

Mental Health Education and Services Are Vital and Effective

September Is National Recovery Month; September 10, 2013 Is National Suicide Prevention Day

We are three survivors of suicide. We're on a mission to save lives and we encourage everyone to join in this mission. Our tools are education and advocacy.

Two of us – Kurt and Tricia Baker – lost our son Kenny in 2009 after he struggled with severe depression and anxiety and many different treatment efforts for four years. While coping with our loss, we also had to contend with discrimination over how Kenny died. We immediately took action with the hope of preventing these difficult situations for other families. Along with our daughter Katelyn, we established Attitudes in Reverse® (AIR). We educate middle and high school and college students about mental health, related disorders and suicide prevention. We demonstrate that mental health disorders are real illnesses that can be managed most effectively if promptly identified and treated.

Our program, *Coming Up for AIR*, is effective, as a student described: *“Thank you for making me aware of the possibility that I could have a mental illness. After the AIR presentation, I got help and I got diagnosed with depression and a social anxiety disorder. So, thank you again for giving the presentation, ultimately helping me to make the decision to get help and save my life.”*

We also created AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds™. We train displaced dogs to serve as Emotional Support Animals and match them with people who have mental health disorders or other types of disabilities. We have evidence of this program's effectiveness, too: *“Once Matthew met Roxie, we knew we weren't giving her back. Roxie is not a crutch; she's more than that. Matthew usually doesn't want to go out, but he'll do whatever Roxie is involved in,”* said Lauren Campbell, mother of 11-year-old Matthew, who has a pervasive developmental disorder, anxiety and depression.

The third one in our group – Shauna Moses – lost a close relative, who had bipolar disorder, to suicide 10 years ago. I thought I would never comprehend how such an amazing guy who seemed to have it all could take his life and leave so many who loved him. Years later, I understood when my depression was so intense, that I could not believe the positives in my life, which I tried desperately to focus on during this frightening time. I was lucky that positive thoughts eventually – and miraculously – broke through, prompting me to get help.

I join Tricia and Kurt whenever I can to share my experiences, especially the effective treatment I received, with students to encourage them to seek help when needed. With AIR and the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies (NJAMHAA), I promote our common mission of eliminating stigma and other barriers to treatment, and the effectiveness of the resources we provide: education from AIR and behavioral health services from NJAMHAA members. Here is one of many examples of the tremendous impact NJAMHAA members have:

“The only constant in my life was drugs. It's no surprise that I was arrested. What is surprising is that being locked up actually opened the door to the rest of my life. I was given the choice of coming to New Hope instead of the youth detention center. New Hope counselors helped me overcome my physical and emotional dependence on drugs. They also made education a part of my recovery plan. I was able to complete my studies through their virtual high school and graduate with my class. That's when I developed a real love of science and set my career path in motion. New Hope helped me find my calm mind and use it to create a future,” said Vanessa, a recent graduate.

To build awareness of AIR and NJAMHAA and to build partnerships with state leaders, education professionals and parents to help save lives, AIR and NJAMHAA will host *Back to School: Take a Breath – and Pack a Good*

Mental Health Tool Kit, on September 10, 2013, from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. in the Department of Human Services' first floor conference room, 222 South Warren St., Trenton.

Online registration is available at <http://www.eventbrite.com/event/7718651695>.

There is no fee for attending this event. However, the importance of it is priceless because everyone's life is priceless.

Tricia and Kurt Baker, Co-Founders of AIR

Shauna Moses, Associate Executive Director of NJAMHAA and AIR Board Member