

We Celebrate Therapy Dogs!

By Tricia Baker - Photos courtesy of AIR



Harley, the Labrador mix, brings smiles to students at a middle school in the West Windsor-Plainsboro School District.

April 11th is Dog Therapy Appreciation Day followed by National Therapy Animal Day on April 30th.

Anyone who has a dog in his/her life knows just how good our dogs help us feel. Their canine antics make us smile and laugh. When looking at the science, we find just being with a dog releases oxytocin, the relationship hormone. Petting a dog increases serotonin and

dopamine, good destressing brain chemicals. Petting a dog also decreases the stress hormone, cortisol.

Attitudes In Reverse® (AIR®) makes the most of these scientific facts in all of their educational programs to help save lives. AIR offers programs that certified therapy dogs are involved in to help eliminate stigma and encourage individuals of all ages to open up about their mental health struggles. These programs are tailored for different student age groups, have been presented to more than 100,000 students since 2010 and based on feedback received, are helping to save many lives.

In 2020, while sitting outside listening to the songs of the cicadas, AIR Therapy Dogs visited with the young students of Princeton's Littlebrook Elementary School. AIR representatives shared the Miki & Friends Go to School: Exploring Emotions through the Eyes of Dogs program. This program is based on Miki the Pomeranian, the American Kennel Club's pick for the top therapy dog in 2011. We discussed emotions, helping students to understand their feelings, and how to make good choices in responding to their emotions. And the very best part of the program is that the students get to meet the celebrities in the book—Miki and his friends.

Some thoughts from a Littlebrook teacher: "The best part of the program was the kids getting to interact with the host and the dogs. The entire assembly was filled with opportunities for the kids to engage in conversations."



JoJo the AIR School-Based Therapy Dog "reading" with students along with Dr. Thomas Smith, former Superintendent of Hopewell Valley Regional School District.

every day. These school-based dogs provide distractions during finals week, greetings upon arrival at school, and support during times of crisis, such as the loss of a friend. The support to students is limitless! Currently, AIR School-Based Dogs are in several districts, with plans to expand to more than half a dozen districts in the 2022-23 school year.

If you have a dog, that likes people and is comfortable being around other dogs, you may consider joining the Miki & Friends Walk for AIR on Saturday, May 21st. For more information, go to WalkForAIR.org or reach out to Tricia@AIR.ngo. There is nothing more rewarding than giving back while helping others, with your canine partner at your side.



The sweet Pomeranian, Brie, visits with multiple students at the Little Brook Elementary School of the Princeton Public School District after an AIR mental wellness educational program.