



Guardian angel: Jessica Macpherson (below) has been coming to the aid of mums in need for nine years, and (left) St Kilda Mums has grown from humble beginnings operating out of a garage.

Baby steps

From helping one mum with a pram nine years ago to an expected 20,000 mothers and babies this year, Jessica Macpherson is a saint to those in need

CATHERINE LAMBERT

WHEN Jessica Macpherson was pregnant, one of her greatest joys was buying nursery items to create a nurturing environment for her new baby.

"Nesting is a really special time for a woman," Macpherson says. "A lot of people are superstitious about buying things too soon, but as you get closer to the due date you go into a cleaning, buying frenzy. I had spreadsheets to completely engineer the whole process."

But not every woman is so lucky as to be able to stock up with even the most essential items and Macpherson, founder and head of St Kilda Mums, knows only too well that there are plenty of families in need.

When she established St Kilda Mums, which recycles and donates second-hand nursery gear to families that need it the most, nine years ago she helped 1500 families. Last year she helped 13,510 families, amounting to more than \$5 million worth of goods.

LIVING IN ST KILDA, YOU DO SEE PEOPLE AT THE EXTREME END OF LIFE

This year she expects to reach 20,000 babies and mothers.

providing the three things that are always in short supply — prams, cots and child car seats. Clothes and toys tend to be over-supplied.

It all began when Macpherson walked into a St Kilda opportunity shop nine years ago with her own child's car seat and was told it was illegal to rehome children's car seats.

She became curious, feeling it was a waste to throw the seat away, and learnt the seats can be rehomed if they pass the rigorous mandatory safety standards that apply to all nursery items.

She learnt the standards and began, from her own garage, to gather second-hand items and get them up to scratch to give to others.

"The first pram that I ever fixed up and gave away was given to a young mum at the mothers' group I had attended," she says. "This lady was new to Australia so she, like 36 per cent of mothers in Victoria today, was born overseas." She made really good friends at the

mothers' group and started teaching them how to cook. She made them the most delicious food.

"The maternal child health nurse still works in St Kilda today and she tells me that the mum I helped nine years ago is still in touch with all those mums she met at the mothers' group and if she didn't have my pram she wouldn't have been able to take the long walk from her home to the group. The pram, for her, was freedom. It ensured she could stay social and connect to her new life here."

Macpherson, 47, says she was not so altruistic before she had her children Carolina, 11, and Mario, 9, but was always aware of others.

She worked in the wine industry, shifting from New Zealand to Australia in 2000. The NZ wine maker she worked for was a strong supporter of the HIV/AIDS Foundation and 60c from every bottle of wine sold went to the foundation.

But it was when she stopped working and was at home with her babies that she started to think about other mothers who didn't have the strong support systems she enjoyed. The thoughts would come most powerfully during night feeding in the dead of winter.

"I used to imagine doing everything as a mother in a women's refuge or what if I couldn't afford to put the heating on or buy the next can of formula?" she says.

"Living in St Kilda, you do see people at the extreme end of life because there is not only a lot of transitional housing, there are also a lot of services for people who need special help.

"On the way to and from work, I see women leading really horrible lives and you just can't avert your eyes from homeless people in Carlisle St and I could say the same about downtown Melbourne.

"I didn't ever think I could solve homelessness or substance abuse, but I knew I could help another mother."

St Kilda Mums runs primarily off the back of volunteers and it helps all sorts of women in need, whether living in a car with a baby, refugees or women who live in affluent areas but have no financial freedom.

All requests are made via a social worker to streamline the process, though the morning we speak she has just got off the phone with a woman who managed to track down her phone number and was desperate for help.

The woman had just been given care of a relative's baby by the Department of Health and Human Services.

"They showed up on the doorstep with the baby and said, 'It's either you or foster care,' Macpherson says. "She's a single mum with two kids and they offered to reimburse her for a car seat but couldn't give her one so she came to me. She told me things were really tough but she wanted to raise the baby herself.

"I had a response within 10 minutes from a callout for a car seat. It's not the normal way I work, but there will always be those one-off cases and I have to help them. It's important that we do that every now and again."

Macpherson is presently part of the Yarra Trail Trailblazer campaign, sharing the stories of "women across Australia who inspire other women to think of their own future without limits.

The future for Macpherson is to expand into every capital city in Australia, having already opened offices in Geelong and Ballarat. She happily shares her intellectual property with like-minded women wanting to establish a similar business in other states, whether from their garages or office buildings.

Funding comes from individual donors and some grant money from philanthropic trusts. No money comes from the government.

"I'm proud that every capital city in Australia, except Darwin, can contact us and we help them to set up for free," Macpherson says.

"We all have to help each other."

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