

People's Choice Medal 2026



Isla, Labrador Retriever, Sydney NSW

Nominated Charity Recipient: Guide Dogs NSW/ACT

Impact area: Independence, mobility and confidence

Role: Guide dog supporting independent living

Community supported: Guide Dogs NSW/ACT

Years of impact: 2+ years

Why this matters: Isla's partnership has restored independence, confidence and freedom, transforming everyday life through trust and teamwork.

"Prior to being matched with Isla, my world was very dark, and I felt extremely isolated and limited. Isla has significantly improved my quality of life and enabled me to gain a level of independence and confidence I had always dreamt of." **Karlee Symonds, Isla's human**

Before being matched with Isla, her handler Karlee lived with a severe congenital vision impairment that left her legally blind, with only light perception, making independent travel overwhelming and, at times, impossible. Everyday tasks such as walking down the street, using public transport or navigating unfamiliar spaces required constant reliance on others and carried a high level of anxiety.

Isla entered Karlee's life in July 2023 and quickly became a trusted partner. Together, they learned to move through busy environments with confidence, from navigating train stations and shopping centres to managing crowds, traffic crossings and unfamiliar routes. Isla's precision, focus and calm presence have enabled Karlee to travel independently, pursue study and employment, and relocate to a major city for the first time on her own.

Beyond practical mobility, Isla has restored something less visible but equally important. Confidence. With Isla's guidance, spaces that once felt intimidating have become accessible, and routines that once felt out of reach are now part of everyday life. Isla's work is constant and reliable, supporting independence not through grand gestures, but through thousands of small, daily acts of trust.

The People's Choice Award reflects the voices of the public, recognising dogs whose impact is felt deeply and personally. Isla's story resonated widely because it illustrates how guide dogs do far more than assist movement. They restore autonomy, expand opportunity and enable people to live full, self-directed lives.

No judge comments, the people have spoken.

Judging panel reflection

"Isla's story is a powerful reminder of what guide dogs make possible. Through trust, training and partnership, she has restored independence, confidence and freedom in a way that reshapes everyday life. Isla's impact is not abstract, it is lived, practical and deeply transformative." **Agnes Beugnon, Judging Panel**