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**Local Family Chooses to Support the Life-Saving Mission of Attitudes in Reverse®**  
***Young Daughter Is Thrilled to Help Dogs and People at the Same Time***  
***May 18<sup>th</sup> Event Promotes the Emotional Value of Pets, Supports AIR's Mission to Save Lives***

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY (May 8, 2013) – When Christine Calandra of Princeton Junction, NJ, learned about Attitudes in Reverse® (AIR) from a friend, she knew her seven-year-old daughter, Grace, would choose AIR as the organization to support with donations requested from her birthday party guests. Christine was right. In fact, Grace exclaimed, “Wow! You mean we can help dogs and people at the same time?!” Soon afterwards, invitations were sent with information about AIR and now, nearly 50 children with their parents and pets are expected at Grace’s birthday party this week.

Christine and her husband, Jeff, have instilled the importance of philanthropy and helping others since Grace was a toddler. “Grace has always put other people and animals ahead of herself,” Christine said. “However, it’s not just being a good person. It’s bigger than that. We have to bring our children out to the community.”

Grace learned to consider supporting smaller charitable organizations. She previously selected the Boys & Girls Club; Rerun, which helps retired racehorses transition back to non-racing lifestyles; and Animal Placement Agency of the Windsors, where she and her friends collected a record-breaking \$900 in cash and \$500 worth of treats last year. “We won’t support causes that don’t put our money where it’s supposed to go,” Grace said.

The Calandras, along with Grace’s Jack Russell Terrier, Domino, and Jeff’s Griffon, Wyatt, will be at the Second Annual Miki & Friends Walk & Run for AIR event on May 18, 2013 at Mercer County Park, East Picnic Area, West Windsor, NJ. The event will promote and celebrate the positive impact dogs have on everyone’s mental health and support AIR’s mission: to save lives by educating students in middle schools, high schools and colleges about mental health, related disorders and suicide prevention. The event is particularly timely as May is Mental Health Awareness Month.

A much more profound connection, however, is that May 19, 2013 will mark four years since AIR Co-founders Kurt and Tricia Baker and their daughter Katelyn lost their son/brother Kenny to suicide. His long struggle with severe depression and anxiety and his death prompted the Bakers to establish AIR. The family and their group of volunteers – which is gradually expanding with more people who have the passion for helping to strengthen mental health and save lives – will continue to hold this annual event and host and participate in other events year-round, in addition to speaking with students whenever opportunities arise.

**More**

**Dogs – as Well as Goats and Other Pets – Help Enhance People's Mental Health**

“Petting a dog releases serotonin, oxytocin and dopamine – all good brain chemicals,” Tricia informs students at every school presentation. As she and Kurt present the facts about mental health and related disorders, AIR's mascot Miki, a Pomeranian and certified therapy dog, relaxes on a nearby chair, probably anticipating treats and petting from the students at the end of the presentation. The health benefits that dogs offer must also be true for cats and other pets – even goats, which, at least at the Calandras' home, seek attention and even give a paw when asked, just like dogs do.

Miki inspired another AIR program, AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds™, which strives to match displaced dogs with the potential to become Emotional Support Dogs, with individuals who have mental illnesses or other types of disabilities. “We took Miki to community events since he naturally draws attention. People come over to pet him and they ask questions about AIR, and that leads to conversations about mental illness and suicide. Many open up about these struggles in their families,” Kurt said. Added Tricia, “Many also say that their dogs saved their lives or that they are lonely and want dogs. So, we realized how much it helps people and it would certainly help dogs, as well. We help save two lives with every match.”

The evidence of dogs' positive impact on individuals is clear in the powerful bond between Matthew, an 11-year-old who had been withdrawn most of his life due to anxiety, depression and a pervasive developmental disorder and is now sociable thanks to his AIR Dog Roxie, a Frenchie (French bulldog and beagle mix) who joined Matthew's family in June 2012. Matthew and his mother, Lauren, learned about the AIR Dogs program at the First Annual Miki & Friends: Walk & Run for AIR event in May 2012. “Once Matthew met Roxie, we knew we weren't giving her back,” Lauren said. “Roxie is not a crutch; she's more than that. Even when Roxie's not around, Matthew can talk about her. The dog has been much more beneficial than therapy. It's great. Matthew usually doesn't want to go out, but he'll do whatever Roxie is involved in,” she added.

