

On paper, Glenda Fisher and Cassandra Yam don't look like they'd have much in common.

Glenda (MEd 2005), 65, has spent her life in education, principally helping school students with disabilities. Cassie, 20, a third-year Bachelor of Commerce student, is headed for a career in accounting. But after being paired through the University's Access Connections Mentoring Program, the two women have formed a strong bond that benefits them both. They tell Val McFarlane about their relationship.

GLENDA

My experience has been very different to Cassie's. I completed my initial teaching qualifications in Special Education at Melbourne University in 1969. When I described what my days were like back then to Cassie – rolls marked, Wednesday afternoon sport, halls of residence living – she said it was like being back in school, and it was. I've been a professional educator for 48 years and currently work for the Catholic Education Office, helping senior school students with diverse needs to transfer from school into further education, training or work. I enjoy working with young people and seeing them succeed. Mentoring is another opportunity to do that. Cassie and I just clicked. One of her biggest challenges was to get herself an internship. She would get interviews but not succeed in being offered a position which was really disappointing for her. I asked her to send me her resume, write down the sort of questions she'd been asked and what her responses were so that I could see if there was an area where she wasn't making an impact. Cassie is such a delightful young woman but quite shy. She shied away from shining the spotlight

on herself and was reluctant to emphasise her considerable talents.

I helped her with her resume and through my connections at the Graduate Union, set up a mock interview panel for her, with myself and two colleagues who are experts in accountancy, which Cassie is studying.

We interviewed her for an hour and a half – she really had a tough time of it! We taught her not to be afraid to take time to consider what to say and how to answer questions effectively.

As she was leaving she said she had an interview at a major accountancy firm the next morning. We were delighted when we got an email later in the day saying that she'd been offered a position.

It doesn't matter that we're in different fields. Mentoring is about teaching the students how to look for and acknowledge what isn't working for them and give them the skills to change that and move forward, as a complement to their academic learning.

I've found being a part of this program very rewarding and I would do it again. It has been an absolute joy meeting and working with Cassie. She wanted to learn and that made my job 10 times easier. We'll keep in touch. I'll be interested to follow her career.

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CASSIE

I had always heard people saying that mentors were really important and they could help you so much but I didn't know what to expect when I signed up for the program.

Glenda and I emailed first to arrange a meet-up. I was pretty nervous because I didn't know what I was expected to do or what would happen. I thought that I would feel really intimidated because it was someone who was so much more experienced than me.

But when I met Glenda, straight away she was so friendly and so helpful and caring. Even though she's achieved so much and had so much experience, she was still so willing to help.

It was at the time when I was applying for internships and I was feeling a bit lost. In previous interviews I was just such a mess. I didn't know what to do, and I was so nervous all the time. I would know what I wanted to get across but I didn't know how to express it and remain calm and collected.

I was taken aback when Glenda organised the mock interview but it helped me so much. The panel went through general interview questions and gave me feedback after each one. They also gave me tips about business etiquette and how to act in an interview – talk slowly, think through

your answer before you say it, don't feel you need to rush ... It really helped with my confidence.

It just so happened that I had an interview for an internship the morning after. It was impeccable timing. I felt so much better and more prepared. I just made sure to remember what Glenda and her colleagues had told me. I guess it worked because I was successful and I got the internship.

When I first started at Melbourne the idea of going from uni to full-time work seemed really overwhelming. I was worried about how you go from studying accounting to actually doing it. But through my conversations with Glenda I learned that no one expects you to know everything right away.

This semester I've been on exchange at Boston College in the US, where I'm studying Chinese as well as finance. I always assumed I'd just go straight down the accounting path, but the more I learn about how many different options there are after uni, the more I'm thinking I don't know where I'll end up. But I'm looking forward to starting my internship at the end of the year. I hope Glenda and I will keep in touch. I'm so grateful to have been able to meet her, let alone have her as my mentor. It's been amazing.