and share the love with other women, locally and internationally. She became more aware of the prevalence of domestic violence through the Sista Code and in 2016 formed the registered charity, Got Your Back Sista.

GYBS offers relief and support to vulnerable women and children escaping domestic violence, helping them to re-establish themselves and live independently.

"The first year I ran GYBS from home and our house became a storage shed," laughs Melissa. This being the home she shares with her four children and husband Craig Browning, owner of OAS Computers. "I'd be up until midnight doing all the bits and pieces required to run a charity," she adds.

However, as the charity's profile grew so did the need for its services, and now GYBS has a permanent home in the former Tighes Hill School Of Arts in Elizabeth Street.

Along with a drop-in centre, the charity also provides self-defence courses, workshops and other activities from its base.



Melissa speaking at the launch of the Got Your Back Sista Village HQ in March 2018



Melissa and Got Your Back Sista volunteers helping to renovate a house that became Trisha's House women's shelter.



Melissa speaking at the White Ribbon Breakfast in November 2018.



Volunteering for Habitat for Humanity with Belinda Smith in 2015.

"I gave away my photography business two years ago to focus on GYBS," says Melissa. "We've been very fortunate and last year managed to get two people on board to help. That took a lot of the pressure off me."

While Melissa feels it's all happened quite quickly she says that it's probably reflective of the need within the community. "We are going into our fourth year and I look back and scratch my head at how quickly GYBS has grown, both in terms of what we are offering and in the support and engagement of the community."

"I just think that comes down to the fact that domestic violence is an issue that touches more people than we realise. They just don't talk about it."

"We get lots of people reaching out to us: 'I want to volunteer, I want to make a donation or I want to support you', and you find out later, when they tell you their story, that they grew up in an abusive family or have some history of violence in their past so they want to give back."

To date GYBS has provided over \$210,000 in support to women and children in the community raised through grants, donations and fund raising. They have provided

165 women making a fresh start with household items and furniture and have had over 100 women and teenage girls complete self-defence classes. Every Thursday, GYBS offers two sessions of their empowerment circles and countless others just drop in for a chat or advice.

GYBS has teamed up with the Newcastle Knights for the past two years, using a home game as a fund-raising and awareness activity, providing them with direct exposure to more than 20,000 people.

They are also partnering with the Hamilton Hawks Rugby Union team and New Lambton Eagles Football Club increasing their profile and creating more awareness. As the charity continues to grow Melissa is still surprised at the turn her life took. "If someone had told me six years ago I'd be doing this I would have said 'no'. I really believe your life changes at the right time, when it's supposed to, and I also really strongly believe that, as part of getting older, you focus less on yourself and more on other people."

For more information and to throw your support behind GYBS go to: <http://www.gotyourbacksista.com>