

Friday, Apr 28, 2017

## A parent's passion turns professional

Claudia Leandres came to the United States from her native Rio de Janeiro in 2001 as a result of her husband's job opportunity. Though a trained attorney in her home country of Brazil, she was enjoying life adjusting to her new environment as wife and mother to a young son.

It was then she realized her son wasn't developing as expected and sought out doctors who finally diagnosed him as being on the autism spectrum.

"I cannot lie. I spent the longest time crying and many times wondering what I did wrong," Leandres said. "I went through a long process of accepting the diagnosis and deciding I had two paths. I could choose sadness and anger or I could choose to learn as much as possible about this diagnosis and help my child. That is what I chose."

It was this motivation to help her son that led to a career change that would eventually empower her to help her family and many others.



*Claudia Leandres during a presentation at a recent autism conference in Brazil.*

In the summer of 2013, Leandres applied for, and was accepted to, Oakland University's competitive master's degree program in Special Education with an ABA concentration. Fast forward through a couple years of classroom work and a 1,500-hour practicum and add in the very rigorous board exam and the result is - today she is a proud Oakland University alumna and a Board Certified Behavior Analyst.

However, her schedule has not slowed down. Today, her son with autism is 12 years old and doing well. The family expanded by adding another son over the years and she and her husband have purchased a former child care center in Metamora with plans to develop it into an ABA clinic.

Leandres also regularly returns to her home country to present at autism conferences and helps coordinate therapy schedules for children and their families that she meets with while there. In fact, she just returned from a recent trip, where she spoke at four different conferences in just two weeks.

In addition, she participates with a local Forever Friends Network that meets every other week in Metamora and she has plans to teach a summer course on **research methods and ethics** at Oakland this summer.

"This career works for me because I can understand what these families are going through because of my son and my family's own experience," said Leandres. "I want to be an example for other parents so they know it is not the end of the world and there is something they can do about it. There is hope beyond this diagnosis."

Leandres is also quick to thank her Oakland "family." She noted that Susan Martino, director of program development, helped her through the enrollment process and gave her encouragement to take the first step. She said the advising and mentorship by Associate Professor Jan Graetz kept her focused and on track to achieve this dream. And, she owes a debt of gratitude to Assistant Professor Jessica Korneder, who made time to meet with her every week during her practicum at the Henry Autism Clinic.

"Claudia was the model student," reflected Professor Graetz on behalf of the OU team that contributed to Leandres' success. "It is so rewarding to help nurture and contribute to helping our students reach their goals and knowing they will be making a difference for the far they treat."

Leandres feels blessed that she made the connection to Oakland to help her son, change her career path and is now capable of making a



*Claudia Leandres providing an autism assessment for a child while in Brazil.*

To learn more about career opportunities in Human Development and Child Studies visit: <https://www.oakland.edu/hdcs/>.

**Story footnote:** While this story was in production, the Brazilian nonprofit organization MOAB, Movimento Orgulho Autista Brasil (Autism Pride Movement Brazil) invited Leandres to join their efforts and made her MOAB Coordinator/USA. She says she is honored by this recognition and looks forward to continuing to help children in the United States and in her homeland of Brazil.



Claudia Leandres, second from left, with her mentors and supporters from the School of Education and Human Services from left, Associate Professor Jan Graetz, Director of Program Development Susan Martino and Assistant Professor Jessica Korneder.