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# Princeton *Living*

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## **Meet The Bakers** *Spreading Hope & Healing*



*From left: Kurt with Misha Silver Lining; Tricia with Miki the Pomeranian; and Katelyn holding Henry Pomchester, with Albie on the left and Ronan on the right.*

## ***Baker Family Honors Son's Memory by Advocating for Mental Health Awareness***

*To date, they have shared hope and healing with over 160,000 students and staff through their AIR® Dogs Therapy Program*

*Information provided by Tricia Baker | As told to Jennifer Amato | Photography by Olga Kolleyen of Portrait Deluxe Studio*



Photo courtesy of The Bakers.

Kenny Baker was a kind-hearted young man. He was smart, funny, good at sports and was always making others laugh. Kenny also loved dogs.

When he was 6 years old, he started to struggle in reading. The school counselors tested him, and they found that Kenny had a learning disability called dyslexia. His family found out at that time that Kenny had the long-term memory of a 29-year-old.

Kenny was always in math honors classes but also in special education classes for reading and writing because of his learning disability. Kenny was a hard worker, achieving mostly As and Bs throughout his academic life.

In middle school, Kenny decided to emulate his peers and started to build his college resume. Kenny started swimming on a local club swim team. When he got to high school, he was swimming 2-3 hours a day, 6 days a week for the high school team.

Kenny worked at the Princeton YWCA as a lifeguard. All the time, he maintained good grades.

But about halfway through freshman year, his mother Tricia noticed something: she noticed that Kenny wasn't sleeping very much, maybe 2-3 hours every night, because he was so busy with academics and extracurricular activities. Tricia spoke to Kenny about her concerns, but Kenny's sleep didn't improve. Kenny was so busy keeping up with all his peers that he felt he needed to sacrifice his sleep to do so.

It was a few weeks after this conversation between Kenny and Tricia that the Baker family changed forever. Kenny had his first mental health break and was hospitalized for depression, anxiety disorder and suicidal ideation.

For over three years, Kenny struggled with his biological brain illness. He was hospitalized six times in three years. When you go into a mental health hospital you go in for weeks, sometimes months—how do you explain that to your peers at school? Kenny was embarrassed by the stigma and lied. He told his peers that he

had mononucleosis for over three years. Young people are smart and figured out that no one can have mono for that long, and it opened the door to judgment and criticism.

Sadly, there were school staff who did not understand mental health disorders and judged Kenny. Kenny was called lazy. He was not lazy—he was living with a debilitating illness.

Sadly, three weeks before graduating high school, Kenny lost hope that he was ever going to be healthy. Kenny lost hope that he was ever going to be “normal” and ended his life by suicide.

For those three-plus years, Kenny's sister Katelyn watched her brother go through all his struggles. She watched him be judged and bullied because he had a biological brain illness. She had to live in the aftermath of Kenny's death, with no counseling support from the school staff.

Due to Kenny's struggles, his illness, and his death, Attitudes In Reverse® (AIR® was born).

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

This phrase was penned by Katelyn. ◆◆◆



Kenny and Katelyn in younger days with the family dogs Egan and Lucky. Photo courtesy of The Bakers.

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

Kurt Baker graduated from the United States Merchant Marine Academy in 1982 with a B.S. in Marine Engineering. He is a private wealth manager with Certified Wealth Management & Investment known for serving successful business owners by helping them find clarity in their financial world so they can focus on what matters most.

Almost 15 years ago, Tricia Baker decided she wanted a way to utilize her love for dogs, her passion for advocacy work, her teaching skills and her business experience in order to improve the lives of others by bringing dogs into their lives.

Together the couple blended their talents and in 2010, created AIR® (Attitudes In Reverse®), a program focused on youth mental health and suicide prevention, in Princeton. Kurt handles net-

working and finances. Tricia developed and shares the mental wellness programs with students and faculty.

More than 160,000 students across the U.S. have received mental health and suicide prevention programming through AIR® since 2011. AIR® offers programs for kindergarteners through college-aged students. AIR® also offers parent programs and school staff professional development. AIR® offers a program in Spanish for the English Language Learner students, grades 7-12.

2011 is significant because the Bakers' Pomeranian Miki received the American Kennel Club's Award of Canine Excellence (ACE). On their trip to Orlando to receive his award, countless people shared with the Bakers how much their dogs helped them emotionally. It was Miki and his award that inspired the Bakers to

form the AIR® Dogs: Paws for Minds program, a therapy dog program with a focus on human mental wellness and canine safety.

In January 2015 the Bakers founded AIR® Dogs: Paws for Minds, and Tricia serves as the director of the therapy dog organization. The organization partners with schools and facilities to ensure that therapy dogs provide support to students, patients and workers. Animal-assisted intervention provides emotional support dogs to peers as well as training to volunteers and their therapy dogs.

Tricia is an evaluator to ensure that each AIR® Dog has the highest quality of training to ensure safety for all. She coordinates with handlers and facilities to ensure a successful visit.

“Therapy dogs allow people, especially teens, to feel comfortable about talking about their personal journeys with mental health issues,” she said. “The goal is to have at least one certified therapy dog on each school property every day.”

