

AIR Dogs™ Break Communication Barriers to Raise Awareness and Fight Stigma



“Mental illness is like air. Just because you don’t see it, it doesn’t mean it isn’t there. It is all around us.”

Katelyn Baker said this in 2009, soon after losing her 19-year-old brother Kenny to suicide and dealing with discrimination and hurtful comments about the suicide. Her “air” concept led to the creation of Attitudes in Reverse® (AIR) and earned Katelyn, 16 years old at the time, an Ambassador Award from the Governor’s Council on Mental Health Stigma in 2010.

“We met a lot of discrimination due to Kenny’s death. That’s why we’re doing this,” said Tricia Baker, Katelyn’s mother and co-founder of AIR. Another motive is to help prevent for others the difficulties that the Baker family had in obtaining services for Kenny prior to his first suicide attempt.

Reversing Attitudes through School Presentations

Tricia and her husband, Kurt, give presentations at schools and, when allowed by the school administration, bring Miki, their Pomeranian who is a Certified Therapy Dog, along with them. In the first 18 months since AIR was founded in 2009, the Bakers have spoken to 7,000 middle and high school students, and as of mid-December 2012, they were already booked to present to more than 2,000 students in January. Each presentation consists of 30 minutes educating students about mental illness; followed by a brief sharing of Kenny’s story,

along with others who have their own stories to tell and want to share; and a half hour focusing on suicide prevention. “The stories shared by students could be about their own struggles with mental illness or someone they know with a mental illness or lost their battle and completed suicide,” Tricia said.

“When we talk about Kenny, you could hear a pin drop,” Tricia said. “We want to get kids to understand it’s not just kids who appear depressed who could be at risk of attempting suicide. Some people are very good at hiding their depression and suicidal thoughts.” Kenny was one of the frequently happy, as well as successful and often outgoing, teenagers.



With his adorable smile and calm demeanor, Miki says, “Let’s start the conversation!” and it works. People are drawn to Miki at events and engage in discussions about mental health and suicide. Miki is a Certified Therapy Dog and 2011 recipient of an American Kennel Club Award for Canine Excellence.

“We took Miki out and started the conversation. We realized how much it helps. It saves two lives [the person and the dog from a shelter].”

— Kurt Baker, Co-Founder of Attitudes in Reverse and co-owner of Miki

“We’re becoming popular because of the quality of our presentation. Teachers know the students need to hear the information, but most teachers don’t know the right way to teach the subject and many are uncomfortable teaching it because of stigma,” Kurt said.

“We have several students who have mental illness or recovered from addictions who travel with us and share their personal journeys. These young people want to help others,” Tricia added.

Expanding their Mission with AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds™

The idea for the AIR Dogs program “was an immediate light switch,” Kurt said. “We took Miki out and started the conversation. We realized how much it helps people and it would certainly help dogs. It saves two lives,” he said, referring to dogs at shelters who will be

“I believe dogs provide us so much healing and that everyone should have a dog.”
— Tricia Baker, Co-Founder of Attitudes in Reverse and co-owner of Miki

given opportunities to become Emotional Support Dogs. “When we exhibit at community events, people come to us to pet the dogs and ask questions about AIR, and it leads to conversations about mental illness and suicide. Many have opened up about these struggles in their families,” Kurt added.

“Many people have said their dogs saved their lives and others said they are lonely and want dogs. From these conversations, the idea for AIR Dogs came about,” Tricia said. “I truly hope we can grow this program. I believe dogs provide us so much healing and that everyone should have a dog.”

Constantly Seeking Potential AIR Dogs

Just two months after Kenny’s death, Tricia started volunteering at dog training classes conducted by Adrienne Carson, who is also a behavioral consultant. They discussed the idea of AIR, which was established shortly after they met, and not much later, they launched the AIR Dogs program.

