

THE TWO RIVER TIMES

SCENE

THE WEEK OF JUNE 28, 2018



LIFESTYLES

Rock Review -
Continuing the Legacy
The Todd Robbins Band

Page 16

EDUCATION

Class of 2018
Valedictorians Offer
Advice For
Underclassmen

Page 20

Fernanda A. Andrade-Brito, Ph.D.

A Doctorate In Overcoming Adversity

When Fernanda A. Andrade-Brito received her Ph.D. from NYU's nursing school last month, she took the stage as valedictorian. Brito graduated with a 4.0 GPA.

Seventeen years earlier Brito stepped off the plane at Newark airport from Brazil with a brand new high school diploma, very little money and even less English.

"I was so naïve I didn't even realize Newark was in New Jersey," she says with a laugh. Instead, she thought it was a mispronunciation of New York.

The journey from high school to Ph.D. conferee wasn't easy. In every step of the way she held on to her faith, set her goals and determinedly gave it her all.

When her father died, Brito, age 4 ½, and her mother, moved from their "comfortable" life in a small Brazilian town to a hardscrabble one. "Every penny mattered."

The silver lining was that they lived in a university town and her mother took in student boarders. Brito grew up surrounded by studious young women – all good girls from good families, her

was a lot of studying, but you could take 18 credits for the same price as 15. That's half of another semester for the price of one!"

She learned from her childhood experience of handling her mother's finances. "I was always practical and rational," she said.

School was not finished. She spent the next few years in Monmouth County pursuing her master's in nursing education at Monmouth University, worked part-time as a nurse in oncology at Riverview Medical Center, taught nursing students through an internship at Brookdale Community College and had a full-time position as a teacher in Seton Hall's nursing program.

When Brito decided to go for her doctorate in nursing, she applied to what she considered the best program – the New York University, Ph.D. program that accepts about six to eight candidates a year. But was rejected.

"I'm not a person who accepts denial easily," she said. "If you're going to deny me, you have to tell me exactly why so it'll be a matter of what I can attend to."

She defended her thesis in September, which focused on technology simulation, a system that mimics the reality of a clinical scenario with the purpose of educating or evaluating.

Since 2008 Brito has called Little Silver home. She has been married to Phil Pahigian since 2012. Pahigian, whom she met shortly after arriving in the U.S., is a former partner at Wilentz Goldman & Spitzer law firm where he spent time defending asbestos victims. Retired, he now serves as a trustee for asbestos funds.

In 2015 Brito became a U.S. citizen, a proud moment, she said.

With limited spare time, Brito has recently taken up a hobby – Instagram.

With two Instagram accounts, she counts about 200,000 worldwide followers and spends time snapping pictures of dishes she has eaten, outfits she wears, gardens she appreciates, hotels where she and her husband have stayed. "I think Instagram is making it more popular for everyday persons, not just celebrities," she said.

All this popularity has made Brito a budding social media influencer, which she plans to use to

accomplish her next goal.

It would be easy enough for Brito to serve as an inspiration to women, to immigrants and to those who have to work hard for their education. And her role in nursing education has already helped launch a generation of healers into the world.

"I am blessed to be in a profession so highly respected," she said. "Nurses have this practical knowledge about life and about medicine and disease."

But Brito hopes to take on a loftier goal.

"What I really want to do is help empower women," especially for minorities – all minorities, she said. "And in particular in the area of science."

The patriarchal society found in countries throughout the world, Brito said, has kept women in place for so long. She wants to change that.

"I know from history and from watching my mother and aunts and others, that whenever women have a chance to flourish, they do," she said. "I would like to be involved with the United Nations or World Health Organization to effect policy to help women."

She suggests this start in the

form of small scholarships or micro-financing or a host of other opportunities for women.

"But what women really need is childcare," Brito said. This would allow them to accomplish goals and most importantly to pursue their education. Whether it's a small village in a developing country or a mother attending a New Jersey community college, Brito points out "it's childcare that makes a difference." She believes they can go on to great accomplishments if they did not have to worry about care for their children.

Right now Brito is taking stock of her life. She is considering the high profile positions in nursing education she has been offered, while she ponders whether to focus more on research or on teaching. This is the first summer since she arrived in the U.S. that she is not in school.

Brito considers herself a faithful person and feels she has been guided through life. "I've always thought God wouldn't give me a dream if it wasn't absolutely possible," she said. "It's just a matter of time."

BY JUDY O'GORMAN ALVAREZ

"I know from history and from watching my mother and aunts and others, that whenever women have a chance to flourish, they do,"

- Fernanda A. Andrade-Brito

mother insisted – who would go on to successful lives with careers and families.

Always a stellar student, Brito earned scholarships to attend private school. "There was no question: I was going to get a college degree," she said. Her best option was coming to America, she said.

Her plan was to learn English, earn her degree and return to Brazil to teach English. "I didn't expect to stay this long."

In 2001 Brito arrived alone in the U.S. on a Friday with \$70 and a student visa. On Monday she started English language classes in Manhattan. She slept on a friend's sofa in Queens while studying English and working an assortment of jobs – house/pet sitter, handing out pamphlets, cleaning tables and "everything I could do without speaking English."

Less than two years later with her newly acquired English skills, Brito embarked on a marathon of educational pursuits, excelling at every stage: an associate's degree from LaGuardia Community College graduating with a 4.0 GPA; the College of Staten Island's B.S. degree in nursing, finishing summa cum laude with a 3.94. "It should've been 4.0, but it was inexperience on my part," said Brito, ever pushing for perfection. "I was sick."

Along the way she tutored classmates, tended bar while attending classes and working 12-hour clinicals toward her nursing degree. "It

The administrator told Brito that the school was very expensive and rigorous and perhaps she would do better at another program, but Brito held firm. She convinced them to allow her to take classes as a non-matriculating student, with no guarantee she'd be accepted the following year.

That first year was a challenge as a "non-student." "I had no mentor, no adviser. I wasn't even invited to the Christmas party," Brito said.

But she did well. "I had a 108 percent in my statistics class from the most feared teacher." Many of her classmates were wary at first but then generous in accepting her. "They all had Ivy League degrees so it's natural that they think someone coming from a different country with a CUNY background" might not be capable.

It was not just Brito's accent that made some question her accomplishments and intelligence.

Stylish and attractive, Brito said a teacher told her she was "too good looking" to be a nurse. Some wondered how she could possibly have time to balance her studies with the time she must spend to leave the house so well-coiffed each morning.

She paid no mind to those comments.

Brito was not only officially accepted the following year, she was awarded a two-year scholarship and an opportunity to work for the university as a research assistant.



DANNY SANCHEZ