

Focus



Vision
Australia

Blindness. Low Vision. Opportunity.

150+

years of vision

Issue 2, 2023

Look out world –
here's Gemma!

(See page 3.)



Thank you!

Your support is
making a difference
to kids like Gemma.



Thank you



Reaching out for help is not always easy. It can be challenging for a young person who is just finding their way in the world, but also keen to show everyone who they are and what they are capable of.

As you read through the wonderful stories in this issue, you'll find this is what your kindness makes possible – and why your continued support is so very important to all of us at Vision Australia. You are supporting people who are blind or have low vision to take that first step with greater confidence, and access the tailored support they need.

Thanks to you, children like Gemma and Hazel have had the very best start in life, and will receive the specialised training, support and resources they need to thrive.

With the help of supporters like you, ambitious young people like Oscar can access professional support to find new jobs that match their skills, allowing them to shine.

We are so grateful you are always there to support the hopes, goals and dreams of people who are blind or have low vision. Thank you for everything you do to help change lives.

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

Ron Hooton
CEO Vision Australia

Hands-on school holiday fun

Eight young people, aged from 10 to 14, learned new skills and forged new friendships during an interactive school holiday event at Vision Australia's Kensington workshop.

It was an opportunity to put down electronic devices and switch to wood lathes, saws and sanders for the day, and take on a simple, useful project. Every student was taught how to use power tools and other woodworking equipment and completed their own elephant-shaped mobile phone and pen holder!

This was a team effort, with expert guidance from our Industrial Skills instructors, Brett and John, as well as Children and Young People occupational therapists, Lani and Sarah and orientation and mobility instructor, Cath.

Programs like this help young people gain confidence and understand they can pursue any opportunity. As well as helping them achieve new personal and professional goals, skills learned on the day may carry over into subjects they can study at school.

Your kind support helps our team develop and provide tailored programs like this for young people and inspires new adventures in learning.

'I love coming to the school holiday program. I feel like I belong!'
– workshop participant.



Thanks to you, children like Gemma can dream big!

Gemma may only be nine, but she has lots of big goals and dreams. A dancer, rock climber, dog lover and budding scientist, Gemma was the shining star of our recent tax appeal. Her story captured the hearts of many, just as it did ours, thanks to supporters like you who showed their support through generous donations.



When Gemma was just five months old, her mum Nova noticed that her eyes would tear up and get a little red, and she seemed to be sensitive to light. Nova clearly remembers her heart sinking when her GP said he wanted to refer her to see an ophthalmologist.

'I kept thinking, what can this be?' said Nova. Within weeks, Gemma was diagnosed with congenital glaucoma, and had four surgeries before she was 18 months old.

Gemma's family lived in the UK in those early days, and Nova says their connection with Vision Australia when Gemma was two was life-changing.

'I can't think of anything that she doesn't do. Our occupational therapist, Alessandra, is by our side, and continually coming up with ways for Gemma to learn, from tying shoelaces, tying up her hair to learning how to button up shirts.

'Gemma doesn't like drawing attention to herself, it's just not her style. So Alessandra finds different ways, making it as easy as possible for Gemma. Things

like identifying her school bag by putting something colourful on it, or how to open her lunch box and packets of biscuits inside. Now we are getting ready for Gemma's first camp, which includes kayaking and abseiling. We are sure Gemma will have a go at everything!'

Nova says having access to Vision Australia very early on makes a big difference. 'If we had not had extra help from when she was just two, there could have had an adverse effect on Gemma's development. Learning how to make things easier for her from an early age was so significant.'

These days, nothing slows Gemma down. She is brimming with confidence because of the wonderful support she and her family have received since their first connection with Vision Australia, and it's all thanks to generous supporters like you.

Your compassion gives more children like Gemma who are blind or have low vision access to specialised support and crucial orientation and mobility training, meaning greater independence and confidence.

Gemma's mum, Nova, has a very special message to you.

'Vision Australia has been there for us since day one, thanks to people like you. Your very generous response to this appeal will enable other parents to receive the same amazing support that we have experienced!'



Do you remember little Hazel?

