

I had

NO

CAREER

NO

SAVINGS

... LOOK

AT ME NOW

How an Adelaide business is helping women like Crystal Crossman, many of whom have risked falling through the cracks, get their lives back on track

Story SARAH HENDER



When Crystal Crossman's husband left the family home for work and never came back, she had no idea what she was going to do.

Other than odd jobs here and there, 43-year-old Crossman, of Enfield, had been out of the workforce since she was 17 caring for the couple's two young daughters while following her husband around the country as he chased work.

After so long, Crossman had what she thought were insurmountable barriers to finding a job. It wasn't the large gaps in her resume that were her biggest problem, however, it was her deep lack of self-confidence bred through years of putting her partner's needs first.

"When we first separated I was scared about the future," she says. "I was basically starting out as an 18-year-old. I had no career, no savings and two children. I needed to figure out how I was going to support myself and them for the long term."

As alone as she felt, Crossman, sadly, is not a rare case. She, and others like her, might have fallen through the cracks but for a woman named Sarah Gun who has made it her life's work to see that women like Crossman don't.

Twenty three years ago, when Gun was in her early 30s, she started her own event management business, GOGO Events.

Her only aim was to earn more than the \$20,000 annual salary she was making working for someone else. Twelve years on, she had more than achieved that goal but Gun was no longer interested in increasing sales.

She had grown uncomfortable with the fact that events took both resources and energy from their host city without giving anything back.

She decided that she would manage her events business differently so that both clients and suppliers could not only feel good about the event itself but when it was over they could feel good about what it had contributed to the community.

Gun's personal mission was to employ vulnerable women marginalised by their life's circumstances and unable to find work.

Gun has some insight into what life can feel like to a person who has been marginalised.

A family member has suffered ongoing mental health problems for most of his adult life, experiencing both unemployment and homelessness at times. She saw that, in his case, there wasn't a community around him that stepped up to support him back to a safe place.

In deciding on her new path for her business, Gun was driven to provide that safe space for others, focusing on vulnerable women facing barriers to employment.

To do that, she had to convince government and not-for-profit agencies assisting women at risk, that she could help by offering safe and suitable employment within her own events business. And, of course, she had to convince her clients, both new and current, that hiring these women for their events was going to be good for them, too.

Catherine Sayers, former CEO of Food SA, the state's peak body for the food and beverage industry, has always used GOGO Events for the



Left, Crystal Crossman, who discovered the Inclusive Work Program through a friend. Above, GOGO Events founder Sarah Gun. Pictures: Keryn Stevens, Matt Loxton

Premier's Food and Beverage Awards which is held every year.

When Gun first proposed that Food SA hire marginalised women to do this work, Sayers readily agreed.

"It felt good to make a small difference to their lives knowing that would be likely to lead to bigger things," Sayers says.

"It also felt good to be the first cab off the rank, giving Sarah the ability to show to others that it has been done before and successfully."

After several years of seeing the positive effect her work opportunities were having on these women, Gun wanted to make a more long-lasting impact.

In 2018, she set up the GOGO Foundation, the charitable part of her business so she could more effectively gather support to achieve this.

She fundraised for private donations and applied for government grants.

Gun raised enough funding from both private

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and corporate donors, followed by a grant of half a million dollars from the Federal Office for Women in 2021, to enable her vision to take shape. She put a team together to create and deliver a wrap-around program that would provide the skills needed by these women to gain safe and sustainable long-term employment, not just with GOGO Events and its collaborating partners, but in the wider community. She called this the Inclusive Work Program (IWP).

Crossman was told about the program by a friend. With nothing to lose, and everything to gain, she decided she'd give it a go. With her children relying on her, Crossman had to change her life, and fast.

"I was disappointed in myself. I had put all of my eggs in the forever basket and that basket had a big hole in it," she says.

"I was disappointed that I had never built anything independently and had become so reliant over time on my ex-husband."

Unsurprisingly, she was anxious at the start. By the end of day one, though, Crossman said she could already sense a change in herself. Working with a group of eight women, all facing complex barriers as she was and encouraged by Gun and the program manager, Tam Norris, Crossman began to believe that her life could change. "It was with their support and Sarah and Tam backing me that I thought, 'Oh wow I've got a shot here'," she says.

The best thing about the program for Crossman was the positive impact it had on her confidence.

The program doesn't just aim to help someone get a job, it is about fixing the whole picture, looking at all the parts of a person.

"I think they identified that confidence was an issue with me," says Crossman.

"Before the program, I had a 'fake it till you make it' attitude, a lot of false bravado to face the world," she says.

The program finds unique ways to build that confidence. Tree Climb is one such session, a challenging obstacle course set high in the tree tops. Amanda Park, of Salisbury Heights, was petrified. Gun, standing alongside her, was equally petrified.

