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### **Attitudes In Reverse® Honors Maria Petsos, BCBA, LDT/C, District Supervisor of Special Education, Ewing Public Schools, as *Partner in Hope***

PRINCETON, NJ, September 17, 2023 – In late 2021, Maria Petsos, BCBA, LDT/C, District Supervisor of Special Education, Ewing Public Schools, recognized early the impact that COVID and the isolation of the lockdowns were going to have on her students. She reached out to Attitudes In Reverse® (AIR®) to access AIR’s K-12 mental wellness programs, which were presented in all of Ewing’s elementary schools and Fisher Middle School during the 2022-23 school year and will be presented in Ewing High School in the fall of 2023. AIR will honor Petsos with a *Partner in Hope Award* during the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Taste of Hope event, which will be held on October 4, 2023, from 6:00 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. at the Princeton Marriott at Forrestal, Princeton, New Jersey.

“Working with students can always be challenging; however, the past two years have been overwhelming as so many young people have been struggling from the COVID response. Our children are going through an unprecedented time. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cited a rise in youth suicide, up more than 16% among 10- to 24-year-olds between 2018 and 2021,” said AIR Co-founder Tricia Baker. “One person who recognized the trauma her students were facing, who stepped up and showed how much she cares is Maria Petsos. She took her own tragedy, losing her husband to mental health disorders and suicide, and takes that with her as she supports students’ mental wellness.”

“Education is critical, and talking openly is imperative. Maria recognized this and sought a creative solution to provide her students with as much mental health wellness support as possible,” added AIR Co-founder Kurt Baker.

Recognizing the benefits of her own dog Mango, Maria implemented the AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds<sup>SM</sup> school-based therapy dog program within the district. “This is a rigorous 11-month program that brings in certified therapy dogs in schools to support students during school days. Maria has coordinated with faculty and staff, who came to school on their own time to train their dogs to become certified therapy dogs. They completed the training at the end of the 2022-23 school year,” Tricia Baker explained.

While the teams were training, Maria wanted AIR dogs in the schools to support the children. Therefore, she implemented AIR Day, a weekly visit with students and AIR Dogs at every school in the district.

“This program has been very widely received by students, staff and administrators. We at Attitudes In Reverse are grateful for Maria’s out-of-the-box thinking to help support Ewing students at such a challenging time,” Kurt Baker said.

“Our counselors have brought in mental health support in various forms, but never used dogs before. I thought it would be an innovative way to get students the support they need,” Petsos shared. “It has been a very impactful experience for me and a true blessing for our students and staff. I am constantly being asked when the dogs are coming back.”

“Receiving this award provides me with personal fulfillment for my efforts to improve our students' connection to our schools, and I am grateful to be recognized and appreciated by others. I hope this award opens up more opportunities to collaborate with AIR and the AIR Dogs,” Petsos added.

Petsos will be honored along with Robert Garofalo, PhD(c), Chief of Police, West Windsor Township Police Department, and Kevin D. Coleman, CEO and Managing Principal, Intrepid Commercial Realty, *Champions of Hope*; and fellow *Partner in Hope* Nikki Casey, Social Worker.

AIR is grateful for the event sponsors: AIR Sponsor - Connell Company; Faith Sponsors - J. Robert Bratman, Esq.; Peter Weedfald and Brenna Whaley, Sharp; and Stark & Stark Attorneys at Law; Dignity Sponsor - Szafer Lakind Blumstein & Blader, PC; Love Sponsors - Antares Event Planning & Consulting, LLC; Hinkle, Prior & Fischer, P.C.; Robert Gonnello; Leary, Bride, Mergner & Bongiovanni, P.A.; Sajid & Simin; and The Barker Lounge; and Half-Day Class Sponsors - Carl Archer, Cascade Advisors; Oaks Integrated Care; Renzi Legal Resources; World Insurance Associates LLC; and Zeiger Consulting LLC.

AIR is also thankful for the participating restaurants and dessert, wine and spirit vendors: Antimo's Italian Kitchen, Applebee's of Lawrenceville, Carella's Chocolates, CATB Liquor Imports, Crown of India, De Lorenzo's Tomato Pies, Iron & Ivy at Princeton Marriott at Forrestal, Joe Canal's of Lawrenceville, KK Sweets, Local Greek, Life Vine Wine, Madam Cupcakes, Outback Steakhouse of Hamilton, P.F. Chang's, Public Wine, Beer & Spirits, Plush Vodka, Ruth's Chris Steak House, Seasons 52, Senor Sangria, Sourland Mountain Spirits, Starbucks and Texas Roadhouse.

To register to sponsor and/or attend the Taste of Hope event or make a donation, please visit [www.toh.ngo](http://www.toh.ngo).

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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 160,000 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 Minds<sup>SM</sup> 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](http://www.air.ngo) or call 609-945-3200.

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