

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**AIR® Therapy Dogs Help Address the Youth Mental Health Crisis;**

**Program Creator Katelyn Baker to Be Honored**

***April Is National Therapy Dog Month***

PRINCETON/WEST WINDSOR, NEW JERSEY (April 4, 2024) – Feelings of persistent sadness and hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors increased by about 40% among youth in the decade prior to the pandemic, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System. In addition to the long-lasting effects of COVID-19, local and global situations such as mass violence, racism, natural disasters and bullying in person and online have had a severe impact on children and adolescents’ mental health, which could seem insurmountable. Fortunately, Attitudes In Reverse® (AIR®) has a unique strategy for mitigating the youth mental health crisis. Through the AIR Dogs®: Paws for Minds™ program, certified therapy dog/handler teams are available during school days to support students, strengthen their mental wellness and prevent suicide.

To date, 75 therapy dog/handler teams have been certified in eight school districts in New Jersey and one in Pennsylvania. They are trained by Tricia Baker, CPDT-KA (Certified Professional Dog Trainer-Knowledge Assessed), and her daughter Katelyn, ANWI℠ (Associate Nose Work Instructors℠) Instructor and Head Trainer of Plainsboro, NJ, who established AIR along with husband/father Kurt and his father Sy soon after losing their son/brother/grandson Kenny to suicide in 2009.

Overall, interacting with dogs has a positive impact on people’s mental health. “Just looking at a dog releases oxytocin, the relationship hormone; and petting a dog releases serotonin and dopamine, which are feel-good brain chemicals. Petting a dog also lowers individuals’ levels of cortisol, which is a stress hormone,” Tricia explained. She has therapy dogs with her at every mental health education presentation at schools (kindergarten through college) and when she and AIR volunteers participate in school and community events.

Recognizing the greatly increasing need for mental health support for youth, Tricia and Katelyn significantly expanded opportunities for students to benefit from dogs’ natural ability to provide comfort by creating the AIR Dogs®: Paws for Minds™ program. “By having therapy dog teams in schools, students can receive the support they need when they have a difficult day and if they are experiencing long-term depression or anxiety,” Tricia stated.

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The dogs have also demonstrated a natural ability to make youth feel comfortable opening up about their mental health struggles. In the 13 years that Tricia has been presenting mental health education programs in schools, she has observed that after petting the dogs, students share that they have been feeling depressed or anxious. Such symptoms may be obvious in students’ demeanor even if they don’t verbally express their difficulties, and the comfort gained from the dogs has led to students’ willingness to speak with counselors.

The AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds program also includes Animal Assisted Crisis Response. “In the past two weeks alone, our dogs were in five different school districts providing support after the loss of a friend,” Tricia said.

**Program Creator Katelyn Baker to Be Honored**

Katelyn’s love for animals and seeing how her personal dogs benefited herself and others through tragedies inspired her to want to expand AIR’s therapy dog program. “The question was how to do this and sadly, the answer came five years ago when a young student in the Hopewell Valley School District (HVRSD) died by suicide. The AIR Dogs were invited in to offer support to the surviving students,” Tricia said. “What the superintendent Dr. Thomas Smith saw was magic. He saw how the students responded and began their healing process when the dogs walked in. In a partnership with HVRSD and AIR, the AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds program was born.” The goal was to have one certified therapy dog on every school property each day.

Katelyn was instrumental in the development and execution of this program. She created the 11-month training curriculum, and she travels across New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania to instruct, test and certify the human-canine teams.

To recognize Katelyn’s unique and impactful contributions to youths’ mental health through this program, the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies (NJAMHAA) will present her with the *Innovative Champion of Children’s Mental Health Award* during its annual Champions of Courage and Compassion Awards Ceremony, which will be held on April 9, 2024 from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. during NJAMHAA’s Spring Conference, *Advancing Opportunities, Improving Lives*, at the Delta Hotels by Marriott in Somerset, NJ.

“As one of the founders of AIR, Katelyn is so inspiring. Immediately after her brother’s passing, she was struck by how stigmatizing, cruel and ignorant people can be. She and her family have been achieving an indelible, positive impact on others by helping them cope with tragedies immediately after they occur and in the long run, and through educational programs about mental health and suicide prevention. Katelyn is a trailblazer and a powerful representative of the youth voice because she is a contemporary of this extremely vulnerable population,” said Debra L. Wentz, PhD, President and CEO of NJAMHAA. “Though there are many therapy dog programs, Katelyn and her family are the first in the nation to use Certified School-Based Therapy Dogs in school settings. We’re very proud, touched and pleased to honor this work.”

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**Education Professionals Share their Perspectives on Katelyn’s Impact**

“Katelyn was instrumental in helping the district build a culture and climate where mental health is not stigmatized,” said Elizabeth Machado, a third-grade teacher at Bear Tavern Elementary School, HVRSD. “My daughter Sara was one of the many students who interacted with Katelyn’s Therapy

Dogs. Her counselors reported that she immediately gravitated towards the dogs and found comfort with their presence. Most importantly, they reported that Sara experienced the true magic that Therapy Dogs bring - the wall that Sara built began to come down. The Therapy Dogs helped Sara to feel safe, even while facing a traumatic event. Sara began to share her feelings and was receptive to the counselors’ work. This was the breakthrough that Sara needed to truly begin a journey of healing.”

Machado also shared that an AIR Therapy Dog attended one of her classes. A few students who were struggling with reading prepared for a month to read to the dog. “The AIR Dogs help children develop confidence, positive self-esteem and social skills needed to make connections with peers,” she said.

The comfort and life-saving impact that therapy dogs provide through the AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds program deserve recognition, especially during National Therapy Dog Month.

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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 200,000 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.