



Caroline de Mori runs her own successful public relations company in West Perth, but spends half her time helping struggling Aboriginals who are out of sight and out of mind in boom-obsessed Western Australia. Why? She explains to **Mark Irving**.

Picture: Lee Griffith



"I have no answers," Caroline de Mori stresses. "I have no expertise in Aboriginal affairs. I don't know who's right and who's wrong . . . and I don't care."

But de Mori does care deeply about improving the health and wellbeing of young indigenous Australians who live in remote communities. These are Australians who are remote geographically from mainstream Australia and, for the most part, remote from our daily thoughts.

"We all worry about the kids on scrap heaps in Bangladesh," de Mori points out. "If you look at the statistics, these Aboriginal children's life expectancy and health and wellbeing statistics are worse than those children."

While she professes not to have any expertise or solutions, de Mori is working hard to make a difference and not by simply writing a cheque to assuage a middle-class conscience. She has set up a charity to improve the health of indigenous West Australians

and to create more opportunities for them by lending a hand, not giving a handout. Granted charitable status last year, it's called the EON Foundation.

EON?

It's an acronym, she explains, for Edge of Nowhere. A sort of play on Western Australia's geographical remoteness.

Edge of nowhere, perhaps, but many have fared well off this largely barren and unpopulated State and de Mori readily acknowledges she is one.

"I think we are incredibly affluent," she states. "We're very well off, have a beautiful environment, beautiful climate, everybody's busy making lots of money . . . but I think there's a risk during those times that these sort of community social aspects of our life somehow get put on the backburner. I think there's a wonderful opportunity in the business community to think about what they're contributing to the community."

De Mori is a former journalist with The West Australian, a one-time publicist

with Channel Nine, author of three books on WA history and a mother of four. She says a community-minded spirit was inculcated in her during childhood. "I believe very strongly that you have an obligation to use the skills and talents that you have as best you can and I think you have an obligation to contribute to a society or a community which, to be quite frank, for most of us, has been so good to us. I mean, Western Australia, what the hell are you going to whinge about? What have you got to whinge about?"

As she warms to her theme, her passion emerges in some straight talking: "I've got four wonderful children who've had all the benefits of a roof over their heads and three meals a day and a good education, and they're all flying. And you've got these beautiful, beautiful (Aboriginal) children — born in the same country — who, through no fault of their own, they're f...d. And how can we sit around and watch that? It just breaks my heart. It's appalling."

We're talking in the office from where de Mori runs her successful public relations business. It's in West Perth, that honeycomb of junior miners and associated companies, law firms and accountants, all busily creating or feeding off the resources boom that is fuelling the nation's economy. This is where de Mori networks, where colleagues and clients are based. Where her husband, Charlie Morgan, is an entrepreneur involved in mining and resources, and two close friends are local lawyers/businesswomen — all of whom are involved with the EON Foundation.

"Our network is very much entrepreneurial-spirited West Australians who are enjoying the fruits of this economic boom that we're going through," she says.



It's these people she and the other EON directors tap on the shoulder to fund programs.

EON examines anything that might improve the health and wellbeing of a community, with a particular focus on children. EON is working with six communities in the Kimberley and another in Katanning.

"We partner with Aboriginal people or other experts who know what they're doing and who have good relations with Aboriginal communities," she says. "We can provide financial, in-kind, mentoring ... we're really backing people to implement programs that we believe are innovative, tailor-made and have the support of the people they're supposed to benefit.

"We say, 'We like the look of this. How much is it going to cost?' Then we go to our friends and say, 'Will you help us?' Between us, we probably know just about everybody in the business community — particularly the small entrepreneurs and junior miners in West Perth."

De Mori says her interest in indigenous issues evolved over many years, her consciousness raised through her work with mining companies which brought her face to face with indigenous issues and some of the problems Aboriginals faced. "And also an awareness that there are some fantastic Aboriginal people doing fantastic things which, of course, one never tends to see or hear about," she adds.

