

Focus



Vision
Australia

Blindness. Low Vision. Opportunity.

150+

years of vision

Issue 2, 2021

**Hugo - a four
year old who
loves jumping,
dancing and
being active.**

(See page 3.)



Thank you!

Your support is
making a difference
to kids like Hugo.

Thank you from Ron



**Ron Hooton,
CEO Vision Australia**

Looking back at how we've all been affected by COVID-19, my hope is that any impact on you by the virus and its severe but necessary restrictions will soon be a thing of the past.

Throughout this past year, Vision Australia supporters like you have been our 'heroes' with continuing to send your donations. That generosity allowed us to keep delivering our services to people who are blind or have low vision. We have nothing less than absolute gratitude for your support.

Looking forward, 2021 is already producing positive results. This is particularly so in our LEAP (Learn, Engage, Act, Perform) Program. Open to children aged 14-17, it helps participants develop the skills they'll need to achieve their professional and personal goals. This year more than 30 young people will strengthen their networking, job-seeking and technology skills, along with gaining a better

understanding of the importance of emotional intelligence and personal presentation.

This year will also see the second LEAP Up: Transition to Tertiary class take place. The program focuses on the skills and attributes people who are blind or have low vision need to succeed in tertiary education. Participants are enrolled in a mock-university and are required to complete tasks such as group assignments, presentations and using an online learning platform. They also receive support to build their assistive technology and self-advocacy skills, which are vital in tertiary settings.

Given Australia's ageing population and associated age-related declines in eyesight, we're also revamping our services for older people. We're aiming to provide the services people aged 65 and over need to stay independent in their home, and connected to and included in society. Our services help older Australians make the most of their remaining sight and learn vital skills that compensate for their blindness or low vision. We also plan to make better use of technology to provide social inclusion options, such as our beloved book clubs, allowing people to participate from where ever they are and whenever they like. We don't want any of our clients to be lonely.

For all of these reasons and more, I'd like to offer my very personal 'thank you' for your partnership in improving the lives of both adults and children who are blind or have low vision.

With best wishes.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ron Hooton". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Ron Hooton
CEO Vision Australia

Hello from Hugo



As a result of a rare genetic eye disorder called Leber's congenital amaurosis (LCA) Hugo can only detect light in both eyes.

Known to us since he was a baby, Hugo is now four years old and has come a long way with the support of a Vision Australia occupational therapist and orientation and mobility specialist.

Hugo can feed himself using a spoon, and does this regularly at kindergarten with encouragement. He knows his left from right and can dress himself. His ability with his white cane grows day by day. He's also a little boy who enjoys jumping, dancing and generally being active.

Over the past 12 months, Hugo has been learning to take turns and get used to other children playing alongside him. He's also getting more involved in group activities. Development of his fine motor skills for play and self-care tasks are next in line, with new types of play being introduced to develop his coordination skills.

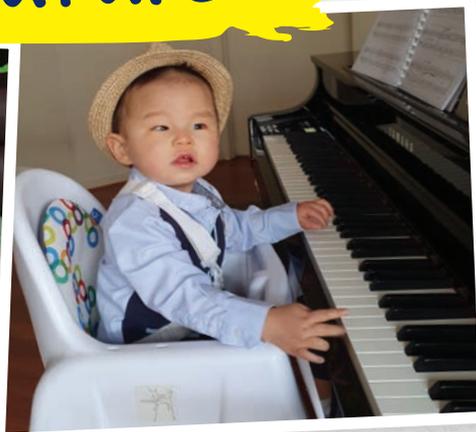
With an estimated 70% of learning being based on vision, a child who is blind or who has low vision may struggle to reach developmental milestones. To keep Hugo on track he'll continue to receive one-to-one support from our specialists.

Growing up to be a fully functional adult takes time, and the families of children like Hugo are so aware of and very grateful for your ongoing donations.

Thank you – so much.



Hope for Nicholas' future



When Cathy, Nicholas' mother, got his diagnosis, she'd never before heard of Familial exudative vitreoretinopathy.

She and her partner felt so terrible, that they cried for a whole month.

Familial exudative vitreoretinopathy (FEVR, pronounced as fever) is a genetic disorder affecting the growth and development of blood vessels in the retina of the eye. It can lead to vision loss and sometimes complete blindness.

Nicholas' specific case has resulted in the retina of his right eye completely detaching, and his left eye has blood vessels that haven't fully developed, leaving his vision incredibly low.

Initially diagnosed at his 10 week check-up, Nicholas first came to Vision Australia when he was just five months old, having fallen behind in his developmental milestone of rolling. With the early intervention, he developed motor skills allowing him to travel around more easily which resulted in him rolling at nine months, crawling at 11 months and walking at 19 months.