Thanks to your kindness and compassion, Hazel started receiving early intervention support when she was just six months old – crucial support that is giving her every chance for a bright future.

Hazel was Jessica's first baby, born at 37 weeks. 'She was so tiny and beautiful, I thought of her as my little Thumbelina,' said Jessica.

'Being our first child, we didn't really know what to expect. Hazel was small, a very slow feeder and was tired a lot. We also noticed she wasn't reaching for toys or showing interest in things like other babies. But the real trigger was when we noticed her eyes started shaking.'

After an MRI and a whirlwind of appointments, everything changed for Jessica. Hazel was diagnosed with optic nerve hypoplasia, as well as a combination of high and low muscle tone.

Babies like Hazel need specialist early support and strategies to overcome the missing connections that happen in the early months of life, and that's what you have made possible.



'The moment we connected with Vision Australia, we felt so supported, and so comforted. We were able to start weekly appointments and it was just so valuable. There have been incredible improvements in her vision and overall development. I know it was funds from donors that have made that happen, and we are so thankful,' says Jessica.

Chelsea, our occupational therapist helps Hazel learn about the world around her and gives Jessica the everyday support she needs as well.

At this stage, the Life Ready Program focuses on building foundations. Learning through play, like picking up a ball or reaching for a spoon, helps Hazel learn to interact with her environment.

Jessica says, 'I can see her changing all the time, and that gives me so much hope. And I just don't know where she would be without the support we've been given.'

We are incredibly grateful to all the donors who support Vision Australia and our little girl. Thank you for caring!

Your support helps Sekinda make a difference

Sekinda, a specialist low vision orthoptist and one of our Life Ready experts, is often one of the first healthcare professionals a person who is blind or has vision loss will meet with at Vision Australia – and it's a fact Sekinda shares with pride.

She knows this first meeting is incredibly important in helping people lead the life they choose. 'I provide advice on a range of vision aids, lighting, contrast and technology solutions to help individuals make the most of their eyesight and regain or maintain their independence,' she explains.

Her clients range 'from a few months old to 90 years old and beyond', meaning no two days, or two recommendations, are ever the same. 'Everyone's goal is different,' says Sekinda. 'I always see their goals as my goals.'

By understanding what each person wants to achieve, be that reading the news, completing puzzles or using technology to communicate with their family, Sekinda can test residual vision, depth perception, contrast, colour and lighting requirement using a low vision assessment process.

The results help Sekinda recommend best-fit vision aids and strategies. Some people may benefit from a functional vision assessment; low vision strategies and/or optical magnifiers, others will be best suited to electronic magnifiers.

Other times, Sekinda makes practical recommendations, such as referrals to Vision Australia's team of Life Ready



experts: speech therapists, psychologists and counsellors, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, orientation and mobility specialists or technology access specialists.

Every day is rewarding for Sekinda and gives her an immense feeling of accomplishment – but she and our expert team couldn't do it alone.

Their work is possible because of supporters like you – thank you so much for your kindness.

You're helping people like Oscar plan a brighter future

When it comes to planning a career, everyone has to start somewhere, and finding the right advice can be tricky. For people like Oscar, Vision Australia's Career Start Graduate Program was the perfect solution – in fact, it has transformed his life.