Tricia is also part of 20 Paws Dog Training in South Brunswick and Plainsboro as a certified professional dog trainer (CPDT-KA). Since 2008 Tricia has been a teacher of all levels of dog training, in various facilities, to help humans work towards their goals of training fully certified therapy dogs, emotional support dogs, or just well-behaved companion dogs.

Prior to her work with her furry friends, Tricia worked for Merrill Lynch in Plainsboro from 1988 to 2001, finishing her career there as vice president of marketing.



*Katelyn with her dog Ronan while teaching classes. Photo courtesy of The Bakers.*

Kurt is the host of the weekly radio show Master Your Finances which shares inspiring stories of entrepreneurs from startups to billionaires along with the providers that help them succeed. He enjoys swimming, reading, meditating, journaling and going to the gym with his daughter.

Although he is not a professional dog trainer, he has learned how to use positive reinforcement methods with dogs through osmosis.

Watching Katelyn and Tricia teach, he couldn't help but become a trainer of their six dogs.

Their daughter Katelyn is 30 years old, and a graduate of The College of New Jersey. She was instrumental in developing the AIR® Dogs: Paws for Minds guidelines. She travels the state to work with school staff to train their personal dogs to be school-based therapy dogs.

She keeps busy as a professional dog trainer, under the business name 20Paws.com, and has been training for over 12 years. She





Photo courtesy of The Bakers.

teaches scent work classes and does in-home behavioral sessions. Scent work is a dog sport created to emulate tasks performed by professional detection dogs. It allows dogs to harness their innate sense of smell to detect odors, and helps them build confidence and a deeper relationship between handler and dog.

In 2019, the Hopewell Valley Regional School District (HVRSD) experienced a tragedy with the loss of Danielle Eckert. Dr. Thomas Smith, who was the superintendent at the time, did all he could to support the grieving students. Dr. Smith invited in the AIR® Dogs for support. Before the dogs' arrival, students were quiet. No one was talking. Then the dogs walked in. The students sat on the floor with the dogs, the counselors sat on the floor with the students and the healing began. A week later, Dr. Smith asked Tricia how they could have a therapy dog on every school property, every day. This was the beginning of the AIR® Dogs: Paws for Minds School-Based Therapy Dog program.

“The proof of success is the student experience. Some people may dismiss therapy dogs; however, once you witness an interaction with students (or staff) you will be convinced of the positive impact they have on the life of a student,” Dr. Smith said.

At the end of the 2023 school year, AIR® is proud to share that they have 75 dog/handler teams in New Jersey and Pennsbury school districts. When dogs are on school property, they can respond to situations quickly. If a student is having a bad day, a certified school-based dog will be on site for that student to visit with, right then.

“So often we have heard of students who don't want to go to class. They visit with the dogs for only a short time, and they seem to forget why they left class. They go back to class with a smile,” Tricia said. “We also hear about students with school refusal.

The students remember that they will be able to visit with the dog during the school day and go to school so they can visit. Then they go to class with the burdens of the day a little less and with their spirits lighter. Dogs will be on school property on stressful testing days. Spending time with dogs helps alleviate the stress and can help students be more successful on the tests.”

As the AIR® Dog program continues to grow and more and more requests were being made for therapy dogs, Tricia knew the team had to grow. She went back to the Texas breeder. To Tricia's luck, there was a new litter of Pomeranian pups that had wonderful temperaments in their family tree. Within a few weeks, the Goofy Goober, the wolf sable Pomeranian, was traveling to New Jersey to start his new life. Goober has visited with well over 100,000 students in New Jersey, from Hudson County all the way to the Pinelands. Goober is currently 7 years old.

Katelyn's 2-year-old Scottish Collie, Ronan, is her partner during instructional classes. Katelyn and Ronan have participated in several Fast Cat events. Fast Cat is a timed 100-yard dash where dogs run one at a time, chasing a lure. Ronan loves to run and has been timed at 27 miles an hour.

When she is not teaching, Katelyn does trials with her dog Henry Pomchester, an 8-year-old Pomeranian. Henry always surprises the other scent work participants, as typically Pomeranians are not active in this sport.

The family also has Misha Silver Lining among its pup pack. Misha is an Old Time Scotch Collie, a rare breed, and came into Tricia's life during the aftermath of Kenny's death. He brought Tricia happiness, earning him the surname Silver Lining. He is smart, intuitive, and gentle. Misha will be 11 in October.

In March 2023, Tricia was honored to share “Miki & Friends Go to School: Exploring Emotions” through the eyes of dogs with the third graders at Little Brook. This is a story, written by Tricia during the lockdowns of COVID. The story teaches young students, kindergarten through fourth grade, how to identify and label emotions but all through the eyes of dogs. ◆◆◆

Miki and friends with Goober. Photo courtesy of The Bakers.



Do you know a neighbor who has a story to share? You can nominate one of your neighbors to be featured in an upcoming issue by sending an email to Cheryl Finger at [cfinger@bestversionmedia.com](mailto:cfinger@bestversionmedia.com).