



Tania de Jong

Home Melbourne, Vic

Why she's an action figure

In 1999, de Jong founded The Song Room, a non-profit organisation that introduces music and the arts to disadvantaged Australian students.

Her day job

An opera singer with vocal group, Pot-Pourri, and artistic director of Music Theatre Australia.

SING ALONG

Help out The Song Room and disadvantaged children by donating funds or things like second-hand instruments, venues, transport and accommodation. Visit songroom.org.au for more information.

BE A SECRET SANTA

The Kmart Wishing Tree Appeal has collected more than three million gifts for needy children over the past 18 years. Drop a pressie off at your local store between mid-November and Christmas Eve.

GIVE YOUR TIME

The Australian Children's Music Foundation – which also brings music to underprivileged kids – is looking for teachers and volunteers. Go to acmf.com.au or call (02) 9929 0008 to find out more.

Sing star

Tania de Jong is turning young lives around – for a song

Why we admire her

Ten years ago, renowned soprano Tania de Jong was singing her way around the world with her group, Pot-Pourri. One day, they donated a gig to a public primary school where the kids had never witnessed a live performance.

"They were bowled over and the principal was so grateful," says de Jong. "That's when I realised some schools can't afford or don't realise the value of music programs; they have bigger issues." Her concerns were verified when a study revealed only 23 per cent of public schools had access to music. De Jong decided to create The Song Room, a non-profit organisation that now employs about 70 teaching artists to implement music programs in underprivileged Australian schools.

How she did it

"I was performing with Pot-Pourri at Dame Elisabeth Murdoch's 90th birthday and her son-in-law, John Calvert-Jones, asked me what I felt was the worst community issue. I said there were many disenfranchised youths and lots of kids didn't have access to music at school." Calvert-Jones suggested

de Jong form a charity and he and Dame Murdoch donated \$10,000. The Song Room was born.

"First, The Song Room put on a big performance at Melbourne Town Hall for a whole lot of disadvantaged schools – today the schools actually do song and instrumental shows there together." The Song Room is now backed by philanthropic foundations and trusts, private and corporate donations, special events and government funding.

What she's accomplished

The Song Room has reached 100,000 kids since 1999, and de Jong earned the 2006 Ernst & Young National Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award. She's also on the board of the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse. But the biggest rewards don't come with a title.

"When all the kids are singing together, I get goose bumps. Seeing the diverse faces and backgrounds makes you realise music is a universal language with the power to transform," she says.

"We hear stories about troublesome kids who aren't achieving at school and through The Song Room, some become model students. That's so rewarding."

The future

In 2008, The Song Room will launch a research project with the NSW Attorney General's department and the University of Melbourne and to measure the outcomes of music programs on disadvantaged kids. And de Jong would like to teach the world – not just kids – to sing. "Everyone can sing; everyone can beat a drum." Music, she says, brings people together. **WH**