



SIX09

A Breath of Fresh AIR: Talking (and barking) it out

By Sam Sciarrotta • communitynews.org

Tricia Baker wants to talk about it.

The mental health advocate, with the help of her daughter, founded Attitudes in Reverse just over a decade ago after her son, Kenny, died by suicide. She's since dedicated her life to suicide prevention and erasing the stigma attached to mental health disorders—as the organization's motto says, "Start the conversation, reverse an attitude, save a life." She knew immediately that she wanted to get out and talk to people—especially students—about mental wellness and signs of suicide.

"The longer you wait to start treatment, the more difficult it is to treat," she said. "That's why we feel it's so important to start talking to young people early. We equate mental health disorders with any other medical illness. We tell the little ones, 'Sometimes your stomach can get sick, sometimes hearts get sick, well, sometimes brains can get sick.' We want them to know what that might feel like, and we also want them to know that there are people out there, those safe, trusted adults who are willing to listen and help them with those thoughts and feelings."

To make those discussions a little easier, Baker channeled one of her own inspirations: her dog, Miki.

When Kenny was having a tough day, Baker said, he'd ask her to go for a ride.

"The thing that would help calm him down was movement," she said.

They would drive around for hours. After his death, the place Baker missed him most was in the car.

"It was so lonely," she said. "Miki started coming with me, never to replace my son, but to just kind of fill that emptiness a little bit."

Miki also helped Baker cope with newfound grief, PTSD, anxiety and panic attacks.

"Just having him around helped me feel better and be able to function in a healthy way," she said. "He just started going places, and we started seeing the effect he had on people. People would talk about their struggles with mental health issues. Schools would invite us in to talk about mental health and signs of suicide."

What started with Miki grew into dozens of dogs at all of AIR's programming, from talks at schools to being a calming, quiet

presence at a wake. The AIR dogs have a massive presence in the Hopewell Valley school district, and the organization has even started training some of the district's teachers' dogs.

"Some of the programs are tough," Baker said. "It's tough to talk about significant mental health issues. It's tough to talk about signs of suicide. But then after the programs, there's the dogs. There's the opportunity to come up and meet the dogs, pet the dogs and also share with the human on the other end of the leash if they have some struggles. We ask our humans to be youth mental health and first aid certified. If they hear something that a young person is saying to a dog, they can then report that back to school staff."

We talked with Baker about AIR's dogs, mental health and the importance of reaching out. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Six09: Tell me a little bit about the effect dogs can have on someone's mental health.

Tricia Baker: Up until 28 years ago, scientists didn't really study dogs and the effect on humans because anyone who had a dog knew that they made you feel better. Once that research started, we learned that the simple act of looking at a dog releases oxytocin, serotonin and dopamine—it causes a physical response. When humans interact with dogs, it helps us feel better.

Six09: Were the school programs the first venture into therapy dogs for you guys?

Baker: I lost my son to suicide in 2009, and as a response we knew that we needed to get out and talk to kids about mental





wellness and signs of suicide. Miki started coming pretty much everywhere in the beginning with me. He just started going places, and we started seeing the effect he had on people. People would talk about their struggles with mental health issues. Schools would invite us in to talk about mental health and signs of suicide.

We have dogs at all of our programs, from kindergarten all the way through college age. Some of the programs are tough. It's tough to talk about significant mental health issues. It's tough to talk about signs of suicide.

Six09: What is it about dogs that helps make those conversations easier?

Baker: It's just this magic that happens, this human-canine bond that exists. Dogs just make us feel good. I've been in schools where the students have said, "I need to go down to the nurse's office to get my allergy medicine so I can pet the dog."

We sometimes go to schools for finals week. I was at a school where we had six dogs there. One girl came around to me and I asked her what test she had today. She said "I don't have any finals today. I'm just here to pet the dogs." It's just amazing. When a school has a wellness fair and we're invited in, they tell us that we're the most popular workshop. There are so many kids who want to come to the therapy dog sessions.

We've just rolled out a new program for elementary students, and it's all about dogs. It's called Miki and Friends Go to School: Exploring Our Emotions through the Eyes of Dogs. I wear two hats: mental health advocate and dog trainer. I find very often the hats overlap.

What I discovered was that the more I studied dog behavior, I saw the similarities between human behavior. That's what this book is all about. It's about dogs and how they respond to certain things, how they have emotional responses, different choices that they make—the same thing that human children can do. It doesn't put the spotlight on the child. We're not talking about you, we're talking about the dog.

Afterwards, they get to meet the dogs. It's a fairly new program because of COVID. Every place that we've been, it's been very, very well received. One teacher told us it was the highlight of their year. I was very honored.

Six09: Can you tell me a little bit about why it's so important to reach out and erase the mental health stigma?

Baker: That is so important. That's our message. The statistics are really staggering. One in five of all of our young people struggle with some sort of mental health disorder, and less than 33% of those actually reach out and receive treatment. What I can't stress enough is that 70 to 90% of all mental health disorders are treatable. It's like any other significant illness, though.

The younger they are that we can educate them, the more likely that we won't have people with substance abuse disorders and overdoses and suicides. My son, we saw signs in him when he was six. We didn't ignore it. We talked to his pediatrician. He saw a therapist. It wasn't ignored. I don't want anyone to think that my story has to be their story. Kenny had a very significant illness. He was in that 10% of very difficult to treat illnesses.

We also lost his grandmother to suicide, and that's another thing we have to talk about—the genetic component of these illnesses that lead to suicide. If we have suicide or depression or alcoholism in our family, we need to be very aware and watch the things that might show in our children so that we can identify these illnesses and help them get support at an early age. The earlier we treat, the more likely the success of that treatment. That's the story.

Kenny's story is a sad one, but it's a story that I believe helps to inspire those who are struggling to get help. Kenny said goodbye to all his friends the day before he died. He talked to them on the phone. He left voicemail messages, email messages. He said goodbye to everybody. But it wasn't until after he died that at least a dozen young people said, "You know Mrs. Baker, I had a really bad feeling. I didn't want to say anything because I didn't want to get Kenny in trouble. I didn't want to get him mad at me."

So it's important for all of us as a community to understand what the signs and symptoms are, let our friends know that we care, we're concerned, and if they're struggling, we're here to help them find help. I don't ever want a young person to feel like they have to take this on by themselves. We want to talk a lot about those safe, trusted adults who are there and who will listen to help keep them connected to the right resources.

These brain illnesses are evil, ugly illnesses that lie to us. They lie and they tell us that we don't deserve help. That's why very often these young people who are struggling who die by suicide, they never, ever reach out and ask for help because their brains are telling them they don't deserve help. Their brains are telling them that their family, their friends, the world would be better off without them. That's why, as a community, we have this responsibility to be there for each other, to listen with compassion and empathy and kindness, and to help our friends get help. We want to get people treatment early so they can be successful and happy in life.

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