Adrienne found Oliver, another Pomeranian, at one of the shelters where she works and took him home to train him and test for his potential as an Emotional Support Dog. “Housing providers must make exceptions to a ‘no-pets’ policy to permit persons with

disabilities to use and live with a service or emotional support animal as a reasonable accommodation,” as this provision of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act is explained in a document produced by Disability Rights California.



The Baker family – parents Tricia and Kurt, daughter Katelyn – established AIR not long after son/brother Kenny committed suicide, in order to educate and support others. AIR Dog Miki is an important part of the program.

“People need to know they have a legal right to have animals in their lives for medical reasons. It’s another form of treatment,” Tricia said.

Oliver passed every test. “He is outgoing. He’s not afraid of loud noises; he investigates them, he doesn’t run away. He has boldness coupled with the desire to be touched and held, or to sit on a person’s lap. He has a real desire to be trained, work, learn and do things, and he is very focused,” Adrienne said. “Oliver is also comfortable around other dogs of all sizes, and he’s very polite and physically affectionate.”

The next step was to find the right person to match with Oliver. Eight months later, Adrienne, the Bakers and Oliver met Stacey at an AIR event, and a perfect match was made.

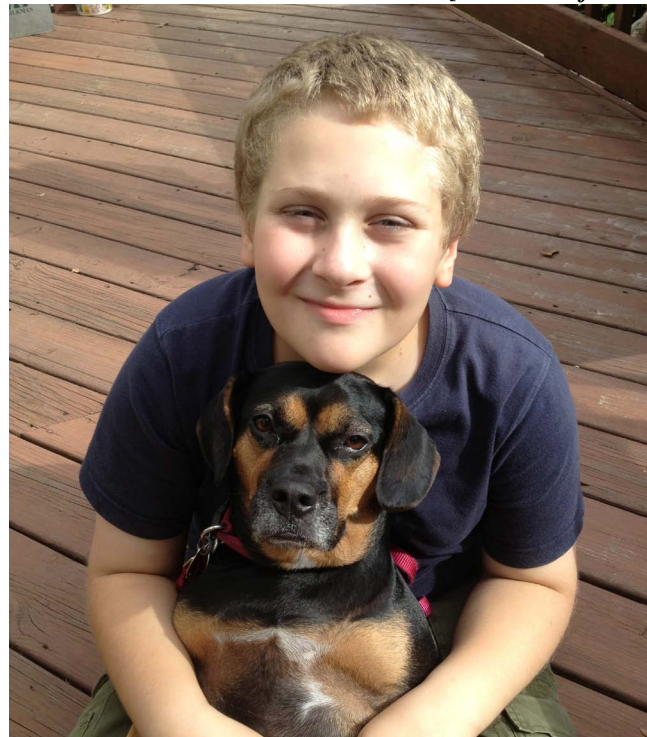
Initiating Relationships that Yield Many Benefits

Tricia explained the physiological reason why petting dogs is good for

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Roxie is a trained Emotional Support Dog who has inspired and comforted Matthew to become sociable and happy.

Miki & Friends: Walk & Run for AIR in May 2012. The Campbell family fostered Roxie for a month to be sure that Matthew can handle the responsibility and decided to adopt Roxie in June 2012. “Once Matthew met Roxie, we knew we weren’t giving her back. Matthew’s always been a dog person, and Roxie is a people dog,” Lauren said. “Roxie is not a crutch; she’s more than that. Even when Roxie’s not around, Matthew can talk about her. The dog has been much more beneficial than therapy,” Lauren said, noting that doctors seem to focus on the medical model and not realize the therapeutic benefit of dogs. “Here’s an excellent opportunity to utilize dogs in the community. People can use them in supportive housing. It really helps; it gives people something to focus on other than themselves,” she added.

Stacey, Matthew and their dogs attend weekly training classes, as well as AIR events. “It’s great. Matthew usually doesn’t want to go out, but he’ll do whatever Roxie is involved in,” Lauren said. To make the training more fun for Matthew, Tricia got a skateboard for Roxie, who is starting to get the hang of it.

