

A GIRL'S *best friend*

WORDS KATE DAVIES PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED

At a time when sexting, bullying and body image rule the world of teenage girls, it's nice to know there are people there for support. They are beautiful people with beautiful minds, as Kate Davies discovers.



MARINA PASSALARIS

It's 3am on a Tuesday morning on the Sunshine Coast. Marina Passalaris's alarm has chimed her awake as she shrugs herself out of bed, gets dressed in long pants, a jumper and a scarf – even though it is already 26 degrees – and drives the short distance to work.

Here, in a large white factory, Marina robotically spends the next four freezing hours piping a slick creamy liquid into tubs, secretly working at a yoghurt factory to pay rent, buy food and feverishly save to start a company and help save the innocence of teenage girls lost in a world of self-doubt.

Nine years on and this company, amiably called Beautiful Minds, is reaching an international audience and changing the lives of thousands of teenage girls every year through school programs, seminars and major Australia-wide events.

"If I look back nine years ago I probably wouldn't recognise myself. I would never have thought what could be achieved and I never imagined I could reach out to so many young girls and give them the support they need. But hey, I did!" says Marina, like an Energiser bunny about to explode with pride.

I had phoned Marina a few days earlier to set up the interview. Her hysterically happy reaction was priceless, much as her enthusiasm on the day of the interview, and it had me thinking about her work as the Beautiful Minds founder, director and mentor.

*"Beautiful Minds was a
FORWARD THINKING
move; no one was doing
it at the time."*

Watching first-hand how the pressures of society and social media have an effect on young girls must be difficult to say the least. But the empowerment of making a difference and guiding the way to a healthier, happier teenhood has to be so rewarding, hence her enthusiasm. Saying that, Marina deserves every ounce of her success so far – after all, she has worked harder than most to achieve it.

"I spent a good part of 14 years working in some of the top modelling agencies around the world, in South Africa, Germany and London, and obviously in Australia," she says. "I worked as a make-up artist and I also used to train all the models in the grooming and department department.

"A lot of models would come to me as a mentor and talk about some of the issues they were facing, whether that was the eating disorders, issues with boyfriends or the weight and the dieting. It had me thinking for a very long time that we needed

to educate these girls on who they were as individuals so they would feel secure about who they were.

"So I went to the casting agency owner that I was working for at the time and I pitched this idea to her and she simply said, 'I think this is a really stupid idea, it doesn't have a place in the modelling world. I don't care what the models are thinking or feeling, I just have to make sure they look amazing on the outside for the jobs,'" Marina explained, still incensed by her former employer's ignorance.