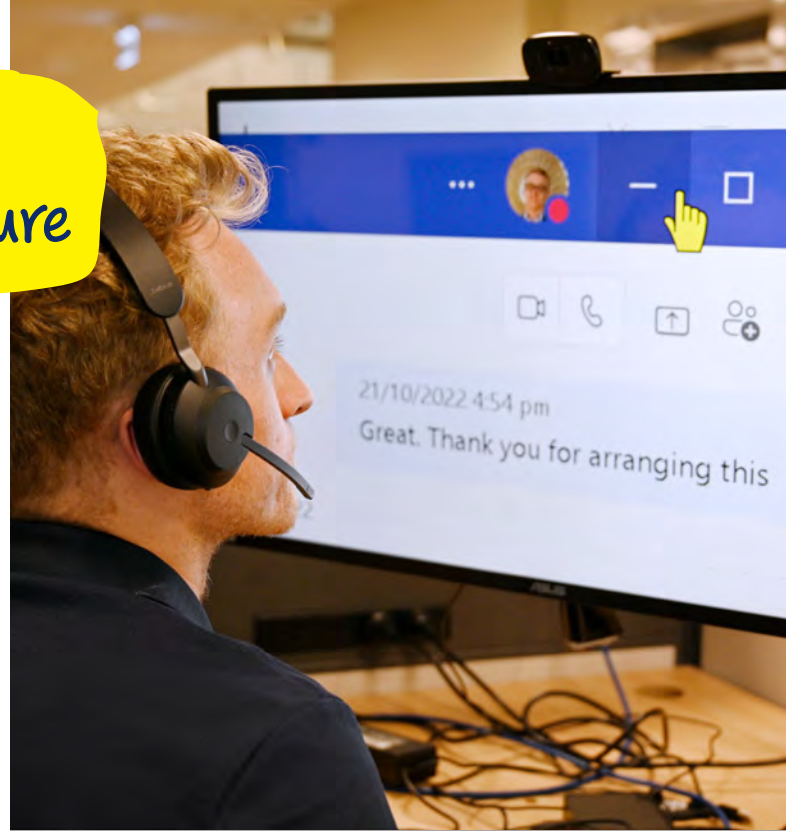
Oscar was diagnosed with optic pathway glioma as a teenager. Everyday life is a little bit blurry for him, distances are a bit hard to see and he can have trouble with peripheral vision.

Oscar says his vision loss is invisible. 'I could walk past you on the street and you would think I just need glasses, but everyday life can be a struggle for me.

'It wasn't until I was 16 that I found out that I wasn't going to be able to drive, and that took a massive toll on me. But I knew I needed to seek help, so I took it upon myself to contact Vision Australia.'

Coming out of university, Oscar was really struggling to find employment, but when he applied for the Career Start Graduate Program at Vision Australia nine months ago, everything changed overnight!

'I was placed in the Telelink Team which specialises in social inclusion, making sure

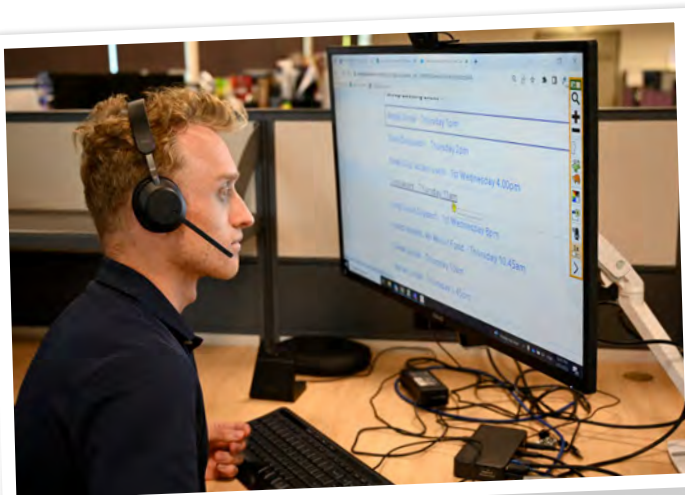


all adults who are blind or low vision have an opportunity to connect with others around their areas of interests. It's a social service via phone for blind or low vision people aged 18 or older.

'If I had not found the Career Start Graduate Program, I would not have the confidence to seek enjoyable, meaningful and fulfilling work. I love my job and I feel like I am really making a difference. It's so amazing to be involved with such a remarkable community.

'Initiatives like the Career Start Graduate Program just couldn't happen without your support. Thank you for your kindness, generosity and belief in the low vision community!'

If you are interested in supporting the Telelink Program or the next round of Career Start Graduates like Oscar, please contact Vision Australia to make a difference at philanthropy@visionaustralia.org or 0408 575 821.



Marjorie – A Living Bequest in tribute to a beautiful wife and mother

A beloved wife, mother, neonatal nurse, gifted needlewoman and a marvellous storyteller who loved reading, Marjorie sadly developed progressive sight loss.

Declared legally blind, her life changed and her journey with Vision Australia's client services' team began. Husband Geoff took her to appointments and said, 'It was a new experience for us and Vision Australia helped us through. We were amazed at the range of aids available and the staff were very caring and helpful.'