Training Also Provides Significant Benefits

“I see personally and professionally the relationship we have with our dogs...the unconditional love, the ability to be yourself and the true joy the dogs bring us. I have also witnessed confidence building in the people while the training process is going on,” said Linda Hobson of Linda Hobson Dog Training.

“With my therapy dogs over the years, I have witnessed the comfort the dogs brought to people. Somehow AIR Dogs and I got together. I do believe it is a great program and will offer my expertise as a professional dog trainer to the families to help build their relationships with their AIR Dogs,” Hobson added.

Hoping to Find More Dogs and Trainers/Foster Families

Adrienne and Tricia are always looking for potential Emotional Support Dogs. When a potential candidate is identified, Adrienne brings the dog home for training and evaluation. From her experience with Oliver, Adrienne knows that giving up the foster dogs is hard. “It’s emotional, but I remind myself that these people *really* need the dogs. The dogs have a job to do,” she said.

Anita Quinn, who works with therapy dogs and trains dogs in obedience and agility, and her husband Dan are eager to become a foster family. “I can truly understand when you’re in a dark place, dogs give you hope and a reason to get out of bed,” Anita said.

“Our whole family is passionate about dog training,” Dan said. “We’ll teach families all that we did at home in order to make a smooth transition.”

Adrienne, Anita and Dan plan to be in contact with adoptive families throughout the fostering/training process, during training sessions and after adoption takes place.

people. “It releases serotonin, oxytocin and dopamine – all good brain chemicals,” she said. The proof is clear when speaking with Stacey and Matthew, a 10-year-old who has had Roxie, a Frengle (French bulldog and beagle mix), since June 2012.

In just the first few months of having Oliver, Stacey has gained tremendous benefits. “I get up at the same time every day and no naps are allowed. That’s been a positive thing for me,” she said. “I’ve been very lonely. Now, people come up to me and ask questions. Oliver brings out the best in me.”

Oliver has transformed life for Stacey’s parents, as well. “When Oliver came into our lives, my husband thought a dog would be too much work for Stacey, but she proved her father wrong,” said Georgia, Stacey’s mother. Naturally, the entire family is enjoying Oliver, as well as participating in AIR events together.

Adrienne also found Roxie at a shelter and recommended the dog because she is “bold, eager to approach strangers, and comfortable with both animals and people,” Adrienne said. “This is so important because the dogs will attend AIR events where there are other animals and people asking questions.”

Roxie proved to be an ideal Emotional Support Dog for Matthew, who has anxiety, depression and a pervasive developmental disorder. He and his mother, Lauren, learned about the program at the first annual

Additional education is provided through monthly meetings that focus on various topics, such as nutrition, medical needs and how family members can agree on what is best for a dog. “These meetings are also a forum for exchanging ideas and answering questions, whether or not the participants have AIR dogs,” Tricia said. “We also want to open up meetings to potential foster families.” These monthly support meetings are held at Heavenly Hounds Dog Training School in Lawrenceville, NJ.

Some of these meetings are conducted by Michael Tokiwa, DVM, Owner, Progressive Veterinary Care LLC, The Animal Hospital at Kingston and Blawenburg.

“People can use dogs in supportive housing. It gives people something to focus on other than themselves.”
– Lauren Campbell, mother of Matthew, owner of Roxie

Local Veterinarian Offers Valuable Volunteer Services

Several months ago, Tricia met Dr. Tokiwa through Chantal Cartier of Maverick Pet Partners. “Chantal has been fundamental in making strong community connections with my practice, and I am happy to say that AIR Dogs is one such great connection,” Dr. Tokiwa said. “My involvement began as an offer of veterinary services to one AIR Dogs placement, Oliver. Many of these AIR Dog recipients have never had a family pet, let alone a therapy dog, and I felt that any way I could offer support would be beneficial. Since then, we (owners and pets) have bonded strongly.”

