

Raise your voice – and your spirit

by EILEEN WOOD

SINGING is the language of the heart. For centuries it has played a key role in community, culture and storytelling. Yet how many people dare sing freely these days, except in the shower?

Every week Creativity Australia's 13 With One Voice choirs inspire people from more than 40 nationalities, aged nine to more than 90, to sing side by side. Age, race, language, religion, disability and disadvantage fade away, and all that's left is the joy of music and the melding of voices.

Voices like that of 79-year-old Imelda Hsieh, of Melbourne, who sings with the Melbourne and Heidelberg Creativity Australia Choirs as well as with a gospel choir.

Imelda came to the choir after she heard soprano Tania de Jong, who launched Creativity Australia in 2008, singing a Chinese song for a Chinese News Year Ball.

She offered to help Tania with some of the Chinese pronunciation and a relationship was born.

"I didn't think I was good enough to join the choir; but I was assured you didn't have to know how to sing – just to want to," Imelda said. "Now I have met lots of new friends of all ages.

"The conductor is so nice and patient and is happy to teach us to sing.

"Singing is so good for older people. You have to use your memory to remember the songs and the breathing is good for your heart and lungs.

"It makes me very happy and you sleep so well afterwards.

"We have lots of younger members and they all treat me with a lot of respect."

It took Ashburton Community Choir member John van Delft, 72, more than 60 years to realise he



INSPIRATIONAL – Creativity Australia choir member Imelda Hsieh.

had a singing voice.

"From the age of 10, I was told I couldn't sing; and then my wife Philomena dragged me along to the choir and they showed me I could," he said.

"We get the satisfaction of singing and the friendships which come from mixing with people from all sorts of backgrounds."

Creativity Australia's founder Tania de Jong is enthusiastic about the benefits of community singing.

"It empowers voices that have been silenced, unleashes creative potential... and that's just the start," she said.

"For some choir is a way to de-stress after work; for others it's a first glimpse into Australian life after arriving here as a migrant, asylum seeker or refugee; and for others it is an opportunity to connect to networks, skills and employment.

"It's all about joy, freedom and inspiration."

As well as singing, Creativity Australia's choirs help members make connec-

tions in the community.

Participants grant wishes for one another – like free music lessons, CV writing, connections to jobs, help with learning English and help setting up a blog to share stories of homeless people in the Sydney CBD.

The networks and friendships developed have led to more than 80 job opportunities and the program has helped more than 150 members with access to services in relation to physical and mental health.

A not-for-profit organisation, Creativity Australia has been recognised in Anthill's Smart 100 as one of Australia's top social innovations.

It recently joined with Victorian not-for-profit aged care provider Benetas to create the Altona Meadows Sings Choir, and plans to create many more in communities across Australia, starting with Brisbane and more in Sydney this year.

■ Creativity Australia, 8679-6088, www.creativityaustralia.org.au