Unable to read, Marjorie found joy in the audio books of the Vision Australia library until her passing.

Geoff collated Marjorie's stories into a full account of her life. He was passionate about community health and instrumental in the integration of clinical and academic aspects of medicine in a teaching hospital.

In consultation with his financial advisor, Geoff subsequently decided to pay tribute to his beloved Marjorie through a generous living bequest to Vision Australia in gratitude for services rendered. 'We were treated so well and wanted to give something in return,' Geoff said.

Vision Australia is deeply thankful to Geoff for his kind gesture in memory of Marjorie, for sharing her beautiful portrait and a snap-shot of their life story.

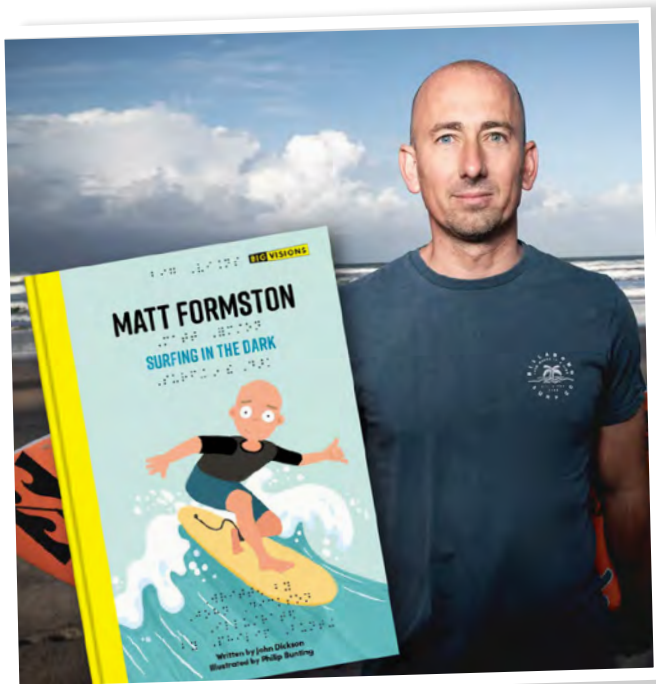


'Marjorie Stacy' by Polish artist Leila Pawlikowska

We're hugely grateful for every Gift in Will.

If you'd like to know more about how you too could include a gift to Vision Australia in your Will please contact our Gifts in Will team by phone on **1800 422 077** or email **giw@visionaustralia.org**

Inspiring new children's book series



Big Visions, an initiative by Vision Australia, is a set of three children's books that explore the individual stories of inspirational, successful Australians living with blindness or low vision. The books aim to help change expectations of what children and young people who are blind or have low vision can achieve.

The first book of the series, titled *Surfing in the Dark*, portrays the story of Matt Formston, from losing 95 percent of his vision at the age of five, to becoming a three-time World Champion para-surfer, Paralympian and successful businessman.

Matt spoke at the launch of the book, cementing the importance of how inspirational role models have the power to not only influence people living with blindness or low vision, but to educate the wider society about the misconceptions of vision impairment.

'When I was five, I was told that I would never play sport and that my career aspirations were essentially unattainable. My family and I decided that this wasn't good enough. The words 'Matt can't do that' didn't exist,' Matt said.

Matt added, 'From here, I developed an inherent belief in what I can do. I want to share that strength, desire and guidance to children and young people. I want them to see themselves in my story so that they don't ever feel like they aren't good enough to achieve their dreams.'

'We want to challenge the stigma associated with the capabilities of blind and low vision individuals, and the Big Visions books are an initiative to drive this change and start important conversations around inclusion.

We want the powerful stories of these inspirational Australians to pave the way for people living with blindness or low vision, and to show children and young people that they can achieve success,' says Ron Hooton, Vision Australia CEO.

Sales from the Big Visions series go back into Vision Australia's Children and Young People team to continue to deliver much needed services.

The Big Visions books are available across leading Australian retailers.



For more information call **1800 42 20 77**

or visit www.visionaustralia.org/get-involved/ways-to-help