

UBEOC Students Are Making Their Mark

By Charles Anzalone

A determined entrepreneur who saved and then re-invented a neighborhood landmark restaurant and an immigrant who now helps a leading hospital celebrate diverse cultures are the most recent alumni honorees at the UB Educational Opportunity Center's annual commencement.

Recognized at this year's virtual commencement on May 19 was Mandy Ferrini, Class of 2009, who overcame multiple obstacles to rally to a better life. She won the EOC's Distinguished Alumni Award.

Receiving the EOC's Arthur O. Eve Education and Community Service Award was Bernarda Arias, Class of 2014, who came to Buffalo from the Dominican Republic and re-invented herself as a human resource professional with over 15 years' experience with leading companies in Western New York.

"This has been another challenging year for our students as they continued to work remotely and entertain a new normal," says Julius Gregg Adams, UBEOC executive director. "We continue to be proud of their accomplishments, their ability to persevere and their commitment to excellence. Although commencement was virtual, it did not diminish our desire to acknowledge their incredible accomplishments."

Ferrini and Arias are the newest headliners in the EOC's legacy of transforming lives. Here are their stories:

"Big Book Giveaway!" Students In Grades K-12 Can Receive Up to 10 Free Books As Part of 20th Annual Mayor Brown's Reading Rules – Kids Summer Reading Challenge

Mayor Byron W. Brown and the Buffalo Police Athletic League (PAL) have launched the "Big Book Giveaway," an initiative tied to the 20th Annual Mayor's Reading Rules! Summer Reading Challenge.

Readers in grades K-12 can select up to 10 free books by visiting PAL offices on the 21st Floor of Buffalo City Hall. The "Big Book Giveaway" will take place on weekdays from now until the end of July from 10 a.m. – 2 p.m., except Monday, July 5th. City Hall is closed on July 5th as part of the July Fourth Holiday weekend.

"Now that school is out and the 2021 Reading Rules! Kids Summer Reading Challenge is underway,

this is the perfect time to come and pick out books to keep your reading skills sharp and put yourself on the path to becoming a Champion Reader," Mayor Brown said.

Here's how Mayor Brown's 2021 Virtual Reading Rules! Challenge works:

KID'S SUMMER READING CHALLENGE #1 – Read 5 books + Submit 5 Written Book Summaries between June 1-July 9, 2021 to be eligible for a prize drawing during the week of July 12th!

KID'S SUMMER READING CHALLENGE #2 – Read 5 books + Submit 5 Written Book Summaries between July 12-August 20, 2021 to be eligible for a

Mandy Ferrini

A single parent, Ferrini delayed her own reconstructive surgery following a serious work injury because her son needed open-heart surgery. A survivor of domestic violence, she would lose her business due to arson.

"Through it all, Ms. Ferrini not only persevered, she thrived," according to Margot Barrett Keyser, EOC's alumni affairs administrator.

Ferrini enrolled in the EOC's dental assistant program "when she was vulnerable and unsure of her next steps," according to the EOC's commencement program. She earned her certification as a dental assistant, and accepted positions at Baker Victory Dental and WNY Dental.

"Her desire to continue to grow" led to her to enroll at D'Youville College, where she earned a BA in sociology in 2014 and received the "Older and Wiser Learner Award" in recognition of her achievements as a non-traditional student.

Ferrini earned a master's degree in mental health counseling from Medaille College and was inducted into the American Counseling Association Honor Society. Upon graduation, she accepted a marketing specialist position at United HealthCare, where she worked until she was laid off early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

prize drawing during the week of August 23rd!

Champion Readers who complete BOTH Challenge #1 and Challenge #2 will be entered into the Grand Prize Drawing which will take place during Mayor Brown's Virtual Reading Rules! Awards Ceremony which will take place on Saturday, August 28, 2021.

"There's still time to sign



Mandy Ferrini

"Ms. Ferrini's tenaciousness once again overshadowed this obstacle," UBEOC administrators say. She and a partner reopened Pizza Bella & More, an iconic restaurant in Buffalo's Riverside neighborhood. Ferrini supplied lunches to students from the Charter School for Applied Technology who were learning remotely, and purchased personal protective equipment for neighborhood residents.

A fire in July 2020 closed Pizza Bella & More. But Ferrini and her business partner "forged ahead," reopening the restaurant and renaming it Bella's Parkside Tavern in November 2020.

"My life has a theme," Ferrini says. "Every time I accomplish something from adversity, I need to accomplish more."

"Obstacles were blocking my path. The EOC was my stepping stone and guided me past them."

up, get reading, and complete Challenge #1. I encourage our readers and their families to take advantage of this great opportunity to pick up some wonderful books," said PAL Executive Director Nekia Kemp.

Readers can begin signing up for Reading Rules! 2021 can register at: www.buffalony.gov/readingrules.

Bernarda Arias

Arias is the recipient of the Arthur O. Eve Education and Community Service Award, recognized as the student or alumnus/alumna demonstrating leadership, advocacy, community service and/or commitment to education.

The award honors the legacy of Eve, Deputy Speaker of the New York State Assembly for 35 years.

Born in the Dominican Republic, Arias came to the United States and moved to Buffalo in 1998 to pursue her college degree. After earning a BS in business administration from SUNY Buffalo State, she accepted a position at a non-profit organization, where she worked for seven years.

When she was laid off from that job, she changed her career aspirations, enrolling in the UBEOC, where she earned certification in medical billing and coding.

"Ms. Arias credits the UBEOC with helping her see career opportunities available in the field of allied health," according to the commencement program, which described Arias as a "qualified human resource professional with over 15 years of experience" at companies including Fisher-Price/Mattel, Southwest Key Program Inc. and Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Arias currently is the diversity program assistant at Roswell, supervising special events that focus on celebrating diverse cultures and holidays.

She also coordinates faith-based events that educate the hospital and community about religions and beliefs, and assists in harassment and discrimination issues that may arise.

Arias says one of the best aspects of her role as diversity officer is the opportu-



Bernarda Arias

nity to give back to the community.

"I learn more about myself and I meet interesting people who give me new insights on life," she says. "But the most important thing is that I am making a difference; even doing small things can have a big impact on others."

Arias organizes outreach events between Roswell and UBEOC, and connects with community organizations including the Pride Center of Buffalo, Native American Community Services, the Buffalo Employment and Training Center, the Hispanic Heritage Council and the Buffalo Urban League to educate them about employment opportunities at Roswell.

Arias is a strong advocate of young women. Through her sorority, Sigma Lambda Upsilon/Señoritas Latinas Unidas, she became co-founder of the L.A.D.Y.S (Leadership, Advancement and Development of our Young Sisters) program that focuses on reaching women who aspire to enroll in a college or university.

"The purpose of life is not just to be happy," she explains. "It is to be useful, honorable, compassionate, and to have it make some difference that you have loved and lived well."

"No one has ever become poor by giving."