The Iris Circle Bequest Society, Melbourne
Wednesday 27 May 2026

Confidence and Purpose

This year's Melbourne Iris Circle Bequest Society event was again held at the Kooyong Lawn Tennis Club where beautiful gardens and historic surroundings created a warm and welcoming setting for our Gifts in Wills supporters and guests to connect. As one guest shared, "I've attended the Iris Circle events from the very beginning, and I always learn something new each year."

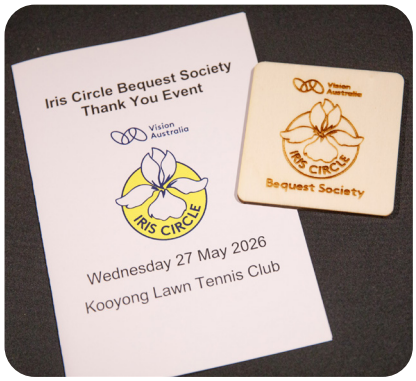
Setting the Tone for Confidence and Purpose



Nigel Mapes, Gift in Wills Manager & MC.

MC Nigel Mapes, National Gifts in Wills Manager, acknowledged the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and described the space for guests who are blind or have low vision.
He shared some highlights planned for the event, including the "See Like Me" augmented reality experience and the beautiful display of handmade woodwork items. "We really want people to experience the impact of Vision Australia in a meaningful way."

Reflecting on this year's theme of Confidence and Purpose, Nigel spoke about the engraved timber coasters at each table, made through Vision Australia's Woodwork Program. "These coasters represent the confidence, skills and sense of purpose our clients gain through practical and creative work."



Iris Circle program and wooden coaster.



High Tea at Kooyong Lawn Tennis Club.

Nigel welcomed new Chairman Mark Grey from Tasmania with his assistance dog, Hoover, and directors Amber Collins, Sue Banks, Dino Farronato and former Chairman Bill Jolley. He recognised guests who had travelled from near and far, including the Kyneton Friends of Vision Australia, who have proudly supported the organisation since 1928. A certificate was presented to client Dale Pierce and Seeing Eye Dog (SED) Yana in recognition of their tremendous support of Community Fundraising initiatives. Of course, everyone was delighted to see so many Seeing Eye Dogs and their handlers in the room too.

Nigel thanked all who have included a gift in their Will. "It's wonderful to see the Iris Circle Bequest Society grow each year. As government funding tightens, philanthropy is more important than ever to help us meet growing demand for our services." He also thanked volunteers and staff before welcoming CEO David Williamson to the stage.



Guest holding the Iris Circle wooden coaster.



See Like Me augmented reality goggles.



David Williamson, with former VA Foundation President - Eve Lustig.



Seeing Eye Dog puppy.

Reflections and What Lies Ahead with David Williamson, CEO



David Williamson, CEO.

David began by reflecting on his first six months in the role and the many conversations he's had with stakeholders. "It's been amazing connecting with people who make this work possible."

Guests enjoyed hearing about David's family life with five boys. "There's never a dull moment, especially during footy season," he laughed. A proud Carlton supporter, watching his sons play sport is one of his favourite things to do. Drawing on his background as an Occupational Therapist, he added, "I've always wanted to help clients, and that's exactly what Vision Australia is here to do for the blind and low vision community."

He shared that Vision Australia supported over 40,000 people this year, delivering in excess of 240,000 hours of service. "That's real impact, made possible by the generosity of our community and the dedication of our staff," David said. He outlined work being done to forge a new strategy. "We've finished our consultation process and I'm genuinely excited about what lies ahead."

Special presentations followed for new Iris Circle Bequest Society members Amalie, Julie, Neal and Lily, with Lily's Seeing Eye Dog Prince in tow. Each received a Certificate of Appreciation and personalised keyring in recognition of including a gift in their Will.



Julie Patman with Sue Banks.



David Williamson with Neal Robertson.



Lily Alford with Nicola Cotton.



Helen Canny with Amalie Mendonez.

In closing, David thanked everyone in the room for the difference they make. “Every gift helps us continue building confidence and purpose for the blind and low vision community. Your generosity is creating a lasting legacy.”

Regaining Confidence and Purpose with Neal and Matthew



Neal Robertson and Matthew Gault in conversation.

The next presentation featured Matthew Gault, a Woodwork Trainer, and Neal Robertson, a long-time client and participant in the Woodwork program.

For more than 40 years, the Woodwork Program has helped people who are blind or have low vision build confidence, learn practical skills and find a sense of purpose. It is estimated more than 300 people have participated. Interestingly, none of the equipment is modified and yet there has never been an accident – a credit to the Woodwork team’s patience, care and skill in supporting our clients.

Nigel outlined Neal’s career from teacher, to joining the Navy and achieving the rank of Lieutenant Commander, then CEO of Honda Australia. After retirement Neal developed Macular Degeneration, and it became very difficult to continue doing what he loved. Nigel invited Matthew and Neal to share how the Woodwork Program helped Neal rebuild his confidence and purpose.

