

Heaven, Heartache and the Power of Love*

In 1998 drug counsellor Jane Rowe went to another funeral of another drug victim. As her coffin was lowered, her six-year-old ran forward, crying "Where are you taking my Mummy?" and was led away by social workers. Jane spent a sleepless night thinking about all the other children left orphaned or abandoned through their parents' drug use. Next morning she set about doing something about it. The Newsboys Foundation has been proud to support the result: the Mirabel Foundation.

When she was born her mother gave her a name that spoke of beauty and hope and reaching for the stars. She called her Heaven.

And then, right from the beginning, she made life hard for her. As hard as it could be.

"My story is only what I've been told really," explains Heaven, now 21. Her mother and father were both illicit drug users, "and when I was six weeks old my mum just said she couldn't handle the responsibility of me – I was more of a mistake baby, I suppose – and she took me around to Nan and Grandpa and left me."

She lived with her Nan from then on and has had only intermittent contact with her mother – and that contact has been volatile, confusing and upsetting: "It's all over the place. One week it'll be an abuse message, the next week she wants me to move in with her."

At the beginning of high school, Heaven struggled with depression and throughout 2008 and 2009 was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome. But her Nan, Lee, was always a haven of love and support until, six days before Heaven's 19th birthday, she passed away after a long battle with cancer.

But even in adversity, Heaven has been able to find positives. She cared for her Nan – and an aunt – during her cancer and to do that well, she studied for a personal carer's certificate. She has since translated that to a job in aged care and is now a diversional therapist in a nursing home. In 2012 she went to Africa with an organisation called Reach Out Volunteers, building a crèche for displaced toddlers and, later, tracking and monitoring endangered animals.

"It was a life-changer for me," she says. "I know Nan would never have approved of me going, with all the talk about the dangers there, but I felt it was something I really needed to do to regain my confidence and independence after she passed away."

She had raised the funds to get there with help from the Mirabel Foundation, which has been a key part of her and her Nan's lives since she was 10. Mirabel, long supported by the Newsboys Foundation, was created in 1998 by drug counsellor Jane Rowe, who had been to too many funerals of drug users and seen too many of their children left behind.

It is the only organisation in Australia specifically addressing the needs of children who have been abandoned or orphaned due to their parents' drug use. At present it supports about 1300 such children – and the extended family members who have taken them in – and averages five new referrals every week.

"At its most simple, what Mirabel is about is providing a sense of love, belonging and hope to these children," explains Ms Rowe. "It doesn't matter what age you are, if you don't have those elements in your life you have nothing to build on."

"What we try to do is bring children together, take away the shame, make them realise they weren't the ones to blame. Even though we're working with kids from very complex backgrounds our work is to restore that sense of



connection and hope."

Another young person helped by Mirabel is Zach, who has lived with his Nan after being abandoned by his parents when he was 12 months old. His father, he says, "had commitment issues – he bugged off" and later his mother left him with his grandmother.

"Mum just dropped me off at Nan's," he explains. "It was only supposed to be for a few months until she straightened out ... but two months stretched out to a year and finally it turned out to be 16 years, as happens."

Zach is an intelligent and driven young man who values education and knowledge. He wrote many letters to get into the secondary college of his choice and is now a scholarship student at John Monash Science School. Mirabel has been important to both he and his grandmother he says.

"It's been important to know I'm not the only one, not the outlier," he explains. "At Mirabel it felt like everyone was in the same situation. Like finding your own group, where you find your own nation if you like, and you fit in."

Heaven agrees: "Mirabel provided me with a family," she says. "One of the best things about it is the consistency, most of the staff have been here for so many years and I've grown up with their support."

"And it's still been there even after I turned 18 and was no longer a Mirabel kid. I always have this family that I can reconnect with whenever I need support."

* A song by Trisha Yearwood
Link: www.mirabelfoundation.org.au