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A degree of difference: Haylee Cook among Ouachita's first master's cohort in ABA



By Felley Lawson

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For more information, contact OBU's news bureau at newsbureau@obu.edu or (870) 245-5208.

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. – A couple years out of college, Haylee Cook knew her calling. She just didn't know what it was called.

After Cook earned a degree in psychology from Henderson State University, she and her husband, Matthew, a 2014 Ouachita graduate, left Arkadelphia so that he could pursue family ministry at a church in Alabama. When the couple's daughter, Leland, was born, "I had zero motivation for graduate school," Cook said. "I wanted to be the best mom I could be, and support Matthew in his ministry."

On Sunday mornings, the Cooks served together working with children at their church.

"I met a little boy who would come with his grandparents. He needed support transitionally, behaviorally, socially; he didn't know how to engage appropriately in his environment," Cook recalled. "I kept wondering, from a church standpoint, 'What can we do to help this little guy?' He just needed support, and I wanted to help."

Cook assumed there were resources that could offer direction but didn't know where to find them. So she started with a Google search.

"The first thing that popped up was applied behavior analysis therapy," she said. "I didn't know what it was." Matthew had heard that Ouachita was starting a master's program in ABA; "That's when the wheels started turning."

Applied behavior analysis therapy uses reinforcement to increase socially significant behavior and is a leading evidence-based treatment for individuals diagnosed with autism. Cook called Dr. Sheila Barnes, director of Ouachita's ABA program at the time, and learned that the program would launch in May 2020—giving Cook time to join Ouachita's first ABA cohort.

Professors in the ABA program are "top notch," said Cook. Although each has a distinctive style of teaching, they're all committed to being accessible, compassionate, engaging and encouraging, always pushing students to do their best. "I think that's just the Ouachita way."

The program is now led by Dr. Julyse Migan-Gandonou Horr; Barnes continues to teach as an interim step toward retirement. Dr. Steven Gonzales, visiting assistant professor, rounds out the ABA faculty.

Even though classes were held exclusively online due to COVID-19, students were excited to meet one another.

"During the first week, Dr. Barnes had to shut down the messaging board because we just kept talking! We wanted to get to know and support each other, and we're still connected today," Cook said. "I have a friend who went through the ABA program at another school, and she doesn't know anyone in her cohort. Coming out on the other side of this program with friends for life who are in the same profession—that's huge."

Ouachita's ABA program offers two unique elements that were important to Cook: a faith-based approach to instruction, and on-the-job learning through clinical partners like alumni-owned Pediatrics Plus.

"Peds Plus offers a loan repayment program, and I liked that it was a local clinic," Cook said. "Their values are spot on with Ouachita's values and my personal values."

Cook completed the Master of Science degree in ABA in July 2021 and on her first attempt passed the Board Certified Behavior Analyst exam, a test with only a 66% national pass rate. She made the transition in November from student to full-time staff at Peds Plus. The clinic is a short walk from the Cooks' apartment in Flippin-Perrin Hall, where Matthew is resident director; he also serves as assistant director of recreational life at Ouachita.

As a student, Cook learned that families of children diagnosed with autism often need hands-on support. As a behavior analyst, she is able to offer individualized support to each family through frequent communication, community outings, behavior support and other tactics.

"One of my favorite things about being a behavior analyst is meeting with my clients' families weekly to update them on their child's progress," she noted. "My goal is to put their wants and needs first so my clients can be successful not only in the preschool setting, but in the home setting as well."

The team approach to treatment at Peds Plus appeals to Cook, who played volleyball at Henderson. Work is collaborative; the clinic offers speech, occupational, physical and behavioral therapy. When mapping out a treatment plan for a client, she said, "We can celebrate successes, but we can also go in every day and think, 'That didn't work. Let's try this.' Recalibrate. We're being creative and productive to get the best result for a child and their family."

"I love to be creative," added Cook, whose undergraduate minor was in art. "Every day of the week I get to be super creative for a great cause."

Another benefit to her job is a 22-hour work week that offers the equivalent of a full-time salary, as well as the chance to develop professionally and dedicate time to home and family. But for Cook, the work is about much more than a paycheck.

Jesus trained his focus on people in need. Even when his disciples tried to hurry him along or discourage hurting people from approaching him, he always stopped to help.

"That's what I try to do, too, following Jesus' example," Cook said. "I don't want to just keep walking and ignore a person who needs help."

"I love what I do," she added. "I'm in it because I feel like God put this in my life, and I was made to do it."

Photo by Tyler Rosenthal