Neal explained that after losing his sight he wasn’t sure what to do in retirement. “I felt I couldn’t do much,” he said. However, through a Vision Australia Telelink he heard about Woodworking and decided to try it, returning to a hobby he had enjoyed since childhood. “One project I’m particularly proud of is a jewellery box I made for my wife, Hille,” Neal said. “It features an engraved image of the church where we were married more than 60 years ago.”

When asked what advice he would give others experiencing vision loss, Neal encouraged people to reach out for support. He spoke about the difference Vision Australia, and the Woodwork Program had to him.

"This program saved my life," he said. "It's given me confidence and a sense of purpose again and introduced me to so many wonderful people. I'm extremely grateful for the support and friendships I've found along my journey. I'd also like to thank Vision Australia supporters whose generosity helps ensure people like me can access programs that make such a difference."



Neal and Hille Robertson.



Neal Robertsons' jewellery box.



Various items crafted by clients of the Woodwork Program.

Building Confidence Through Seeing Eye Dogs with Nicola



Dr Nicola Cotton addressing the room.

Following a delightful high tea luncheon, Nigel introduced Nicola Cotton, National Manager of Seeing Eye Dogs. Nicola brings over 20 years of experience as a veterinarian across animal welfare, breeding and clinical practice. Her expertise helps ensure the Seeing Eye Dogs program continues to support independence, confidence and participation for people who are blind or have low vision.

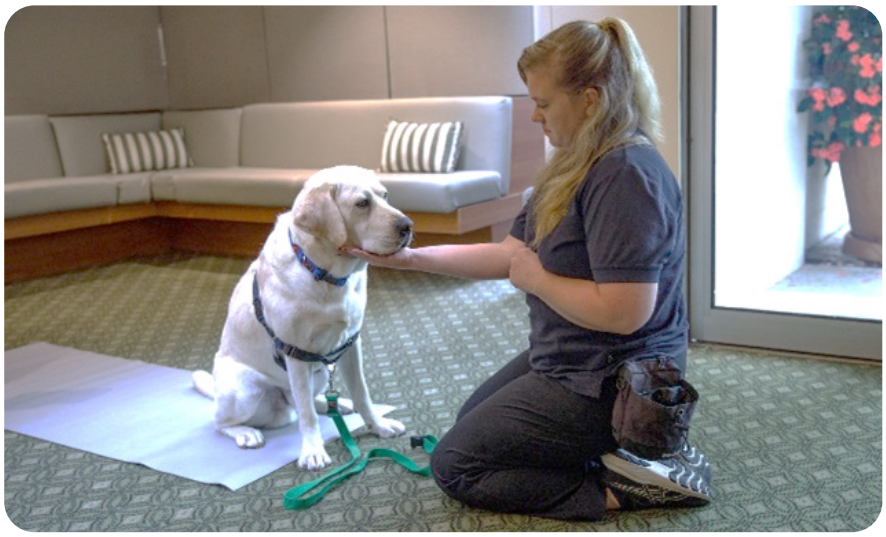
Nicola thanked supporters for their generosity and the important role they play in making the Seeing Eye Dogs program possible. "There is so much that happens before a dog is matched with a client," Nicola explained, as she took guests behind the scenes of the program. She shared how health,

behavioural and genetic data help guide decisions at every stage. “Everything we do is evidence-based,” she said, explaining the goal is to achieve the best outcomes for clients and dogs.

Nicola highlighted the dedicated staff and over 700 volunteer puppy carers who support each dog’s journey. She described the Mobility Training Centre in Kensington as a safe and controlled environment where dogs can build their skills before working out in the community.

Turning to animal welfare, Nicola spoke about the introduction of Cooperative Care across the program since 2022. “It’s about giving dogs a voice in their own care,” she explained, describing how dogs are taught to actively participate in grooming, health checks and veterinary procedures, rather than simply tolerate them.

Joined on stage by Brittany McCarthy (Breeding Program Team Lead) and SED Mirring, Nicola demonstrated the Cooperative Care approach. Guests watched as Mirring calmly participated in a mock vaccination and ear check. Nicola explained that Mirring was trained to sit at a designated station and could choose whether to participate. “The dog can tell us when they’re comfortable and ready to continue.” The demonstration showed how this builds trust, confidence and wellbeing, while strengthening the bond between dogs and handlers.





Brittany McCarthy with SED Mirring on the station demonstrating Cooperative Care.

The audience responded warmly to the demonstration, applauding SED Mirring’s calm demeanour and willingness to participate throughout the cooperative care exercises.

Before the event concluded, Vision Australia Chairman Mark Grey spoke briefly about the role of the Board and the importance of strong governance for Vision Australia's longevity. Mark shared his experience of living with low vision following a brain tumour and how his Assistance Dog, Hoover, is trained to support him on his left side. He thanked supporters for their generosity and acknowledged the difference every gift makes in helping Vision Australia deliver its life-changing programs.

Nigel closed the event by thanking Mark, Nicola, the Board members, presenters, staff and volunteers for their contributions, with guests responding with enthusiastic applause.

"We look forward to seeing you all again next year. Take care, Litsa, Nigel and Helen!"



Litsa, Nigel (holding a black SED Puppy) and Helen at the Iris Circle Bequest Society event in Melbourne.