

Iris Circle Bequest Society: Thank you event Melbourne 2025

Taking journeys and making memories

We had a lovely event at the Kooyong Lawn Tennis Club on Wednesday, May 14. Whilst violins played, the autumn sunshine made for a perfect day overlooking the tennis courts. We welcomed our wonderful supporters and guests, some of whom had travelled from distant places including Stawell, Benalla, Bendigo and Geelong, and celebrated and thanked those who have generously included Vision Australia and/or Seeing Eye Dogs in their Will.

With tails wagging and plenty of cuddles, Seeing Eye Dog puppies Rye, Cuba, Wasabi, Louie, Vera and Petra lit up the morning – thanks to our amazing volunteer puppy carers. Seeing Eye Dog breeder Makayla was there too keeping an eye on the puppies! We were also joined by Seeing Eye Dogs Kevy, Eva and Bonnie, whose calm focus reminded us of the incredible work they do every day.



Gathering in gratitude: A celebration of generosity

Our MC, Ian Finlayson, General Manager of Fundraising and Marketing, warmly welcomed everyone, outlining the theme of the day, Taking journeys and making memories. He acknowledged the traditional owners of the land, then thoughtfully described the venue for guests with blindness and low vision.

Ian expressed heartfelt gratitude to everyone who had chosen to include a gift in their Will, acknowledging their enduring legacy. Ian thanked the Kooyong Lawn Tennis Club for their warm hospitality and then introduced violinists Jennifer Occleshaw, a music teacher and Vision Australia supporter and her student Zahra, a Year 10 violinist from Korowa Girls' School, who was accompanied by her mother, Amanda. With a smile, Ian joked, "Zahra's probably enjoying her half day off school – and what better way to spend it than performing for such a lovely crowd!"

Ian closed by paying tribute to Nelson Ruffatt, our former pianist, who passed away in February. Nelson was a gifted musician who brought much joy to many Iris Circle events and will be missed.



A future made possible: Celebrating the power of giving



Next, Justine Heath Acting CEO shared Vision Australia's future direction, warmly thanking donors for their continued support. "Every life changed is thanks to you," she said, emphasising the vital role of philanthropy in helping us reach and support more people in our community.

Justine then introduced Trevor and Angela, some of our newest Iris Circle members. As Nigel Mapes, National Manager Gifts in Wills, and Helen Canny, Gifts in Wills Officer, presented them with their certificates of appreciation, lapel pins and keyrings, the room cheerfully applauded to celebrate their generosity.

Justine announced several exciting initiatives, including the expansion of the Seeing Eye Dogs youth program, increased investment in the electric wheelchair mobility program and the streamlined onboarding process for new clients. She proudly told of the incoming Australian design rule from November 2025 requiring new electric, hybrid and hydrogen fuel cell cars, trucks and buses to be fitted with an acoustic vehicle alerting system from November 2025 and how it was due to the efforts of one of our guest speakers today, Chris Edwards.

Living boldly: Chris's journey of adventure and advocacy



Ian thanked Justine and introduced Chris Edwards, General Manager of Corporate Affairs and Advocacy. "With this year's theme of Taking journeys and making memories, Chris, an avid traveller and passionate advocate for our community, is the perfect speaker," Ian said. Chris was joined by his beautiful Seeing Eye Dog, Eva, with his proud mum, Pat, watching on from the audience.

With a broad smile, Chris invited the audience to close their eyes and imagine sitting on a chairlift, then speeding down a mountain at 70km per hour. "For most, that sounds daunting, but I look forward to it every year." His adventures have taken him skiing across Australia, Switzerland, Japan, Aspen and Colorado, and sailing in the Whitsundays, Portarlington and Apollo Bay. "Travel opens doors," he said. "It builds confidence and shows blindness does not limit what you can do."

Diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa at ten, Chris never let vision loss hold him back. "My parents made sure I didn't skip sports or chores," he laughed. At 18, he and a friend travelled across the US from LA to Chicago in a Kombi van. "I faced tricky situations but got through them with confidence and having a great friend."

Beyond his adventures, Chris is involved in many social change and advocacy programs, including improving access to taxis and rideshares for all dog guide handlers. As he said, "Everyone deserves to get around safely and independently."

The audience was captivated by Chris's inspiring life story and great sense of humour, while his Seeing Eye Dog Eva sat calmly by his side. Ian closed the session by presenting Chris with a framed brailled map of Aspen, thoughtfully created by the transcription team, which he accepted with a smile. Ian then invited everyone to enjoy the much-anticipated lunch.



Travelling with heart: Linda and Seeing Eye Dog Kevy's story



After lunch, Ian introduced Linda Blaik, saying, "Many of you will remember Linda from our autumn appeal with her Seeing Eye Dog Kevy. She's an enthusiastic traveller, especially fond of New York, and volunteers for causes close to her heart." Linda joined senior mobility instructor Justin Marshall for a relaxed Q&A chat.

Justin began, "Linda, can you tell us about your connection with Vision Australia and Seeing Eye Dogs?"

Smiling, Linda replied, "I'm one of five kids and three of us inherited RP. I started losing my sight at seven and went to the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind. That's where it all began. I've stayed connected ever since and now volunteer at the Seeing Eye Dog kennels in Kensington. It really feels like a second family."

When asked why a blind person would travel, Linda's face lit up. "I travel to feel the energy, hear the sounds, smell the food, and meet people. New York was a dream come true – I'd always wanted to go. A friend came with me and described everything. We shopped at Tiffany's, visited Times Square, and strolled through Central Park. It was amazing. I'd go back in a heartbeat. Ireland's next."

Justin then asked about the biggest difference Seeing Eye Dog Kevy has made in her life.

"I've had Kevy for 18 months, and he's changed my life completely. I'm a big Collingwood fan and volunteer at the club, and everyone knows him there. On game days getting to the MCG from Geelong can be tricky, but Kevy handles it calmly and guides me right to my seat. People at my retirement village love him too – he's got a great nature and has a soft spot for the ladies!"

She finished by saying, "I'm lucky to be able to travel, have a loving husband and family, and go everywhere with Kevy. Thanks to Vision Australia and Seeing Eye Dogs and to all of you here for your kindness and generosity and helping me to live the life I choose."

The audience responded enthusiastically as Seeing Eye Dog Kevy sat quietly by her side. Ian thanked Justin and presented Linda with a framed brailled map of Manhattan, which she accepted with a beaming smile. "Thank you. This means a lot."

Behind the scenes: The power of accessible information

Following Justin and Linda's Q&A session, Ian shared a short video about Vision Australia's transcription service, based at our Parramatta office. The service began in 2000 and now includes 17 staff and 15 volunteers. They create a wide range of accessible formats like braille, large print, audio, tactile graphics and even 3D printing, supporting individuals, schools, government and other organisations from across Australia.

As well as books and important documents, they also produce other forms of information such as the beautiful maps and music scores that were on each table and that were also presented as gifts to the presenters and performers

Jane Wegener, our production manager, explained how this vital work helps people stay independent and connected. She emphasised that it simply wouldn't be possible without the generous support of our donors.

We closed then with another wonderful violin duet performance by Jennifer Occleshaw and her student Zahra playing.



Closing with gratitude and hope

Ian wrapped up the afternoon by thanking everyone who attended and acknowledging the efforts of the Vision Australia staff and volunteers. He offered a special mention to the Gifts in Wills team, saying, "Nigel, Helen and Litsa – another fantastic event." With a warm smile and wave, he added, "Take care, travel safe – we hope to see you next year!"

And a final word from Nigel, Litsa and Helen to all our lovely supporters.

Thank you for all you do to enable Vision Australia to fulfil its mission, which is to support people who are blind or have low vision to live the life they choose.