By focusing on Nicholas' fine motor skills, he's now reaching the correct development milestones for his age. His present goals revolve around communication and sharing of objects, eating more independently and being able to advocate a bit more through the use of verbal skills. With help from a speech pathologist, Nicholas has started to build more sounds and improve his eating habits.

Cathy is aware that Vision Australia will be a prominent part of Nicholas' life. She said, 'He may be legally blind, and whilst initially

it was all so bleak, we now see a future for him. Nothing is enough for me to express how much I appreciate and love all the people linked to Vision Australia who are responsible for this change.'

Please know that Cathy's appreciation and love belongs to you too. Vision Australia staff may have the hands, but you provide the power behind them. Thank you, so much.

Why speech pathology?

Children who are blind or have low vision can face challenges when it comes to developing communication and other social skills alongside their peers, which makes the work of Vision Australia's paediatric service providers extremely important.

People often associate speech pathology with things like stuttering or a lisp – sound related rather than having anything to do with vision loss. However, communication is a lot more than speaking, it's also what we do with our hands and body in our interaction with others. Missing out on those cues can impact communication. For literacy development it's also important for children to have exposure to books and other written material from a young age.

If children miss out on reading or being read to, they can face challenges when it comes to developing their phonological awareness skills which could potentially impact on their literacy skills and speech sound development going forward.

That's why speech pathology is so important in the lives of children who are blind or have low vision.

Meet one of your Vision Australia partners making a difference

If you saw a child who is blind or has low vision struggling to use a knife and fork, you'd instinctively want to help. Besides momentarily using the utensils on his or her behalf, how could this child be given long term help?

Enter Leo! Leo is someone who cares as much as you do about improving the lives of people who are blind or have low vision. He's your 'hands on' partner in making a difference.

Teaching a child everyday skills, like using a knife and fork correctly, and getting dressed, are what Leo does. Yet he also does much more, helping our clients to develop critical life skills such as mobility, communication and problem-solving.

As you would do, Leo takes time to understand each child's likes and dislikes, and what their goals are. Leo's highly individualised approach and expertise teaches children how to speak up for themselves, and develop their potential alongside their sighted peers.

Children who are blind or have low vision have the same talents, wishes and dreams

as any other child. You, and an occupational therapist like Leo can make these a reality at home, at school, and in the playground – and that's a priceless gift.

Thank you for working alongside Leo with your donations. Thank you for your helping hand in making dreams and wishes come true for people living with blindness or low vision.

"There is no greater joy, nor greater reward, than to make a fundamental difference in someone's life."

Mary Rose McGeady



What does an orientation & mobility specialist do?

Vision Australia's orientation and mobility specialists teach people who are blind or have low vision to get around their world safely and confidently using a white cane – even young children.

Let's give you an example of how orientation & mobility specialists can work with a four-year-old boy with a vision loss in conjunction with his family.

Early introduction of the cane is important for familiarity, and at first it can be seen as just another toy. However, children learn quickly, and the cane soon becomes a 'friend' and a tool for life.

Orientation for young Hugo began with his learning the layout of the family home, then progressed to the kindergarten environment and now out in the community with his family.

Children love to explore, so he'll be encouraged to do just that in open spaces outdoors. This is especially important for a child from an outdoors-loving family, and the scope for learning about different terrains and activities is unlimited. The white cane can be a guide to experiences and the identification of so much in the world in a safe, confident and dignified way.

Thanks to supporters like you, who make these specialised services available to people who are blind or have low vision.



If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.



It's unlikely that you'll have met Max Schroder, but he works hand in hand with you in supporting Vision Australia.

Max's passion is education – and particularly helping people who are blind or have low vision to access and succeed in education.

This particular passion has inspired Max to become a major supporter of our Further Education Bursary Program, which provides tertiary students across Australia with the technology they need to complete their studies.

Helping people who are blind or have low vision to access and succeed in education is one of Vision Australia's four main priorities.

2021 marks the 25th anniversary of the Further Education Bursary Program which has supported 445 blind and low vision students since its inception.

Max's 12 years of loyal support was inspired by a personal encounter with a successful blind law student doing volunteer work in his office.

Max noticed that he was making a valuable contribution by using some early learning assistance devices for note-taking and communication. The seed of 'possibility' was sowed for Max, resulting in his 12 years of loyal support, for which we and our bursary recipients are deeply grateful.

Education is an investment in the future.

A recent beneficiary of the bursary program is Connor McLeod who is studying for a Bachelor of Science and Information Technologies at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Connor received a BrailleSense Polaris 32-Cell Braille Notetaker. This has made university much more manageable for him.

