

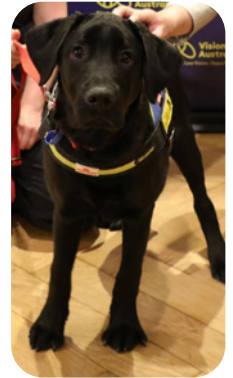
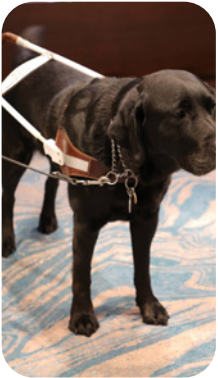
Iris Circle Bequest Society: Thank you event Sydney 2025

Taking journeys and making memories

We held an amazing event at the Four Seasons Hotel on Thursday, June 5. The autumn sunshine made for a perfect day as we welcomed our wonderful supporters and guests. Some had come a long way to celebrate those who have generously included Vision Australia and/or Seeing Eye Dogs in their Will.

With tails wagging and plenty of cuddles, we were joined by several incredible working Seeing Eye Dogs, along with our gorgeous puppy-in-training, Pablo, and his handler, Jess.

One guest said with a smile, "I'm just so thrilled to be here. It's such a special event, and I'm really looking forward to hearing from the presenters and learning more about the incredible work being done."



Gathering in Gratitude: A Celebration of Generosity

Our MC, Nigel Mapes, National Gifts in Wills Manager, warmly welcomed everyone and introduced the theme of the day – Taking journeys and making memories.

Nigel acknowledged the Traditional Owners of the land and gave a thoughtful description of the venue to help guests who are blind or have low vision better understand their surroundings.

He shared heartfelt thanks to those who have included a gift in their Will, saying, "Your generosity leaves a lasting legacy – it truly changes lives."

Nigel also acknowledged the Four Seasons Hotel for their warm hospitality before thanking Seth Leggett for his musical performance. "Seth is a Vision Australia client and a talented guitarist studying at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. We're so lucky to have him perform for us today."

He then invited Justine Heath, Acting CEO of Vision Australia, to the podium. "Justine will talk us through some of the latest developments at Vision Australia and how your support is helping bring these to life."



A future made possible: Celebrating the power of giving



Justine began by warmly thanking donors for their ongoing support. "Every life changed is thanks to you," she said, emphasizing the vital role philanthropy plays in helping Vision Australia reach and support more people in our community.

With heartfelt gratitude, she introduced some of our newest Iris Circle members. As Nigel, Karen, and Tom from the Sydney Gifts in Wills team presented them with certificates of appreciation, lapel pins, and keyrings, the room responded with cheerful applause to celebrate their generosity of including a gift in their Will.

Justine then shared several exciting initiatives, which featured the expansion of the Seeing Eye Dogs youth program, greater investment in the electric wheelchair mobility program, and a more streamlined onboarding process for new clients.

She proudly announced that from November 2025, a new Australian design rule will require all new electric, hybrid and hydrogen fuel cell cars, trucks and buses to be fitted with an acoustic vehicle alerting system. "This change will make our streets safer for people who are blind or have low vision," she said. "And it's thanks to the tireless efforts of one of our guest speakers today, Chris Edwards."

Living boldly: Chris's journey of adventure and advocacy

Nigel 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," Nigel said. Chris was joined by his beautiful Seeing Eye Dog, Eva, who was sitting comfortably beside him.

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 story and great sense of humour, while Eva rested calmly by his side. Nigel thanked them both before inviting everyone to enjoy the much-anticipated morning tea. To the guests' delight, Seth played a lively rendition of Neil Diamond's Sweet Caroline.



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

After morning tea, Nigel introduced Linda Blaik, describing her as an enthusiastic traveller, especially fond of New York, and a dedicated volunteer 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 (retinitis pigmentosa). 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, Melbourne. It really feels like a second family to me."

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."

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 completely changed my life. I'm a big Collingwood AFL fan and volunteer at the club – everyone there loves Kevy. Travelling to the MCG from my home in Geelong, about 80 kilometres away, means catching a train and navigating crowds, but Kevy handles it all calmly and gets me right to my seat. The residents at my retirement village adore him too, he's got a lovely 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. I'm so grateful to Vision Australia, Seeing Eye Dogs, and to all of you for your kindness and generosity – thank you for helping me live the life I choose."

The audience responded enthusiastically to Linda and Justin's Q&A, as Kevy, sat calmly by her side. Nigel thanked them both for travelling from Melbourne, noting that Kevy had expertly guided Linda through the airport and onto the plane – making the journey possible.



Behind the scenes: The power of accessible information



Following Justin and Linda’s Q&A session, Nigel 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. The team also created the impressive braille maps of New York and Aspen, along with the sheet music displayed on each table.

To tell us more about the transcription service, Nigel introduced Jane

Wegener, Production Manager, and Josh Dixon, Assistant Format Producer (Music Specialist), for a quick Q&A.

Jane smiled warmly and asked Josh to explain what he does as a music transcription specialist.

Josh replied, “I turn printed sheet music into braille so people who are blind or have low vision can read and play it. When I started, I didn’t know braille at all, so I had to learn by reading lots of books. Now, after about a year, I’m much more confident. With the help of my amazing team – and you, Jane – I’m comfortable in the role. I work on everything from simple piano pieces to complex orchestral scores, and I also help choir groups, musical theatre shows, and students getting ready for exams. Honestly, I think I’ve got the best job in the world.”

Jane then asked about the technology that helps Josh in his work.

Josh said, “OCR (Optical Character Recognition) software is a big help. It lets me scan printed music and turn it into a digital file. This saves time and lets me focus on making sure the braille is clear and accurate. It’s not perfect, so I still check everything carefully, but it really speeds up the process.”

Jane finished by thanking Josh and guests for their support. “We couldn’t do this work without all of you,” she said. “Your generosity makes a real difference.”

Closing with gratitude and hope

Nigel wrapped up the afternoon by enthusiastically thanking supporters for attending, recognising the contributions of staff, volunteers, the Vision Australia store, and the Gifts in Wills team, saying, "Karen, Tom and Litsa – another fantastic event!"

He highlighted the special efforts of our community fundraisers, who have supported Vision Australia by taking part in events such as 100K Your Way and the Abel Tasman track in New Zealand. With a warm smile and a wave, he closed by saying,

"Take care, travel safe—we hope to see you next year!"

