

The Iris Circle Bequest Society, Brisbane Wednesday 10 June 2026

The Queensland Cricketers' Club at The Gabba once again hosted this year's Brisbane Iris Circle Bequest Society event, creating a warm and friendly atmosphere for supporters and guests to come together. As one long-time supporter reflected, "I've been coming to this event for the last couple of years. I just love it, and meeting the Seeing Eye Dogs is always a highlight."

Bringing Confidence, Purpose and Connection to Life



Nigel Mapes, Gift in Wills Manager & MC.

MC Nigel Mapes, National Gifts in Wills Manager, acknowledged the Turrbal people 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 Goggles" and the beautiful display of handmade woodwork items.

Reflecting on this year's theme of Confidence, Purpose and Staying Connected, Nigel spoke about the engraved timber coasters placed on each table, created by clients in Vision Australia's Woodwork Program. He explained that the coasters were more than just a memento from the event. They represented the confidence, skills and sense of purpose that clients gain through practical and creative activities.

Nigel thanked everyone who has included a gift in their Will. "It's wonderful to see the Iris Circle Bequest Society grow each year," he said. "As government funding tightens, philanthropy is more important than ever in helping us meet the growing demand for our services."

Before welcoming CEO David Williamson to the stage, Nigel thanked the volunteers, puppy carers, staff and venue whose support helps make these events successful. He also recognised Fortunato lasgro, a former Vision Australia client and musician, who has been performing at Iris Circle events since the very beginning. His music helps make each event feel warm, welcoming and memorable.



Iris Circle program with wooden coaster.



Kerrie with her father Rusty.



Puppy Carer Lynne with Kristoff.

Reflections and What Lies Ahead with David Williamson, CEO



David Williamson addressing the room.

David began by reflecting on his first eight 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 sons. "There's never a dull moment, especially during footy season," he laughed. A proud Carlton AFL supporter, and cricket enthusiast, he said watching his sons play sport is one of his greatest joys.

Drawing on his background as an Occupational Therapist, David 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 also spoke openly about his own experience of vision loss due to a rare optic nerve condition.

David shared that Vision Australia supported over 40,000 people this year, delivering more than 240,000 hours of service. "That's real impact, made possible by the generosity of our community and the dedication of our staff." 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."

David thanked everyone in the room for the difference they make. "Every gift helps us continue building confidence and purpose and sense of connection for the blind and low vision community. Your generosity is creating a legacy."

He then welcomed newly appointed Vision Australia Chairman, Mark Grey, to the stage for a Q&A session. Mark spoke about the role of the Board and the importance of strong governance in ensuring Vision Australia's future. He also shared his experience of living with low vision following a brain tumour and explained how his Assistance Dog, Hoover, supports him in daily life. Mark closed by thanking supporters for their generosity and the lasting impact their gifts will have on future generations.



David Williamson with Mark Grey.



Mark with Hoover, Paul and Sarah.



David, Theresa Smith-Ruig and Tania Hobson.

Regaining Confidence & Purpose with Nemoy and Nathan



Nemoy and Nathan in conversation.

Nigel then invited Vision Australia's Emotional and Social Support Programs Lead, Nemoy Malcolm, to the stage with his Seeing Eye Dog, Benji, alongside Vision Australia's Senior Woodwork Trainer, Nathan Price.

After thanking guests for their kindness and generosity, Nemoy shared his own journey. Born without vision in one eye and losing sight in the other as a young adult, he spoke about using his lived experience to support others. "Connection can change someone's life," he said. "When people feel supported, their confidence grows."

Nemoy described some of Vision Australia's Social Support Programs, including the Quality Living Program, which provides a welcoming space for people to connect, and Tele link, which helps reduce social isolation through regular conversations and engaging activities. These programs are life-changing for clients and have been running for many years."

Nathan then shared a different journey. A long-time Vision Australia client, participant in the Woodwork Program and now Senior Woodwork Trainer, he spoke about losing his sight suddenly in his early 30s. A registered builder, Nathan received no warning before his vision deteriorated. "All I could see were dots of grey and black," he recalled. Being declared legally blind was devastating, bringing his career in the building industry to an unexpected end.

Nathan spoke about how Vision Australia saved his life. He explained that Occupational Therapy and mobility training gave him the confidence to regain his independence, while the Woodwork Program gave him the opportunity to rediscover his purpose.

Reflecting on his role as the Senior Woodwork trainer, Nathan smiles, "What I love most about my job is seeing the transformation in our clients. Watching someone who arrives full of self-doubt gradually build the confidence to safely use machinery, create something with their own hands and rediscover a sense of purpose is amazing. Seeing that joy and pride on their faces never gets old."



Learning safe techniques.



Hands-on skills in action.



A handcrafted wooden table.

Building Confidence Through the Seeing Eye Dogs program



Dr Nicola Cotton addressing the room.

Following a lovely high tea luncheon, Nigel introduced Dr 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 connection for people who are blind or have low vision.

Before beginning her presentation, Nicola thanked everyone for their generous support. "With minimal amount of government funding, we simply couldn't do this work without you," she smiled.

Nicola then introduced guests to Cooperative Care, an approach adopted across the Seeing Eye Dogs program in 2022 that encourages dogs to actively participate in their own care. "It's about giving dogs a voice," she explained, describing how they are trained to willingly engage in grooming, health checks and veterinary procedures, rather than simply tolerate them.

To demonstrate the approach, Nicola invited Puppy Development Trainer Mark Wilczynski, volunteer puppy carer Ann Baillie and Andy, a five-month-old Labrador, to the stage. Guests watched as Andy calmly participated in a mock vaccination and ear check, choosing when he was comfortable to continue. The demonstration highlighted how Cooperative Care builds trust, confidence and wellbeing while strengthening the bond between dogs and their handlers. Andy's calm demeanour and willingness to participate drew warm applause from the audience.

"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. The goal is to achieve the best outcomes for both clients and dogs."

Nicola finished by acknowledging the many staff and more than 700 volunteer puppy carers whose dedication helps every Seeing Eye Dog reach its potential.



Ann Baillie with SED Andy on the station demonstrating Cooperative Care.

With the audience inspired by the stories and demonstrations, Nigel returned to the stage to thank everyone who had contributed to another successful Iris Circle gathering. He expressed his appreciation to the presenters, volunteers, puppy carers and supporters, whose generosity continues to make Vision Australia's life-changing work possible.

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



Ingrid with Kristoff.



Wayne, Sue and Cornelis.



SED Andy.



Ann with daughter Alphege.



Dena with Father Peter.



Barry with wife Carol and Kristoff.