I was on holidays from uni, looking for something to occupy myself, when I read an article in Melbourne's Child magazine about a charity called St Kilda Mums. They received donations of baby and children's items from the public, sorted, cleaned and safety checked them, and then distributed them to welfare agencies throughout Melbourne. And the kicker - they had recently started a satellite organisation in Geelong.

I could run something like this, I thought. I was basically already doing it in my spare time. I was bundling up my children's old clothes and toys and selling them online. It was time consuming, but I enjoyed it. Friends often asked me to sell their clothes and furniture for them as I was so successful at it.

I decided to go to St Kilda to experience for myself how the St Kilda Mums' warehouse operated and to check whether I would be getting in over my head. I wanted to make sure I was ready.

You see, I lost myself for a while there. Babies will do that to you. I gave my all to my babies when they were young, as they rightly deserved, but forgot to nourish myself. I battled through postnatal depression, as so many do. I struggled. I denied.

Then I decided I had to help myself, as no one was going to do it for me. I took small steps. First, there was a short course, one night a week for six months. I rejoiced as I was challenged to use a brain that had, for years, been focused only on the minutiae of life. How many millilitres of formula has the baby had? How many ducks can you see on this page? How many sides does a triangle have? It was a priceless opportunity to be a functioning member of the adult world again.

Yoga helped. For one hour a week, I could turn off my brain. I mused to a teacher friend that yoga was perfect for teachers and mothers - a calming experience where someone tells you what to do. Finally, I was looking after myself. And you know what? It made me such a better mother.

I was calmer, more energetic, less resentful, and I could see the fog of depression slowly but surely lifting.

From the outside, these acts can seem unnecessarily selfish. They are selfish, but they are also necessary. It's as if we are expected to devote all our time, energy and resources to our children, with little regard for our own wellbeing. Who wrote that rule? Those that have children will recognise the danger in this. I certainly did. I needed to be selfish in order to become selfless.

It took me two years, a great therapist, a handful of self-help books and patience, but finally I felt clear. I discovered a sense of clarity, a kind of insight I never would have bothered to find had I not been dragged through depression. Finally, I was content, and ready to give again.

I had just finished my first year of a part-time course at RMIT in Brunswick. I loved textiles in high school, and studying textile design two nights a week combined a need to escape the house with a love of creating beautiful things.
I had a three-month stretch of holidays ahead of me and St Kilda Mums fitted in nicely with what I was looking for.

I met Jessie, St Kilda Mums’ CEO, and knew this would work. Here was a woman successfully combining work and family. The warehouse was full of volunteer mums who were donating their time to help other mums in need and doing it with their children in tow. There were babies in slings, toddlers in the kids’ play area, bigger kids helping sort toys and it all worked.

I volunteered and picked Jessie’s brain. I observed the day-to-day running of the warehouse and met so many wonderful people. I felt I was making a valuable contribution to some child’s life and I wanted to do more.

Eureka Mums was born.

I began in my shed. I accepted donations from the public of clothes, linen, toys and other essentials needed to welcome a new baby home. I regularly spoke with generous people who wanted their baby gear to go to someone in genuine need.

As one mother said to me recently, “I’ve often wondered how to pass on baby goods that aren’t needed anymore in the Ballarat area, preferably to someone who is struggling. It’s great that items now aren’t going to waste.”

I began to see people who had kept precious toys or clothes that they felt were too good to throw away. Many didn’t want to drop them in a charity bin, instead preferring to give them directly to families facing hardship.

One mother put it this way: “I know what it’s like to struggle at times, and being able to donate items to others in the same situation warms my heart.”

Many mothers had stories attached to their donations. I heard how a mother had searched tirelessly for the perfect pram for her first born, how it had carried her next three children effortlessly. This pram had been with her through sleepless nights, through the ups and downs of parenting and had carried so many memories.

She was reluctant to give up such a precious part of her children’s history but she wanted it to be used to enhance someone else’s life.

