

## The Iris Circle Bequest Society, Sydney Wednesday 1 April 2026

### Confidence, Purpose and Staying Connected

This year's Iris Circle Bequest Society event was held on a sunny autumn morning at the Kimpton Margot on Pitt Street. The building, once the Sydney Water Board headquarters in the 1930s, still holds its art deco character and made for a great setting for our Gifts in Wills supporters to gather. As one guest shared, "I try to come along each year, everyone is so welcoming."

### Setting the Tone for Confidence, Purpose and Staying Connected



Ian Finlayson, Chief  
Fundraising and  
Marketing Officer.

MC Ian Finlayson, Chief Fundraising and Marketing Officer, got things underway with some light humour before paying respects to the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. He described the room for guests who are blind or have low vision, then walked through what the morning had in store. "There's a lot to look forward to," he said, pointing to the "See Like Me" virtual reality experience among the highlights.

Ian spoke to this year's theme, Confidence, Purpose and Staying Connected, and how it is reflected across Vision Australia's work. The engraved timber coasters at each place sitting, made through our Woodwork Program, he said, were a perfect example. "A meaningful reminder of the work this organisation does every day, giving clients a real sense of purpose through hands-on work."

Ian then introduced the ten Seeing Eye Dogs and their handlers, explaining the difference they make in building confidence and connection for our handlers. They quickly became the centre of attention, collecting well-earned cuddles throughout the morning.

He closed by thanking those who have included a gift in their Will. "It's wonderful to see the Iris Circle grow each year," he said. "As government funding tightens, philanthropy is playing a bigger role in helping services keep up with demand." He acknowledged Karen and Nigel from the Gifts in Wills team, the volunteers, the Vision Store and the Kimpton Margot team, before welcoming CEO David Williamson to his first Iris Circle event since joining in October.



Guests welcomed at the registration desk.



Iris Circle wooden coaster.



Seeing Eye Dog.



Guests at the Kimpton Margot (Hammond room).

## Reflections and What Lies Ahead with David Williamson, CEO



David Williamson, CEO.

David thanked Ian and shared insights from his first six months in the role, mentioning the many conversations he's had with stakeholders. "It's been amazing connecting with people who make this work possible."

He then gave guests a glimpse into life as a dad of five boys. "It's always busy, especially around footy season," he laughed. A Carlton supporter, Melbourne Storm fan and cricket lover, he added, "Watching my boys play sport is one of my most favourite things to do." He also shared his own lived experience of low vision, adding that 15 percent of Vision Australia's workforce are on a similar journey. "I'm no longer the only one asking for larger fonts," he said, prompting a warm response from the room.

Reflecting on the past year, David disclosed that more than 40,000 people were supported, with over 240,000 hours of service delivered. "That's real impact, made possible by the generosity of our community and the dedication of our staff." Services for children continue to grow, and the Seeing Eye Dogs program goes from strength to strength.

He then outlined a new strategy focused on making services easier to access and ensuring employees are well supported. "We've now finished our consultation process and I'm genuinely excited about what lies ahead."

A special moment followed as David welcomed new Iris Circle members.



Gary with Fan presenting the Iris Certificate.



Libby and Katherine.



Peter and Rianna.



Karen with Carol.

To finish, David revealed a final reflection. “The support in this room makes a real difference to our work. Our programs help build confidence, purpose and connection for our clients, and we couldn’t do it without you.”

## Connecting Through Shared Experience with Nemoy and Michael



Nemoy and Benji in conversation with Michael.

Ian thanked David, with the room responding in enthusiastic applause, before introducing Nemoy Malcolm, Vision Australia’s Emotional and Social Support Programs Lead. Born without vision in one eye and losing sight in the other in early adulthood, Nemoy lives in Queensland with his partner and two sons. He uses his lived experience to help others rediscover confidence, purpose and connection. His Seeing Eye Dog, Benji, joined him on stage.