"But", says Park, "she encouraged me to do it and I had to encourage her." They did it.

But once wasn't enough for Gun. "Come on," she said, "We're going to do it again." When Park asked why, the response was, "Because you need to!"

The wellness techniques taught as part of the program were what made the difference for Crossman. She had never meditated before but

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once she learnt how, she realised how helpful this was for her.

“Wellness was not about having false confidence anymore it was about having real confidence so you could walk into an interview really prepared in yourself,” says Crossman.

The GOGO team knows how essential it is for these women to build a strong sense of self-belief if they are to find safe, sustainable and suitable work.

Crossman didn’t feel she had any skills that she could mention in a resume but with help from a work immersion with GOGO Foundation’s partner Beyond Bank, she saw that as a stay-at-home mother, she had many useful skills such as budgeting, delegating and household management.

Suddenly, an empty resume looked closer to impressive. As others were believing in her, Crossman’s self-belief also grew.

Crossman finished the IWP on the Friday and by the Monday, she had a job with Beyond Bank as a relationship adviser. She was in disbelief. “I had zero technical skills and thought they’re going to figure out I can’t turn a computer on or off,” says Crossman.

“They told me they could teach me those but they can’t teach people skills which they say I’ve got in spades!”

A year later Crossman has been promoted to a lending role. So, how would she describe herself now? “The person I was before this was reactionary. I followed somebody else around and his hopes, dreams and goals dictated where I was,” she says. “Now I’m very proactive about my life, my plans and goals. I have savings in the bank.”

Crossman has recently returned from her first ever holiday with her daughters. She is proud of what she has achieved personally, professionally and financially. Her girls have never been happier. “They’re in a happy thriving nurturing environment now and I’m really proud of the example I have set for them,” she says. “I’m a world away from where I thought I would land.”

The self-belief that Crossman developed with the support of the GOGO team to get that first job and the financial stability she created for her family once she did, was a life lesson.

“What I learnt about myself is that I actually have excellent judgment. The mistake was that I trusted somebody else to steer my ship, but when I steer my own ship it sails beautifully. So that was a revelation.”



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Because of that example, Crossman’s daughter, 23, has now gone on to do the IWP herself. The impact of the program has become multigenerational, something Gun hoped for when she embarked on her mission for change.

The IWP aims to build pathways to employment but for these disadvantaged women, those pathways are often blocked.

More than half have suffered domestic violence. Most suffer poor mental health, are socially isolated and on average, report low scores for self-confidence.

As part of the program’s wrap-around approach, the teamwork helps to remove these barriers. On graduation, all the women reported an improvement in their wellbeing and felt more confident in their ability to get a job.

Amanda Park, 47, was struggling several years ago to keep on top of problems with her three autistic children, the youngest being non-verbal.

When it all got too much, her relationship broke down and she left her partner for several months, taking the children with her.

The government agency assisting her at the time suggested she apply for the IWP.

After sharing her family stress with the GOGO team, they put her in touch with an NDIS Support Coordinator, immediately easing the load on the family and Park and her partner reunited. It was only once home life improved,



More than half of the graduates of IWP, the program started by Sarah Gun, top, have suffered domestic violence. Above, Crystal Crossman now works at Beyond Bank and has just taken her first holiday with her daughters.

that Park could start thinking about joining the workforce.

She finished the program and is now working in aged care after 10 years unemployed. It is a job she has always wanted. Now she is hoping to study to further enhance her skills as a carer.

“I love it!” she says. “I love meeting the old people and hearing their stories. I can see myself doing this forever.”

The extra money has, also eased the family stress by helping to pay off their debts. “We actually had a Christmas last year!” says Park.

“We haven’t had a proper Christmas for 10 years with food and presents at home.”

Park and Crossman are two of the 35 graduates of the program so far. They and others in the IWP alumni enjoy staying connected with each other as well as with the GOGO team who remain available to them for ongoing advice and support.

For Park, discovering that one of the other participants also had a child with autism was comforting.

“She and I could talk to each other about what it has been like for us,” says Park. “We laughed, we had tears, we did everything together. I still see her.”

It is this community that GOGO is building, known as the IWP Plus, which Gun believes is likely to have the greatest impact of all.

The team ensures that there are regular gatherings to foster ongoing friendships and that sense of belonging that has become so important to these women.

Graduates with lived experience are a valued asset to the GOGO Foundation. It is powerfully motivating for new program participants to see that women like them can have a future. Equally, the process of sharing is a reminder to a graduate of how far they have come. Crossman was recently asked to speak to a new group of IWP participants.

“I told them that I was once sitting where they were, facing the same barriers and that if I could do it, they could too. It’s possible for anyone. You just need to believe in yourself.” Crossman recalls saying.

And it was as she spoke that it dawned on her ... “I had come full circle.” ■



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