

**FAST FACT** | Doncare opened in 1969 with a staff of just 22 volunteers.

# 'Angels' offer hope

Women living in fear of attack are shown it's not their fault

**Domestic violence** | Anna Prytz

MANNINGHAM'S volunteer "angels" are leading domestic violence survivors out of hell.

The Doncare Angels for Women Network provides mentors for abused women.

The program, which pairs participants for 12 months, has provided a lifeline for 42 women since starting in 2007.

DAWN co-ordinator Kristin Rogers said many "angels" had been domestic violence victims.

"It definitely encourages mutual growth. I think everybody learns something from it," Ms Rogers said.

Domestic Violence Victoria

chief executive Fiona McCormack said DAWN, the only program of its kind in Victoria, was doing important work.

"We would encourage Doncare to evaluate the Angels for Women Network so that others can learn from it and, if successful, adopt similar programs," Ms McCormack said.

Doncaster police family violence liaison officer Sgt Steven Pope applauded Doncare for being proactive about an issue that requires police to attend at least one incident a day in Manningham.

"Doncare has been very good at identifying the barriers that will prevent a woman from



DAWN facilitators Kristin Rogers, Susan Orr and Julie McDonald. N50DT301

leaving (an abusive relationship), such as lack of support," Sgt Pope said.

He said a referral system and police contribution to the program was planned.

## Victim finds way back after years of abuse

**Community** | Anna Prytz

BELINDA was a mess. A lifetime of abuse — starting with her parents and continuing with a succession of violent partners — had left her shattered and on the verge of a breakdown.

Then, eight years after fleeing a damaging relationship and living in frightened seclusion with her eight-year-old son, she found her way to Doncare.

That was when an angel, in the form of Jane Kuszla, came into her life.

"She saved my life, absolutely," Belinda, 35, said. "I was very isolated. I had no friends or social relationships and no hope for them because I was living in complete fear."

During weekly coffee dates, lunches and day trips with Ms Kuszla, a Donvale Angels for Women Network member, Belinda began to heal.

She learned to share her feelings and take steps to increase her self-confidence and community connections.

"It wasn't just one relationship, it was abusive parents and partners, so my whole life has been about people hurting me," Belinda said.

"So I'm just in awe and have to pinch myself that there's a place



Domestic violence survivor Belinda (right) with her "angel" Jane Kuszla (left).

Picture: MARK STEWART N49DT305

where people care about me." Ms Kuszla, of Blackburn, said the program replaced a cycle of hurt with a cycle of healing.

"I got involved because I was a victim and it's something that never leaves you," she said.

"I'm very passionate about being involved in the program because when you're in it, you feel there's someone to go to."

Belinda said the program had changed her life for the better. "It's made me see that the

treatment I was getting was not what I deserved," she said.

"And that has given me strength I didn't think I would ever have."

To contact Doncare, call 9841 4215 or go to doncare.org.au