

In PRIVATE

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BIG VOICE, BIG DREAM

*Tania de Jong is a
soprano and a social
entrepreneur who wants
to give all Australians
— new and old
— a voice.*



A soprano's voice rings out from the photographic studio in North Melbourne where Tania de Jong is in the middle of a photo shoot for *In Private*.

The performer and social entrepreneur, who is focused on helping others find their voice, is having no trouble finding her own despite the unfamiliar surrounds.

It probably shouldn't come as a surprise; de Jong always harboured dreams of becoming a singer (despite her best friend telling her at 14 that she shouldn't bother). Her entrepreneurial streak was revealed early, too, as she charged her parents a five-cent admission fee for the pleasure of watching their offspring put on magic shows in the family home.

Hard work was drummed into de Jong by the very same parents who, she says, came to Australia with nothing as Holocaust survivors. "A lot of artists live in a world where they expect to get grants and be funded. I never expected that," she says.

It's served her well during the years as de Jong has been able to make a living from her art – something many performers fail to do. Twenty-three years ago she formed her group, Pot-Pourri, which has regularly toured overseas, released six CDs and is still going today. Pot-Pourri then morphed into an agency, Music Theatre Australia. "Now we have 2,000 performers, speakers and groups on our books, who perform at events around Australia and overseas," she says.

"Performers need to think of their profession as a business. Often performers are told they're very talented and they're going to make it big, and it builds in them a sense of 'I don't have to work for this'. I think performers have to understand how to market themselves, how to network and how to run the financial side of their business because it is a business."

de Jong gets help with her personal finances these days, freely admitting to making some "stupid" decisions in the past. "I've done things like buy speculative shares," she says. "I'm better off with my professional advisors because I get persuaded too easily. I don't have enough time or knowledge about wealth management so I need professional help."

However, de Jong doesn't just sing for her own supper. She became interested in social entrepreneurialism after performing for Dame Elisabeth Murdoch and meeting other philanthropists.

"Pot-Pourri decided to donate a certain number of performances each year and we continue to do that," she says. "But then I started to realise how little access some people had to the things we take for granted."

Her first foray into the field was to set up The Song Room, a not-for-profit (NFP) organisation that provides children with access to music and the arts. The Song Room has since gone national, with its programs being rolled out in disadvantaged and high-need communities around Australia and reaching more than 250,000 students.

Borne out of The Song Room were newer ventures Creativity Australia and Creative Universe. The aim of these NFPs is to maximise potential in organisations and enhance wellbeing, social inclusion, innovation and productivity. They do this through creative leadership programs, community choirs, keynote speeches and Creative Innovation conferences.

"I like the idea of social innovation, of finding a gap, dealing with an issue we're facing at a community to global level and then working out how to solve it," de Jong says. "The current challenge I'm dealing with is around population growth. As the country grows, it becomes more important than ever to build social capital, not just bricks and mortar, to connect people and to give them a voice."

de Jong believes every person has a unique voice to offer the world, "and I don't mean their singing voice". She continues: "If we can help

people to unlock more of their own voice, we can unlock their potential and their sense of self worth, and they can make more of a contribution to work and to life."

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There are many examples of how this approach works. de Jong talks about Nathalie, a woman from Cameroon who went through Creativity Australia's With One Voice program and the Brotherhood of St Laurence's course for migrants and gained the confidence to get a job with ANZ.

"Catherine McDowell, the head of ANZ Private, was so impressed that she met with Nathalie to lend her support and coach her to gain a more permanent role with ANZ. Now instead of working in a call centre, Nathalie is in an accounting role," de Jong says.

She may only be one woman with one voice, and a powerful one at that, but de Jong is building a figurative national choir, one that's loudly singing a tune of inclusivity and equality.