



Two years later, family adjusts to loss of son

By Allison Musante, Staff Writer

Since her son, Kenny, took his own life two years ago, Tricia Baker and her family are working through the grief.

In addition to educating others about mental illness through the family's organization, Attitudes in Reverse, Ms. Baker spends her time with five furry friends at home and has begun professionally training puppies and dogs.

May 19 will mark the second anniversary of Kenny's death, a suicide he completed on railroad tracks near his Plainsboro home after a long battle with anxiety disorder at age 19. To coincide with National Mental Health awareness month, Ms. Baker is working to orchestrate several events and fund-raisers in memory of Kenny, who was a senior at West Windsor-Plainsboro High School North, and to reach out to those struggling with similar issues.

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"Our goal is that kids won't feel embarrassed if they have a problem and that they'll get the help they need," she said. "The healthy brain doesn't think about ending its life. Mental health disorders are more treatable than diabetes, but less than a third of people seek treatment, and why is that? It's a stigma. We want to change that."

The nature of her work, however, has taken a toll on her spirit.

"I feel like my life is two different extremes," she said. "On one side I deal with suicide prevention and one side I have my dogs, which keeps my life balanced."

"Just recently, we heard about the senior at Princeton (High School) who committed suicide, and a friend of mine called me because her husband was hospitalized after a suicide attempt. It can be very hard dealing with all this suicide. The dogs bring me joy."

In the throes of Kenny's illness, Ms. Baker took the advice of a friend and child Psychologist.



The Bakers – Katelyn, Kurt, and Tricia – with their dogs

"She told me I was losing myself," she said. "I needed to do something for me."

Ms. Baker, who already had four dogs at home, applied to be a trainer at the South Brunswick PetSmart. There, she accumulated the required 225 hours of hands on training and took the qualifying exam, earning her training certification through the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers.

"I love it. I met so many nice people and we have a running joke at PetSmart – that I remember every single dog's name but never the dog owners' names," she said.

Each of Ms. Baker's dogs has a valuable place in the family for overcoming their loss. Lucky, a 13-year-old golden retriever-mix, was the most connected to Kenny, she said.

"A week before he died, Kenny used to pace a lot, and Lucky would follow him around pacing – like he knew Kenny was going through something serious."



Miki, a Pomeranian, has become something of a “spokesdog” for Attitudes in Reverse. Recently certified as a therapy dog and Canine Good Citizen from the American Kennel Club, Miki travels with Ms. Baker on their lectures to the area schools about mental illness.

“The kids love to pet him and pass him around and it’s amazing how relaxed they start to feel,” she said. “It opens them up to start conversations about mental health, which the whole point of AIR.”

Luna is their 10-year-old pit bull, a dog Ms. Baker said is like a “bull in a China shop, but very gentle and a good girl.” Boxster, a Boston terrier sheltie mix, was Kenny’s dog.

“Boxster was an anxiety puppy – he still is and he’s fearful of other dogs,” she said. “Since Kenny died, his anxiety has gotten worse, like he was stressed by it.”

The newest member of the family is Albie, an Icelandic Sheepdog they adopted as a year after Kenny’s death for their daughter, Katelyn, who is now a senior at High School North.

“Katelyn had asked for a dog of her own and said to me, ‘Mom, I want a dog that looks at me the way the other dogs look at you.’” she said. “Katelyn has been through a lot and she continues to struggle. When you’re a sibling of someone with mental illness, it’s hard because you take a back seat in a way. It took all the air out of the world.”

Upcoming AIR events:

May 14: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. AIR Awareness car wash held by the Plainsboro Rescue Squad, 621 Plainsboro Road, Plainsboro.

May 19: 8 a.m. AIR Awareness mass in Kenny’s honor at Queenship of Mary Catholic Church, 16 Dey Road, Plainsboro.

May 19: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. AIR fund-raiser at Cheeburger, Cheeburger, 3349 Route 1 South, Mercer Mall, Lawrenceville. The business will donate 20 percent of proceeds to AIR.

May 21: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. AIR Awareness concert and National Alliance on Mental Illness walk at Rider University. The concert will feature Marshall Crenshaw, Amy Kuney, Michael Glazier, Rhymes with Orange, and Xenia Sky. The event is free with a barbecue to follow.

Regional help hotline: The region’s 24-hour crisis prevention hotline provided by Contact of Mercer County is 609-896-2120 or 609-585-2244. The hotline is staffed by trained volunteers who provide compassionate listening and safety services to those in need.