Nemoy began by acknowledging the generosity in the room and spoke about the value of peer support, highlighting programs like Telelink, now celebrating 40 years, and Quality Living groups. “When you meet others who are experiencing the same thing, you no longer feel alone, it’s life changing.”

Following a short video on Vision Australia’s Woodwork Program, Nemoy introduced Michael Rigby, a long-time Vision Australia client and President of his local Men’s Shed, where he has introduced woodworking for participants. His wife Lina, Treasurer and Secretary, was in the audience.

Opening the conversation, Nemoy asked how vision loss became part of Michael’s story. “I was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa at 17, and my vision gradually declined,” he said. “A few years later, I couldn’t see the cursor flashing on my screen. That’s when I was deemed legally blind and was referred to Vision Australia. “Vision Australia’s support had a huge impact. They taught me to take things one step at a time and showed me there’s still so much I can do.”

The conversation then turned to the Men's Shed, where Michael has been involved with the Granville shed for over 20 years. Alongside Lina, Michael has helped create a space for connection and skill-building. "I wanted to give back, and the Men's Shed has made that possible. It's been great to see men support one another and grow in confidence."

When asked what drew him to woodworking, Michael reflected on building garden beds with his grandfather as a boy. "There's a deep focus to working with your hands, and it's something I now share with my sons," he warmly smiled.

Asked how tools can be used safely with low vision, Michael explained it comes down to training, techniques and setup, with shields helping to keep things safe. "With practice, it becomes second nature."

To close, Nemoy asked what Michael is most proud of. "My family and seeing people leave the Men's Shed feeling good about themselves," he said. "That gives me a strong sense of purpose. I couldn't have come this far without Vision Australia and the generosity of people in this room."



The workshop with machinery and equipment.



Michael with his son assembling garden beds.



Four Men Shed participants preparing lunch.

## Building Confidence Through Seeing Eye Dogs with Nicola

Following morning tea, and a Seeing Eye Dog video, Ian introduced Nicola Cotton, National Manager of Seeing Eye Dogs. “Nicola’s been with Vision Australia since 2004 and brings over 20 years’ experience,” A veterinarian by training, Nicola has worked across animal welfare, breeding and clinical practice. “She oversees the entire program,” Ian explained, “helping ensure it supports independence, confidence and participation for people who are blind or have low vision.”



Nicola Cotton,  
National Manager  
of Seeing Eye Dogs.



Seeing Eye Dogs in training.

Nicola began by thanking Ian for the introduction, adding with a smile, “I can’t quite believe it’s been over 20 years working with Seeing Eye Dogs.” She also acknowledged the generosity in the room and the important role it plays in making the program possible.

“There’s a lot that happens before a dog is matched with a client,” Nicola explained, offering a behind-the-scenes look at the care and expertise involved at every stage. She outlined how data underpins the program, with behaviour, health and genetic information helping guide decisions. “Everything we do is evidence-based,” she noted, ensuring the best outcomes for both clients and dogs.

She also highlighted the people behind the program, from specialist staff to more than 700 volunteer puppy carers who support each dog's early development. Facilities like the Mobility Training Centre in Melbourne provide a safe, controlled environment where dogs can build the skills needed before working out in the community.

Connection remained a strong thread throughout. Nicola spoke about initiatives such as youth pathways, which introduce young people to the Seeing Eye Dogs program early, helping them build confidence, skills and connection as they prepare for the future. Alongside wheelchair-accessible training and regional roadshows, these initiatives help people understand what's possible and feel connected to the program. "It's about making sure people comprehend the benefits of a Seeing Eye Dog," she said.

She closed by bringing it back to what matters most. "At the end of the day, it's about the right match," she added, "supporting people to live with greater confidence and connection."

Ian wrapped up by thanking Nicola and all the presenters, staff and volunteers, with strong applause from the audience. A special mention to the Vision Store team for bringing along the VR 'See Like Me' goggles, which were in high demand throughout the morning.

"I look forward to seeing you all again next year. Take care."

## Thank you from the Iris Circle Bequest Society

