

Bianca Smith
(left), 28, and
her friend
Lara Picone, 30.

“How my sisterhood saved me”

Meet the women who, in the face of adversity, found a source of strength in each other. **Sheree Mutton** discovers how their special bond helped them through.

PHOTOGRAPHY ● KRISTINA SOLJO STYLING ● BIANCA LANE

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines sisterhood as “a closer relationship among women, based on shared experiences and concerns”. It’s a good definition as these things go, but a few words conjured up by a grammar geek are never going to capture the true beauty and importance of female friendships.

Real women telling their stories does it better, so we’ve asked these six Australian women, whose friendships have been forged and strengthened in a time of need, to share theirs. Each has faced a crisis head on and here they give credit to their “sisters” and the charities that helped them through. These charities are backed by the Priceline Sisterhood Foundation, which has raised more than \$2 million to support women since 2010. Here’s to celebrating the sisterhood we all share.

“She helped me through perinatal depression”

When Lara Picone heard her long-time friend, Bianca Smith, question if her new baby girl, Eve, was even hers, she knew something was wrong. “I could tell she was down,” says Lara. “We were so excited for the arrival of this baby and then after she was released from hospital I just knew something wasn’t quite right.”

Like most new mothers, Bianca was attempting to adjust to life with a newborn, but her feelings were pointing to a deeper problem, which she now recognises as signs of perinatal depression. “I just didn’t feel a connection to her,” she recalls. “As it progressed, I acknowledged what was going on. I went to the PANDA website, panda.org.au, and looked at the forums to see what other women were experiencing.”

Fortunately, Bianca confided in Lara, who helped her get the support she needed, but she says many women are afraid of speaking up because there is a stigma attached to perinatal depression.

“People brush it off as the ‘baby blues’. I didn’t want to be seen to be a bad mother. I would never put my child in danger, I just needed support,” says Bianca. “I felt so relieved once I told Lara, I wasn’t holding it in anymore. I would often say, ‘I’m okay’, but she would show up and help out when I needed a rest.”

The pair, who met playing tennis as teenagers, says their bond is even stronger now. “We’re so much closer and I didn’t think we could be,” says Lara, who is also Eve’s godmother. “I feel like we’re sisters.” »

How to help

Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia (PANDA) is a not-for-profit, self-help organisation which provides information and support to those affected by post- and ante-natal mood disorders. Visit panda.org.au or priceline.com.au/sisterhood.

HAIR BY SAM POWELL. MAKE-UP BY MICHELLE COX. BIANCA WEARS SAMBAG TOP AND JEANSWEST JEANS. LARA WEARS SEED BODYSUIT AND ZARA JEANS. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHED.

“She is my strong, fierce goddess”

If we are fortunate enough, we will never know our true strength. Helen Tran is one woman who does know. After years of trying to conceive a child, Helen gave birth to a beautiful baby girl in her early 40s. Then, while she was breastfeeding her daughter, Audrey, she noticed one breast was producing less milk. “There was a mass of tissue which I assumed was a blocked milk duct,” says Helen. “My doctor examined it [and] wasn’t too concerned.” Yet Helen couldn’t shake the feeling that it was more serious.

A year later, she returned to her doctor and, after tests, discovered she had stage three breast cancer. Rounds of chemotherapy followed. Her hair fell out and Helen says she became a recluse because she lost part of her identity during the aggressive treatment. She began attending workshops run by the charity Look Good Feel Better. “It reignited my need for self-care, self-love and self-respect,” she says. “I was starting to feel comfortable in my own skin at the age of 40-something, but lost a large part of that during the initial stages of treatment. I came out of the program more positive about little things I could do to make myself feel better.”

Helen also credits her strength to the support of her close friend, Barbara Choy. “Our 26 years of friendship has endured many markers in life that we have cried over or laughed at together,” says Helen. “She’s sat by my side and held my hand while I cried over my divorce. And while friends and family came to visit with home comforts during the cancer treatment, Barbs would remind me of the inner strength that has carried me through adversity, topping it off with a ‘do you remember?’ which would make us giggle like teenagers. We have always been there to remind each other of the strong, fierce goddess that lives in each other.” »

How to help

Look Good Feel Better is a free community service program that helps women manage the appearance-related side-effects of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Visit lgfb.org.au or priceline.com.au/sisterhood.

BARBARA WEARS ZARA TOP AND JEANSWEST JEANS. HELEN WEARS JEANSWEST TOP AND JEANS.



Helen Tran (right), 45, and her friend, Barbara Choy, 52.

Eliesa Collins (left), 57, and her sister, Julie McGlinn, 56.



“We’re not just sisters, we’re best friends.”

Like so many others with dementia, Eliesa Collins was an unlikely candidate. Tertiary-educated, an avid reader and a “queen of trivia”, Eliesa, also known as Lisa, was considered to be a fiercely intelligent and independent woman.

Although she noticed a few changes in herself, she wasn’t diagnosed with Alzheimer’s until months later. “My GP was very good to me,” she says. “She was the one who realised I had Alzheimer’s.”

Lisa’s doctor phoned her sister, Julie McGlinn, and informed her of the unexpected news. “It was Lisa who always looked after me,” says Julie. “We really only saw each other at birthdays and Christmas, so no one knew she had Alzheimer’s. She hid it well.”

Julie was put in touch with Alzheimer’s Australia, which helped support her and Lisa through some tough life changes. “Everyone at Alzheimer’s Australia was really helpful,” says Julie. “It can be overwhelming because everything in their life is affected. Lisa was behind in

her rent. She wasn’t eating properly. She was living on noodles.”

For the past six months, Lisa has been living in a new home, which helps her stay active and receive the care she needs. “We do lots of things together now,” says Julie. “We are much closer. We’re not just sisters, we’re best friends, too.” **AWW**

How to help

Alzheimer’s Australia provides support and advocacy for people living with dementia. Visit fightdementia.org.au or priceline.com.au/sisterhood.