'I have light perception, usually just enough to help with mobility. I can only see larger more contrasted shapes, which is in no way helpful in terms of education', says Connor. The Notetaker allows me to take and read

notes during lectures, as well as in Q & A sessions and tutorials in conjunction with my laptop.'

Connor's vision for the future isn't only for himself. His ambition is to establish a career in developing accessible computer applications.

Connor's wider view is, *'Whatever I make has to be accessible. Being able to test it myself I can make sure that it's usable for other people facing accessibility difficulties. The Braillesense is really going to make it easier for me to gain the knowledge that I'll need to progress in that field.'*

If there's someone who really understands Connor's thinking, it's Max:

'I'm of the view that the solution to many of life's problems is education. I acknowledge that it can be expensive, but love the old adage - if you think education is expensive try ignorance! This underlies my commitment to assisting with the Vision Australia Bursary Program.'



It's impossible to overstate the importance that the Further Education Bursary Program has for recipients. If you would like to find out more about other programs that make a significant difference, a member of the philanthropy team at Vision Australia will be delighted to help you; or you can email: philanthropy@visionaustralia.org

Gift in Wills Iris Circle event

As we all slowly move out of our COVID restrictions, we are finally able to begin holding events with people in real life and not on a computer screen.

We have been delighted to be able to hold events in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne to re-launch the Iris Circle, Vision Australia's Bequest Society, to acknowledge this special group of generous donors who've informed us of their gift in their Wills to Vision Australia.

In attending these events, donors enjoyed a delightful morning or afternoon tea while providing an opportunity for animated conversations between guests, Vision Australia staff, and volunteers. Musical entertainment was provided at each of these events by the likes of Lara Nahkle and Nelson Rufatt, both clients of Vision Australia.

Our various services have been profiled and brought to life by clients and client families who have young children receiving ongoing support and assistance from Vision Australia each telling their own personal stories.

A highlight in each event, was our CEO Ron Hooton, presenting Iris Circle Certificates of Appreciation and uniquely tagged key rings to those donors that have included a gift in their Wills to Vision Australia.

All the guests were thrilled, and left the events excited by the evidence of their present and future support.



If you've included a gift to Vision Australia in your Will, please let us know so that we can say 'Thank You' and extend an invitation to you for future events.

If you would like information on how you can include a gift in your Will, please contact our Gift in Wills team on 1800 422 077, or send an email to giw@visionaustralia.org

Christmas may be past, but it's certainly not forgotten



If ever there was an end of year when we all needed a lift in spirits, it was 2020.

It was Vision Australia's 83rd Carols by Candlelight that provided that lift.

This annual event is our largest fundraiser for Vision Australia's children's services. The 2020 event looked a little different with no live audience at the Sidney Myer Bowl due to concerns about public health during the pandemic.

The event worked closely with our broadcast partner, Channel Nine, to produce a magical Carols by Candlelight from the Bowl stage, with over 2.65 million online audiences who tuned in from around the country.

As always, a line-up of Australia's best and brightest performers joined us. Marina Prior, Dami Im, David Hobson, Chris Sebastian, Casey Donovan, Simon Gleeson and more showed off their talents.

But the real stars of the show included you.

The event was a huge success, deserving a big 'Thank You' to generous supporters like you for making it possible.

With your support, we raised over \$1 million, which helped us deliver services from FEELIX library kits, encouragement of literary skills in our youngest clients, white cane training to help navigate playgrounds, to orientation and mobility in schools, and so much more.

We're so grateful to have you on our side. We look forward to welcoming back the thousands of people who make the annual pilgrimage to the Sidney Myer Music Bowl's candlelit skies this coming Christmas Eve.

'The Latest' from Willow



'I've got so much to tell you!

Last year was so strange, but it did end well with the best Christmas ever. And when we could eventually go out, our family went to the Zoo. It was really special because we had twilight tickets with dinner and ice cream as we watched the sunset.

Because it was a six week break I had trips to see my grandparents and cousins. We also went to a new play centre and I caught up on my swimming lessons. I love swimming.

This year I started my new school. I'm going into Prep and have a new uniform, school bag and hat, with even a new lunch box and drink bottle.

I know my new teacher is going to be my favourite teacher ever. My year six buddy wears glasses just like me which is really exciting.

My mum tells me that it's nice people like you who allow the experts and therapists from Vision Australia to work with my school so that I'm always safe and get the best learning opportunities. We all want to say 'thank you' for that.

Until next time, lots of love from me and my family.'

Willow

For more information call 1800 42 20 77 or visit www.visionaustralia.org/get-involved/ways-to-help