



Attitudes in Reverse®
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Attitudes In Reverse® Honors Nikki Casey, Social Worker, as *Partner in Hope*

PRINCETON, NJ, September 21, 2023 – Throughout her career, Nikki Casey has been dedicated to helping improve children’s mental wellbeing. She worked as a psychiatric screener, in inpatient and therapeutic after-school programs and with Prevent Child Abuse New Jersey, and has served as a social worker in the West New York School District since February 2009. She met Tricia Baker, Co-founder of Attitudes In Reverse® (AIR®), at a dog training class that Baker led and then convinced the school district to have Baker present mental health educational programs for all K-12 students, as well as staff and parents. To recognize Casey’s initiative on behalf of youth, AIR will honor Casey with a *Partner in Hope Award* during the 7th Annual Taste of Hope event, which will be held on October 4, 2023, from 6:00 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. at the Princeton Marriott at Forrestal, Princeton, New Jersey.

“We have a large Spanish-speaking population, so Tricia developed her presentation in Spanish. The first AIR presentation was in January 2022 for 600 to 700 school staff via Zoom. Tricia had them engaged and they asked if she could come back. Student presentations began in May 2022, first for the middle school, and they were very well received,” Casey said. “Kids who were identified as struggling with mental health challenges were linked to services. Otherwise, they might not have been.”

“During the 2022-2023 school year, Tricia presented to all elementary grades, one middle school grade and two high school grades, and she will educate the rest of the high school students in September. We also plan to have her speak with fourth graders in 2023-2024 school year,” Casey added.

“Providing mental health education is critical for youth of all ages and the younger, the better because 50% of mental health disorders develop between ages 14 and 25,” said AIR Co-founder Tricia Baker. “By educating students beginning at an early age and as they get older, we increase the likelihood that students who experience mental and emotional health difficulties will speak up and ask for help. With the understanding that depression, anxiety and other mental health disorders are real, brain-based illnesses and should not be any cause of shame or embarrassment, many more people of all ages will seek help when they need it.”

“It’s equally essential to educate adults, especially those who have and/or work with youth,” added AIR Co-founder Kurt Baker. “With comprehension of the nature of mental health disorders and the ability to recognize the signs that individuals are struggling, doors to support – whether clinical, nonclinical or both -- will more likely be opened and along with them, opportunities to prevent mental health crises. By contrast, without understanding and help for

individuals who are having difficulties, mental health disorders can worsen and increase risk of suicide.”

“AIR’s future is unlimited. I introduced AIR therapy dogs to a friend who works with Child Wellness Institute, a subsidiary of Prevent Child Abuse New Jersey. These kids are often forgotten and most at risk,” Casey said.

“It makes you sleep a bit easier at night knowing Tricia and the dogs are spending time with the kids and giving them extra love,” Casey added, referring to certified therapy dogs whom Tricia and Katelyn train and certify, along with the dogs’ owners.

“I have a Golden Retriever and grew up with one. When I have a bad day, there’s nothing better than being with my dog, so I’ve always seen the value of animals. They teach a lot about empathy. There’s always a clean slate – a fresh start – with animals. They’re always happy to see you,” Casey said. “We need to be the Golden Retriever for children and give them that fresh start every day.”

AIR gives many dogs and their owners opportunities to provide this valuable service and, as a result, gives individuals of all ages comfort that encourages them to seek ongoing support.

Attend AIR’s Taste of Hope Event to Bring These Opportunities to Many More People

Casey will be honored along with Robert Garofalo, PhD(c) Chief of Police, West Windsor Township Police Department, and Kevin D. Coleman, CEO and Managing Principal, Intrepid Commercial Realty, *Champions of Hope*; and fellow *Partner in Hope* Maria Petsos, BCBA, LDT/C, District Supervisor of Special Education, Ewing Public Schools.

AIR is grateful for the event sponsors: AIR Sponsor - Connell Company; Faith Sponsors - J. Robert Bratman, Esq.; Peter Weedfald and Brenna Whaley, Sharp; and Stark & Stark Attorneys at Law; Dignity Sponsor - Szafer Lakind Blumstein & Blader, PC; Love Sponsors - Antares Event Planning & Consulting, LLC; Hinkle, Prior & Fischer, P.C.; Robert Gonnello; Leary, Bride, Mergner & Bongiovanni, P.A.; Sajid & Simin; and The Barker Lounge; and Half-Day Class Sponsors - Carl Archer, Cascade Advisors; Oaks Integrated Care; Renzi Legal Resources; World Insurance Associates LLC; and Zeiger Consulting LLC.

AIR is also thankful for the participating restaurants and dessert, wine and spirit vendors: Antimo’s Italian Kitchen, Applebee’s of Lawrenceville, Carella’s Chocolates, CATB Liquor Imports, Crown of India, De Lorenzo’s Tomato Pies, Iron & Ivy at Princeton Marriott at Forrestal, Joe Canal’s of Lawrenceville, KK Sweets, Local Greek, Life Vine Wine, Madam Cupcakes, Outback Steakhouse of Hamilton, P.F. Chang’s, Public Wine, Beer & Spirits, Plush Vodka, Ruth’s Chris Steak House, Seasons 52, Senor Sangria, Sourland Mountain Spirits, Starbucks and Texas Roadhouse.

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Attitudes In Reverse® (AIR®) was established by Tricia, Kurt and Katelyn Baker of Plainsboro, NJ, in 2010, soon after their son/brother Kenny died by suicide following a long battle against severe depression and anxiety. Their mission is to save lives by educating students about mental health, related disorders and suicide prevention. Since January 2011, they have presented to more than 160,000 students in elementary, middle and high schools and colleges in New Jersey, New York, Vermont, Missouri, Texas and Arizona. AIR also offers the AIR Dogs: Paws for MindsSM program, bringing dogs into schools to help students de-stress and engage in the conversation about mental health. In addition, AIR trains and certifies Emotional Support Animals and offers a lunch-and-learn program for businesses. For more information about AIR, please visit www.air.ngo or call 609-945-3200.

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