“Nothing is stronger than the human-animal bond. The recipients of AIR Dogs have proclaimed a significant change in their ability to handle the stresses of their conditions. These dogs have enhanced their lives, and I am told that each and every time I see them. They now have significant beings in their lives who are more than willing and able to listen to them, and pass no judgment. They continually offer unconditional love,” Dr. Tokiwa added.

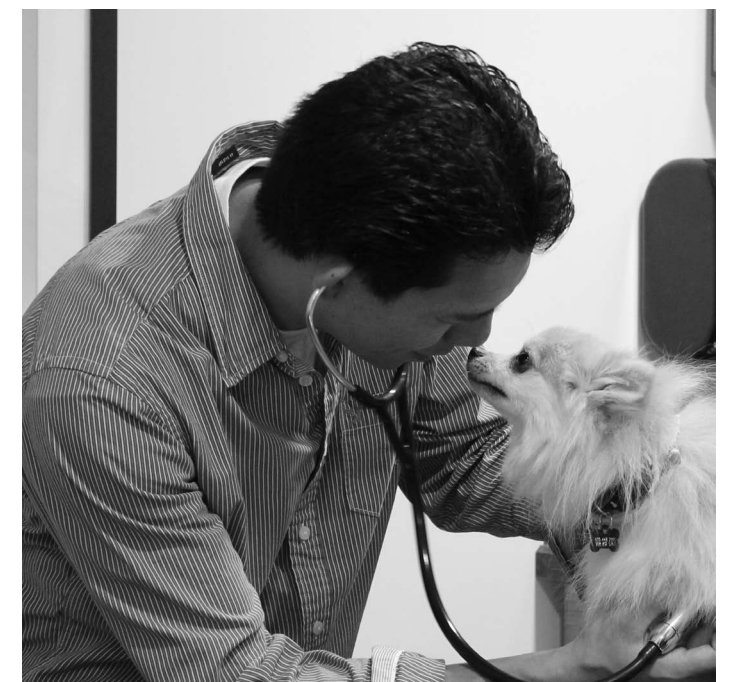
“Even my limited exposure to the recipients of such wonderful therapy pets has shown me the importance of these four-legged friends to the livelihood of these afflicted individuals. It is my hope that this program expands and becomes more widely recognized. My role will remain the same: (1) to donate my time to maintain the medical well

being of these therapy pets, so they can perform their duties, (2) to educate families who have never had a dog about pet health care, and most importantly, (3) to enjoy the successes that these people achieve through this unique relationship,” he added.

Reaching Out Online and through Events, Seeking Volunteers and Other Support

For more information, visit www.attitudesinreverse.org and save the date, May 18, 2013, for the second annual *Miki & Friends: Walk & Run for AIR*. This event, which is being supported by the national chain of Petsmart stores and several local businesses, will feature much more than the walk and 5K run. “We are going to do a butterfly release to remember all those who we lost too early. We will also put on a concert; offer American Kennel Club *Canine Good Citizen* testing and *Bright & Beautiful* therapy dog evaluations; a Blessing of the Animals; and a Mini-Meet the Breeds presentation,” Tricia said. Details on this event, as well as a T-shirt design contest (entries are due February 28, 2013), are available in the Events section of the AIR website (www.attitudesinreverse.org). Information can also be obtained by contacting Tricia at tricia@AttitudesInReverse.org; 609-945-3200; or Attitudes in Reverse, P.O. Box 3127, Princeton, NJ 08543.

“We are 100 percent volunteer and we are passionate. I think we have accomplished much in a fairly short period of time. There is so much more we want to do, we have lots of plans and hope to get more volunteers to help us carry them out,” Tricia said.



Oliver is the first AIR Dog, matched with Stacey. Pictured here, Oliver patiently goes through a regular checkup with Dr. Tokiwa.