

While pursuing a Bachelors degree in Psychology, I worked full time with developmentally disabled adults with varying exceptionalities, for the Long Island Developmentally Disabled Services Office. In 1998, I received a Bachelors degree in Psychology with a minor in Sociology from St. Josephs College in Patchogue, New York. I planned to pursue a career upon relocation with my son, William, from Long Island, New York to Orlando, Florida, in social work.

Like many parents of children who are diagnosed with autism, I began to notice behavioral changes and loss of speech in my son at age 15 months. After repeated insistence that something was "wrong" with my baby boy, my pediatrician agreed to refer him for an evaluation. In the year 2000, my son William was diagnosed with severe autism. The psychologist told me that he would never speak. After the shock and disbelief subsided (and a really deep breath) I decided that the doctor's were wrong. My son would speak and much more and I was determined to do what ever I had to do to make that happen. I began researching autism and decided that the best way to help my son was to change careers from social work to teaching students with special needs. To further my education, I also returned to school and in 2001, received a MS degree in Exceptional Student Education.

After teaching for 3 years in the public school system, I began working as a Curriculum and Resource Specialist. In constant pursuit of the latest research, educational and assessment methods, I also returned to school to pursue an EdS degree in Curriculum Instruction and Management. My experience as a teacher, continuing education student, and curriculum and resource specialist taught me a great deal about education and assessment. It also taught me that the majority of curricula and assessment available for my students' was not designed to meet their individual needs and learning styles. I began developing individualized curricula, assessment programs, and education workshops to better meet the needs of my son, and my students.

In 2004, I decided that it was time for my dream of an optimal learning environment for my son and other students with special needs to come true. I began working diligently with friends who were educators and parents of children with autism.

In January of 2006, I met Antonia Lull. Fifteen minutes into the meeting, Antonia and I were completing each other's sentences. Together we realized that we could bring our dreams for children with special needs to fruition.

In August of 2007, Antonia and I opened Maitland Academy to 16 students grades K-5 with special needs. Our staff consisted of trained educators who also had children with special needs enrolled in the school.

I have seen our students and my own oldest son, William grow into adolescents and young adults. Adolescence is such a challenge but each new challenge presents another opportunity to learn. With every opportunity to learn comes a new solution to tailor and share with another child/parent/teacher. With constantly developing opportunities, I realized a new direction was needed for our MS and HS. In the spring of 2013, we began working on the development of Celandine Life-Prep Academy as a non-profit, educational institute specifically dedicated to children grades 6-12 and into adulthood.

We want to make sure that our students' dreams, whatever they may be, are always a possibility. We started Celandine Life-Prep Academy to make sure that even if we are no longer here, our children and other children with disabilities will have ongoing educational, vocational, and life-skill-building support for as long as they need it. Our goal is to continue to evolve with the needs of our students by creating more opportunities for them to become independent, self-supporting, members of their community.

In 2015, we made the decision to expand our program to include elementary-age students and offer our programs within a Christian environment. We began to look for a new location to expand our programming. In the spring of 2016 after searching for a new location for over a year, at the suggestion of a parent, we scheduled a meeting with Reverend Sarah Broncos of The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, in Maitland. After reading a book about a child with autism who found her voice, Reverend Sarah had prayed for the opportunity to help a school with special needs students. After full approval and incredible support from the City of Maitland, we moved to the campus in June of 2016 enabling us to have weekly chapel services, on-campus vocational training, and on-campus trade skills! Our worship and praise time is filled with singing and dancing!

On a personal note, my son William is now 25! He graduated in May 2020 amid the COVID epidemic and virtual schooling with a special diploma. God had a plan for him during that time. With the office and campus closed to visitors, William and I had ample opportunity to work together to learn so many office skills. He spent the next school year interning in the office and classrooms and I am just overwhelmed with joy and thankfulness to say that he now works in the office and around campus full-time! He is an invaluable assistant administrator and classroom helper. He tracks and helps manage our IEP scheduling, uses spreadsheets to build individual student teaching assessments, tracks our lunch orders and attendance, etc.. He now prefers to be called "Mr. William". He and a few other of our graduated students are the inspiration of our Trailblazers

program; a program specifically for young adults that will need some assistance and ongoing learning in order to be more independent and productive members of the community. He continues to amaze me daily! He continues to be my inspiration. I am so blessed to be surrounded and supported by knowledgeable and compassionate staff. I am truly honored to be entrusted with the education of so many beautiful boys and girls, with differing and amazing abilities!

Thank you and God Bless.

Sincerely,

Kristen Peterson, M.S. Ed, ESE

Principal/Co-founder of Celandine Life-Prep Academy

*Every one therefore that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man, who built his house upon rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house: and it fell not: for it was founded upon the rock. Matthew 7:24-25*