Spring 2017 ADA alum Sileno Santos works as an adaptive sports coordinator at Associação Desportiva Para Deficientes (ADD), a nonprofit organization in São Paulo, Brazil that provides inclusive recreation, fitness and competitive sports for people with physical, visual, or cognitive disabilities.

“Sports is a universal language,” said Sileno. “Through sports, people can connect and build their physical, mental, and academic skills.”

As the father of a child with special needs, Sileno has been passionate in advocating for inclusive sports opportunities for youth with a disability for the past 15 years. His responsibilities at ADD include facilitating the orientation on adapted physical education and sports for the program’s youth participants, developing curricula around adapted physical education activities, and conducting physical assessments. Sileno also plays the roles of teacher, counselor, and coach for youth with and without disabilities.

Prior to the ADA International Fellowship, Sileno was selected to participate in a U.S.–Brazil exchange program promoting inclusive sports in 2013. The event was sponsored by U.S. Department of State.

As an ADA International Fellow, Sileno was interested in learning effective strategies and tools to promote the development of adapted physical education for youth with disabilities. Specifically, he wanted to learn how to train school physical education teachers to apply inclusive approaches, using a train-the-trainer methodology, and to sustain these efforts in the community.

Sileno spent his fellowship at the Lakeshore Foundation in Birmingham, Alabama, under the supervision and mentorship of the foundation’s policy and public affairs coordinator, Dr. Karin Korb. For his follow-on project, he aimed to promote inclusion of students with disabilities in school-based and after-school physical education activities by educating health professionals, caregivers, and families about the rights of people with disabilities, and by working in partnership with Brazilian authorities at the local, city, and federal levels.

Since returning to Brazil, Sileno has presented on his fellowship experience and knowledge gained in the United States to his professional team at ADD, composed of 18 physical education teachers. He gave the same lecture to REMS, a national network of Brazilian health professionals.

“Thanks to the ADA Fellowship... I was able to train teachers on helping people with disabilities to be independent and direct their lives toward a more promising future. This is all part of fighting for a more just society with the preservation of rights for all people, with and without disabilities.”

—Spring 2017 ADA alum Sileno Santos

Figure 1: Collaboration with REMS about using sports to bring about social change.
The ADA International Fellowship Program was funded by the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, and implemented by the Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD) in partnership with the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Institutions that promote social change for vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities, through sports (see Figure 1). Sileno also participated in a table discussion about U.S.–Brazil differences in sports programming for people with disabilities. This event was held on August 31, 2017 in São Carlos during the International Symposium on Adapted Physical Activity.

Sileno, together with fellow ADA alum Renatta Bonotto, had an opportunity to debrief with staff from the U.S. Consulate in São Paulo on his fellowship experience and follow-on project. The consulate subsequently posted an article about them in Portuguese on their social media platform.

Sileno was able to replicate the sports programs that he experienced during the fellowship at the Lakeshore Foundation with professionals interested in adapted sports in four cities (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Santa Teresinha, and Rio Claro). He offered guidelines for parents of students in these programs related to the rights of persons with disabilities, especially educational rights.

Additionally, he implemented weekly physical activities for students with disabilities at Zenaide School, a public school in São Paulo, providing the physical education teachers with materials and resources. This effort allowed 40 students with disabilities to fully participate in the school’s physical activities alongside their peers.

Reflecting on the impact of the ADA International Fellowship Program, Sileno said, “Thanks to the ADA Fellowship, I had the opportunity to learn about the initiatives of the Lakeshore Foundation for the involvement of people with disabilities in physical and sports activities. In addition, I was able to train teachers on helping people with disabilities to be independent and direct their lives toward a more promising future. This is all part of fighting for a more just society with the preservation of rights for all people, with and without disabilities.”