

An International Perspective BY COURTNEY TAYLOR

VKCC UCEDD trainee **Maria Paula Mello** has had longstanding interest in doing comparative research in international special education. Last year, she applied for a Fulbright Scholarship to investigate the current state of special education in rural Brazil. She proposed the implementation of a needs assessment, outlined a series of technical assistance activities for training educators, and suggested the development of a website for sharing tools and information to better equip educators to support students with disabilities in the classroom.

“I wanted to return to Brazil to explore school systems and to share some of what I was learning through my program,” said Mello, whose family emigrated from Brazil to New York when she was 7 years old. “I had been working on a research project with the Tennessee Autism Summit Team to assess services for people with autism in rural and nonrural counties in Tennessee. Then I focused my thesis on disability service availability in rural areas. I designed the proposal to extend what I was learning about rural communities and to put some of what I had been doing here into practice there.”

Mello says her faculty advisor, Bob Hodapp, Ph.D., VKCC UCEDD Research director and professor of Special Education, provided assistance throughout the proposal process. In addition to reviewing, editing, and encouraging Mello to think intentionally about the sustainability of the project, he also organized a group of faculty, staff, and students to provide Mello with two rounds of mock interviews. Though she received enthusiastic feedback from reviewers, she did not receive the Fulbright Scholarship.

“I think we were all a little surprised that the Fulbright Program didn’t fund the project,” said Hodapp. “The proposal was well thought through with some substantial outcomes. I was impressed with Maria’s ability to combine her own personal experiences with her interests and coursework and then devise a way to share her knowledge



Bob Hodapp, Ph.D., and Maria Paula Mello, M.Ed.

in a geographic area she knew would benefit. I was also impressed that she decided she would do some of the work anyway. She’s bright and determined.”

Over the summer following graduation, after she was accepted into the Special Education Doctorate Program at Vanderbilt’s Peabody College, Mello scaled down her proposal to outline goals that could be accomplished in a 2-week visit to Fortealeza, Brazil. Originally spanning 10 months, her shortened trip and project would now focus more on conversations and consultations with educators and school psychologists and on the development of a resource-heavy website. Mello currently is developing a website for families and school educators in Brazil.

“I learned so much,” said Mello. “I was able to connect with a school psychologist who taught me a lot about how Brazil’s fairly new classroom inclusion laws [2008] have played out in the school systems. I learned that not enough professionals are available to support the growing needs of the families, especially in rural areas. Though I needed more time, I take away an affirmed sense of purpose in the work I could do there. I know I will return to this work in the future.” ■

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