Of course, dogs offer tremendous benefits for individuals of all ages and whether or not they have disabilities. One powerful example is the emotional support that Kayla Skiba of Riverside receives from her three-year-old Leonberger, Meeko. Kayla adopted Meeko from a breeder when he was eight weeks old in 2009 and in 2010, had him begin training to become a therapy dog. Soon afterwards, Kayla's father completed suicide after having suffered with major depression for most of his life. “Meeko instinctively knew that I needed more support,” Kayla said.

Last year, Meeko had one of his legs amputated due to cancer. However, this is not slowing him down. In fact, he and Kayla, along with her fiancé Steve, will participate in the 5K walk at AIR's event on May 18<sup>th</sup> – they have been training for it, walking an additional .2 mile each week – and they continue to visit people at nursing homes and in mental healthcare programs. “We're trying to get some volunteer time at Magee Rehabilitation in Philadelphia, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and Veterans' Administration hospitals, as well,” Kayla said.

“Miki has played a huge part in supporting Kenny and me,” Tricia said. She also has five other dogs to provide comfort, one of whom is Misha, a five-month-old Old Time Scotch Collie who is well on his way to becoming a certified therapy dog and often shares the spotlight with Miki at events. Tricia also trains dogs through her business, Twenty Paws.

Another dog trainer who is very familiar with the emotional and mental benefits of having dogs is Linda Hobson, who met Tricia when she and one of her dogs were students of Linda's about 12 years ago. “Tricia and I lost touch after the training was completed and then, a few years ago, we reconnected at a pet therapy event at Rider University,” Linda said.

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"Dogs have a natural way of helping people feel good and they listen without judging. These relationships are so valuable for the dogs, as well as the people," Linda said. She recalled helping a family a number of years ago. "The son was very shy. He didn't want to leave the dog or even the couch. I worked with them and I'm proud to say that today, this young man is a lawyer," she said.

Linda and her therapy dog, a Chihuahua/Dachshund mix named Emmett, will be at the AIR event, not only supporting AIR but also building awareness of City of Angels, a family-run charitable organization in Hamilton that provides family counseling services.

### **AIR Event Will Also Demonstrate Dogs' Many Talents**

As dog lovers can attest, pets also make people smile and even laugh and feel amazed at times. Several examples of dogs' impressive talents will be demonstrated during the May 18<sup>th</sup> AIR event:

- Disc Dogs will show off their Frisbee-catching skills.
- Dogs from Heavenly Hounds Dog Training School in Lawrenceville will give freestyle dance performances.
- Several dogs will participate in a Rally- O (O for obedience), which is similar to a road rally. "A dog owner reads instructions of tricks for the dogs to do," Linda explained. "It's usually human error why they fail."
- Dogs from the West Windsor Police Department's K-9 unit will demonstrate nose work.
- Other demonstrations will include canine first aid, canine massage and various tricks.
- A brief presentation on canine nutrition is also planned.
- Guests will have the opportunity to have their dogs try out agility equipment: five minutes for a \$5 donation.

In addition, representatives from the American Kennel Club will conduct Canine Good Citizen testing, and individuals from Bright & Beautiful will evaluate dogs' abilities to become certified therapy dogs.

The event will also feature musical performances by The John Wilkey Band, Xenia Sky, The Antics, The Burgeoning, Nick Nubz and Atha. In addition, nearly 30 dog- and health-related vendors, including event sponsors PetSmart and Banfield Pet Hospital, will demonstrate their products and services.

Details on AIR and the event are available at [www.attitudesinreverse.org](http://www.attitudesinreverse.org). Please also visit [youtube.com/attitudesinreverse](https://youtube.com/attitudesinreverse) to view videos by the Bakers and other AIR volunteers, including Matthew and Lauren, sharing the importance of AIR's mission and initiatives.

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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 completed 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. In the first two years, they have presented to more than 10,000 students in middle and high schools and colleges in New Jersey and New York, and they have been invited to present at other schools in New Jersey, as well as Georgia, Vermont and Texas. AIR also includes an AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds™ program, through which displaced dogs with the ability to serve as Emotional Support Dogs, which are more than pets, are matched with individuals who have mental illnesses or developmental disabilities, thereby saving two lives with each match. For more information about AIR and its Walk & Run event, please visit [www.attitudesinreverse.org](http://www.attitudesinreverse.org).