"And then, this growing awareness of what an appalling scandal it was that, in general terms, their health and wellbeing is worse than the poorest Third World country.

"There's always going to be people who fall off somewhere along the way and there is an opportunity for people to make a difference, and contribute and think

about what they need to give back. We're all sucking the living daylight out of this environment in which we're living and this boom that we're living through, but how much money do you need, really?"

She started to talk to people and find out where she could contribute and discovered a lot of her colleagues were feeling the same way: they wanted to help, but didn't know what they could do or how to go about it.

She spoke to a lot of groups and discovered a lot of academic research was being conducted into indigenous affairs, a lot of government programs conducted and a lot of money being spent. "But there seemed to be a gap in terms of the private sector being involved specifically to assist the health and wellbeing of the indigenous population at a very grassroots level," she continues. "Like, let's do a breakfast program and give the kids breakfast."

This, de Mori decided, was where she and others in the private sector could make a contribution. A chance conversation in Broome alerted her to a principal doing "great things" at the Djarindjin-Lombadina Catholic School on the Dampier Peninsula, near Broome. Contact was made and EON started financing a breakfast program to ensure the kids got a healthy start to each day.

The drawcard used was access to Xboxes. These games lured the kids to school early and, once there, they were provided with a healthy breakfast. "You're covering so many bases," says de Mori. "You're giving them something good to eat, so they're getting nutrition. You're attracting them because they're hungry. You've got them there, so the chances are they'll stay there and learn something and they've got a full belly, so they'll be able to concentrate and not fall asleep."



Involvement with the small school (it has about 90 students from kindergarten to Year 10) continues. Another program will establish an edible garden to grow fresh vegetables and tucker for the community. One of the issues in remote communities is the appalling incidence of Type 2 diabetes, says de Mori. It's a lifestyle disease, and the result of poor diet and overweight.

But then supplying fresh fruit and vegies to a remote community is both expensive and hazardous. There's the freight costs. And if the generator packs in, the fresh and chilled food goes off. "There are all sorts of reason why it's expensive, but you can pay \$70 for a tray of apples that has probably been sitting in a cold room in Broome for six months — it's just ridiculous. But in many areas, they have great soil and water."

So the plan is to create a school garden of about 20m by 25m where fruit trees, vegetables and bush tucker can be grown. EON is funding the plan, which is being designed by West Weekend Magazine gardening columnist Sabrina Hahn, for three years and it is hoped the idea can be rolled out to other communities.

Involvement with Ernie Bridge continues, too. The former State Labor minister has established his own charity, the Unity of the First People of Australia, which runs a program to tackle diabetes among indigenous Australians. EON has dovetailed its work to help UFPA's mission.

Working with Bridge also allows EON to fulfil another of its underlying tenets that de Mori sees as paramount to the success of its work: a partnership with the communities they want to help. "We don't just hand over the money. We partner with people,

undertake our own little version of due diligence and back people to implement programs we believe are innovative, tailor-made and have the support of the people."

One of the reasons some government programs fail, says de Mori, is because they're imposed on communities. EON uses the methodology of discussing ideas with the elders and community and not implementing it until they give the agreement. "You can't impose things on people. You need the community 'buy-in' and a partnership so ultimately, they own it and run it. You help them to set it up and ultimately, it is sustainable and gives them a sense of ownership."

It's the idea that if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish and you feed him for life.

De Mori accepts change is not going to come quickly. Ten to 15 years is the time frame she envisages. "We're here for the long haul. It's no point giving somebody a cheque and three months later, the money runs out."

When pressed, de Mori says she puts as much time into EON as she does running her business. I ask her why she does it. "Because it gives me enormous satisfaction," she replies. "I get an enormous satisfaction and pleasure out of it."

"I've raised and educated my four children, I'm not going to go hungry. And if there was a choice to be made, I would do this. At this stage of my life, I think this is a much better spend of my time and energy, quite frankly."

Her voice lowers as if she's somehow admitting to some guilty pleasure. "It's a lot more satisfying than, you know, my day job, to be perfectly frank — a LOT more satisfying." 