

Shoes draw attention to mental health

👤 **Maryanne Christiano-Mistretta** ⌚ Published: September 21, 2025 | Updated: September 24, 2025

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Kenny Baker was kind-hearted, a star swimmer on two swim teams, and a lifeguard at the local YMCA.

He had many friends and a girlfriend. Everyone loved him. At age 15 he was diagnosed with depression. Within a year, he was also diagnosed with a severe anxiety disorder. He was embarrassed by his illness, and it prevented him from attending his local high school in the Princeton area. Many of his friends drifted away.

Public educators didn't understand his illness or the side effects from his medications and said hurtful things to him. He bravely battled against his illness and was compliant with doctors following all forms of treatment.

In both emotional and physical pain, three weeks before he would have graduated from high school, Kenny took his own life on May 19, 2009.

"Mental illness is like air. Just because you don't see it, it doesn't mean it doesn't exist," said Tricia Baker, Kenny's mom, at the "In Their Shoes" exhibit at West Orange High School.

She explained the discrimination that continued after Kenny's death. The administration of the local high school believed suicide was about "looking for attention."

"Sixteen years ago, Kenny's name was not mentioned at graduation," Baker said. The "belief was that if you talk to students about suicide, they would hurt themselves."

Though the school did not support Kenny's sister Katelyn, who was only a sophomore in high school when Kenny died, through this discrimination, Attitudes in Reverse (AIR) was born.

AIR's mission is to create a community of understanding, kindness and empathy through mental health education and awareness. AIR offers many programs that, when combined, remind students throughout the year that there are many people — perhaps their friends, family or classmates — who may be living each day with mental health disorders. Certified AIR therapy dogs accompany all program presenters.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth in New Jersey, Baker said.

"We don't want people to focus on sadness of our story but of hope."

Her husband Kurt Baker said, "Our goal is a school-based therapy dog program in every school in the country."

In honor of Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, AIR partnered with the Family Support Organization of Essex County (FSOEC), Partnership for Children of Essex (PCE), and the West Orange School District to present "In Their Shoes: Story of Hope."

The moving exhibition featured more than 300 pairs of shoes, each symbolizing a New Jersey youth who lost their life after battling a biological brain illness.

The visual installation fosters empathy and raises awareness of the silent struggles the youth have faced. Famous people who also struggled with mental health donated their shoes.

The trail of shoes seemed endless. Each pair had a message attached, giving a taste of the young person's struggles. Some messages were simple, yet undeniably tragic, like "I'm no good."

Mayor Susan McCartney said, "This gathering is about more than awareness—it's about compassion, connection, and community. By coming together, we honor the lives that have been lost, support those who may be struggling, and remind each other that no one ever has to walk alone." McCartney donated a pair of her shoes to the exhibit.

"Our mental health matters," said Oscar Guerrero, West Orange High School principal.

Tammy Williams said, "People don't have to suffer alone. It's important to have resources and support."

Patti Betz who is an AIR dog handler who lost her son to suicide finds volunteering for AIR "a tremendous reward."

Lucy Halter is also an AIR dog handler. Regarding famous people who struggled with mental health and have donated shoes to the exhibit, she said, "Just because a person looks like they have it all together, maybe they're struggling."

To learn more about AIR, visit: <https://www.air.ngo/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Maryanne Christiano-Mistretta

Author

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