What I didn’t expect was the dire need of some families. Almost immediately, I began receiving requests for help. “My little boy needs warm clothing”, “I have limited income and my baby needs a cot”, “I’m a single mum whose baby was born at 25 weeks”, “I’m pregnant and not eligible for maternity leave”.

All desperate people asking me for help. It was then I fully realised the extent of what I was doing. I could help these people. Parenting is stressful enough without having to wonder where your baby is going to sleep when you arrive home from the hospital.

This really hit home one evening when I was filling an order for a case manager who had requested two single-bed linen sets. The case worker told me a father had recently gained custody of his four-year-old and six-year-old sons, but had no blankets or clothes for them. As I packed each bundle with a doona, a blanket, a sheet set, a mattress protector and a soft toy, I thought about the little boys who would receive these gifts.

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I thought about how trying a custody battle would have been on them, about how excited — but apprehensive — they might be about moving into a new environment with dad. I thought how something as simple as a cool new blanket could ease the transition. And, finally, I thought, if they didn’t get this linen from me where would it have come from? Would they have received it at all?

The message from case workers has been loud and clear. We need you and this service.

Too often case workers have to petition for funding for something as necessary as a cot for a child to sleep in. Many have told me of their clients’ babies sleeping in portacots or prams while they wait for access to funds that will allow them to purchase the most basic necessity for a family — a safe place for their child to sleep. Cots are one of the hardest things to purchase when you have little or no income, yet they are one of the most important things for a new baby. Eureka Mums can now provide a second-hand or new cot to a family facing hardship, free of charge. That’s one less thing the family has to worry about.

Other welfare workers have told me of taking their clients to op shops around town to try and find clothes for their children. Not only do you pay per item of clothing, but many op shops have been so picky over that they would be lucky to find five quality items, let alone a season’s worth of adequate clothes. We provide clothing bundles made up from donations that have been sorted, quality checked and packed to resemble a gift bag.

The bundles contain 100 items of clothing, including a combination of summer and winter items. We make sure there is a winter coat, a sun hat, some bathers, pyjamas, at least three pairs of shoes, and all of the basics required for a year in a child’s life.

Shae Eva from welfare agency Barry Street says, "the clients feel so uplifted when they receive a clothing bundle. It empowers them to think their children aren’t missing out. They can go to kinder, or down the street, and fit in with the other children. The quality of the clothing is outstanding and the bundles have obviously been packed with love and care. This makes all the difference to the child’s and the mother’s self-esteem."

Parenthood can be isolating at the best of times, but even more so if you don’t have a mode of transport. We recently gave a double pram to a family who didn’t have a car. Mum had no way of keeping both her three-month-old and two-year-old safe while out so, even though they craved interaction, they all stayed home.

Mum was missing out on valuable time spent outside the house, and her children were missing out on socialising and exploring their environment. With a double pram and backpack-style nappy bag, the family was able to catch the bus across town to visit family, walk to the playground near their house and involve themselves in life outside the home. In my experience, this is one of the greatest factors in preventing depression and other risks associated with isolation.

Domestic violence, homelessness, job loss and poverty are all too prevalent in our society. Many families live in these circumstances with children who deserve as much of a chance to thrive as anyone else. Eureka Mums is a necessary service that bridges the gap between the generous donating public and the welfare agencies working tirelessly to give their clients the care and support they need.

My story isn’t much different from the countless mothers who have gone before me. I’m grateful for all I’ve gone through. I’ve heard people say how lucky they are to have lived hard lives, as their struggles make them who they are today.

I understand the meaning of that now. I wouldn’t give up any of my experiences, as hard as they’ve been, because they have led me to this exact point where I am in the perfect position to help people who may also be struggling within themselves.

We all need help in one way or another and this is my way of showing that everyone deserves unlimited kindness and compassion. It may take just one kind act to turn someone’s life around.

If you would like to donate to Eureka Mums, please visit the website www.eurekamums.org or email donate@eurekamums.org