CASE STUDY: OPERA AUSTRALIA

Opera Australia has one of the longest established development programs among Australian performing arts companies. It comprises corporate sponsorship opportunities; the Opera Friends membership group; and fundraising from individuals via the Patrons Program and the Opera Australia Capital Fund (essentially a bequest program).

The company is proud that it has a number of donors who started giving in 1979 and who continue to be active supporters today, some 25 years later. Such donor loyalty is not accidental; it is the result of careful on-going stewardship. Greeba Pritchard, Patron Manager at Opera Australia, stresses that high quality relationship management has been of the utmost importance to the company's fundraising success over the years.

Patrons are invited to join the Opera Club, which provides invitations to special events, dress rehearsal tickets and personal service from the Patron Manager to assist with other requests. Like many other non-profit organisations that offer such a service to donors above a certain threshold, the company's experience is that those who give at the entry level tend to expect most in return and have more of a 'quid-pro-quo' approach to the relationship than top donors who are more likely to be genuinely philanthropic in their motivation.

One of Opera Australia's leading donors, Mr Fred Street AM, is an outstanding example of a philanthropist motivated by a wish to make a difference. Mr Street has been the driving force behind "OperaEd", an education program that aims to make opera accessible to secondary students from under-privileged areas. He is the sole financial backer of this initiative.

Born in Vienna and raised in South Africa, Mr Street settled in Australia in 1979 and established a successful stationery supply business. He and his wife Dorothy Street are patrons of the opera and the arts. They believe in philanthropy as a civic responsibility for those who are able to give something back to their community. Mr Street is an advocate for private philanthropy in the media and practices what he preaches through generous support for a number of causes, particularly in the arts.

OperaEd was essentially Mr Street's idea. He approached Opera Australia in 1999 with the suggestion to set up a program that would introduce young people to classical music and opera in particular and promised to fund it if something suitable could be developed. The suggestion fitted with Opera Australia's commitment to 'develop and encourage new audiences' – part of the company's mission. CEO Mr Adrian Collette and music educator Ms Victoria Watson were critical to subsequent negotiations with Mr Street and the development of the program parameters.

OperaEd gives high school students unlikely to be exposed to opera an opportunity to attend an Opera Australia performance at the Sydney Opera House after a prior workshop and project activities at their school and a day spent looking behind the scenes at the Opera Centre and observing the logistics of staging an opera.

Between 2000 when OperaEd was first launched and 2004, the program was offered 15 times involving 900 students from 42 schools in the Sydney metropolitan area.

Participation of schools is by invitation. At least four schools are each asked to nominate 15 students from years 9, 10 and 11 to participate, and parents have to approve the students' involvement in the program. The OperaEd Project Director meets with teachers at each school, provides notes and resources, and later conducts a workshop with both students and teachers about the opera under review. On the project day, students and teachers from all participating schools are bussed to the Opera Centre. They go on a behind-the-scenes tour of workshops and rehearsal rooms, and get a chance to perform themselves for their fellow students. Later in the afternoon, they participate in a workshop at the Opera House about the opera they have been studying, watch the "bump in" for the

evening's performance, and after dinner take their A-Reserve seats to see the performance. They are then taken back to their schools by bus and met by their parents. An evaluation session is held a few days later with the OperaEd Project Director, students and teachers.

Mr and Mrs Street usually see the opera together with the students, and have also been present at some of the afternoon workshops at the Opera House, or the evaluations afterwards.

The program clearly offers a deeply enriching experience for all involved.

Students' reflections about OperaEd include '*I would rather be an opera singer than a pansy pop star*!'; '*I did not read the surtitles – I understood it all through the music and emotion*' and '*I would not have seen an opera if it wasn't for Mr Street*.'

Teachers have commented on the enjoyment of hearing a student whistle a tune from the opera on the bus going home, and one teacher simply wrote: "*It was the best school excursion I have ever been on in 23 years of teaching*."

Opera Australia believes that the program has improved the company's performance in the field of opera education.

Mr Street has said that "*to open the eyes of young people to a window of the world they never knew existed is a great joy*" (AFR Magazine, March 2000). It is the benefactor's way of expressing that giving – to the right cause and in the context of the right relationship – meets his needs as much as it helps Opera Australia's needs for financial support.

Mr Street and the OperaEd case study powerfully illustrate that in a true philanthropy partnership, value is created for all parties. It was a case of a donor-led major gift initiative, which through discussion with the most senior company leadership has resulted in a highly creative new program that meets company objectives, the donor's interests and wishes – and provides a fantastic opportunity for the young people who participate, who may become part of opera's audience of the future.

It is an inspirational story. The performing arts in Australia need more Mr Streets. There is little doubt that they are out there. The challenge for performing arts companies is to find them, connect with them, and develop a relationship that builds confidence, inspires and excites. Whether a company asks for that big gift or whether it is offered before the ask – companies need development operations, staff and systems that will allow them to respond as effectively as Opera Australia worked with Mr Street when taking up his offer.

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