

AU PAIR: PART OF THE FAMILY

BY ANN McDUFFIE

FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

WHEN Deanna Dabney rises before the sun to prepare for her hourlong commute from Stafford County to Northern Virginia, she doesn't face the stress that often comes with getting children up and off to the school bus on time.

Instead, Deanna and her husband, Gene, have peace of mind, knowing their two children are in the capable hands of the family's live-in au pair.

Roseana Miranda, 22, from Belo Horizonte, Brazil, has been the caretaker of Nikki, 15, and Jake, 11, since last April. But the vibrant young woman, who goes by Rose, has been much more—friend, confidant, playmate, peer and cheerleader—to the two active kids.

Once thought to be the domain of the wealthy, au pairs are providing child care to more and more families.

The U.S. Au Pair Program was established in 1986 by the U.S. Department of State as an educational and cultural exchange with a strong child care component. Participants enter the United States for one year to care for the children of a family in whose home they will live.

Unlike nannies, who are employees paid for their expertise and experience, au pairs are part of the DOS exchange program, who receive child safety and development instruction. "Au pair" is French for "on par," reminding host families that, although she is an employee, their international visitor is to be treated as a member of the family.

There are a number of au

pair agencies in the Fredericksburg area, but Miranda is sponsored by Au Pair in America, one of the first legal au pair programs in the U.S., according to Hayley Kruger, community counselor for the agency.

Sponsoring organizations identify, screen, select and match au pairs and host families. To qualify, au pairs must pass a rigorous application process, be proficient in spoken English and pursue post-secondary education. They provide up to 45 hours per week of live-in child care. In exchange, the host family provides a private bedroom, meals, a weekly wage, transportation to classes and a portion of their tuition. The average annual cost to a host family is about \$17,000, according to the state department.

Deanna Dabney says she has tried all sorts of child care situations over the years. Their grandmother kept the children when they were younger. Later, they went to day care. But about

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four years ago, the Dabneys decided to try an au pair. Having a live-in young adult caretaker turned out to be the perfect fit for the family.

"I love having an au pair for the flexibility and companionship," Deanna Dabney said. "A live-in au pair has a vested interest in the kids and family. Rose has been fantastic."

Because of their long and irregular work hours the Dabneys felt an au pair would be in the children's best interest. Deanna commutes to her job in Tysons Corner while Gene, a general contractor, owns Mount

Holly Builders in Fredericksburg, doing commercial and residential renovations as well as custom homes.

The working couple can pursue their demanding careers, knowing the children are in good hands. Rose is responsible for making sure the kids get their homework completed and taking them to their numerous extracurricular activities. She drives Jake to football practice and monitors his time spent in front of the computer and TV screen.

Jake, a self-described video game addict, said the best thing about having an au pair is sleeping in during the summer.

"They can relax and be kids," Deanna said. Otherwise, she explained, the children would have to be up well before sunrise to go to day care, or Jake's older sister would become his sitter.

For Nikki, who is a member of the Mountain View High School dance team, that's a job better left to the professional.

"Having Rose gives me the opportunity to be a teen," she said. "She drives me to visit friends, picks me up after dance practice. And I don't have to babysit my brother!"

Despite the screening process and interviews, not every au pair is a good fit for every family, and vice versa. There may be certain expectations on both parties that may not be fulfilled. Sometimes there are personality conflicts or differences in lifestyle.

"It can be very emotional to have someone from another country living with you and not working out. It's not just a 9-to-5 job that you

can ask them to leave," said Deanna Dabney.

That's when community counselor Kruger steps in, acting as a liaison between the family and au pair. As the local counselor for Au Pair in America, Kruger currently maintains contact with and provides support to eight au pairs and their host families in the Fredericksburg area. That work includes orienting families to the program and helping to acclimate the au pairs to the U.S.

On the suggestion of Kruger, Deanna and Rose e-mailed back and forth for three months, discussing discipline, schedules and activities before Rose came to the U.S. "This way, expectations of both the parents and the au pair were addressed before a situation arose," Kruger said.

Rose is the Dabneys' fifth au pair, mainly because of the policy limiting au pairs to a 12-month term. After that time they are required to return to their home countries. That tenure can be a drawback when families bond with their au pairs as the Dabneys have.

Jake still seemed a bit downcast about the departure of one former au pair, saying, "I don't want to talk about it."

However, participants can apply for a six-, nine- or 12-month extension to stay with the host family or move on to another.

Normally after new au pairs arrive, they spend a few weeks adjusting to the area. Deanna Dabney helped Rose with basic things like applying for a Social Security card, enrolling in college and getting a driver's license for her new home. Having a Social Security number helps to register for classes, establish a bank account and obtain a

driver's license, Kruger said.

And, of course, Rose's family in Brazil worried about her well-being. However, after living with the Dabneys for a few short weeks, Rose was able to reassure her parents that she was fine.

Deanna Dabney understands their concern. "If my daughter decides to go to another country, I would want someone to care for her as well," she said.

Beyond basic child care, the au pair and her host family receive the added benefit of a cultural exchange.

"I've found the experience to be very interesting and enlightening," counselor Kruger said. "It's a chance for au pairs and families to learn about other cultures."

Kruger meets monthly with the au pairs in her district, and at each meeting she tries to plan something new for them. For example, she hosted an international picnic, in which the au pairs each brought a dish of food from their native country. The group has gone strawberry-picking at Belvedere Plantation. They have ridden a horse-drawn carriage through downtown and

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learned some history of Fredericksburg.

Last spring, Kruger coordinated an event at the Thurman Brisben Center. The au pairs prepared and served a Sunday lunch of grilled-cheese sandwiches and soup at the regional homeless shelter. Because the nature of an au pair's job associates them with a certain demographic, Kruger explained, working at the homeless shelter gave them a chance to give back to the community they temporarily call home.

"I felt it was an appropriate activity for the au pairs to see another aspect of America," she said. "It was very meaningful for them to be able to help."

The cultural exchange gives both au pairs and host families a chance to put their impressions into perspective, she added. For example, many American families drive large SUVs. "Even our small cars are still big compared to the rest of the world."

Rose seconded that statement. "Driving in Brazil is way different than driving in the U.S." she said.

Though she found U.S. drivers generally more polite than in her home country, driving laws are different, and American cars on the whole are much bigger.

For some, an au pair may simply be a form of live-in child care, but Deanna says it encompasses much more. The Dabneys consider Rose part of the family, including her in family outings to the beach, camping trips and Kings Dominion. "It's like having an older daughter," Deanna said.

When away at work, she and Rose communicate often by telephone, text and e-mail. And when Deanna is home, she's primarily in charge of the kids.

During the summer Rose's biggest challenge was finding activities to keep the kids busy while the parents were away at work. The start of school brings a whole different set of circumstances. The kids will take the bus to school and much of Rose's day will be free to attend classes or pursue personal interests. She's studying linguistics and morphology, the study of word structure, at the

University of Mary Washington. Previously, in Brazil Rose taught English to children and adults.

Besides working with children, Rose chose to come to the U.S. to improve her English. The college classes she takes here will help with her curriculum when she returns to Brazil.

The rural Stafford countryside is a world away from

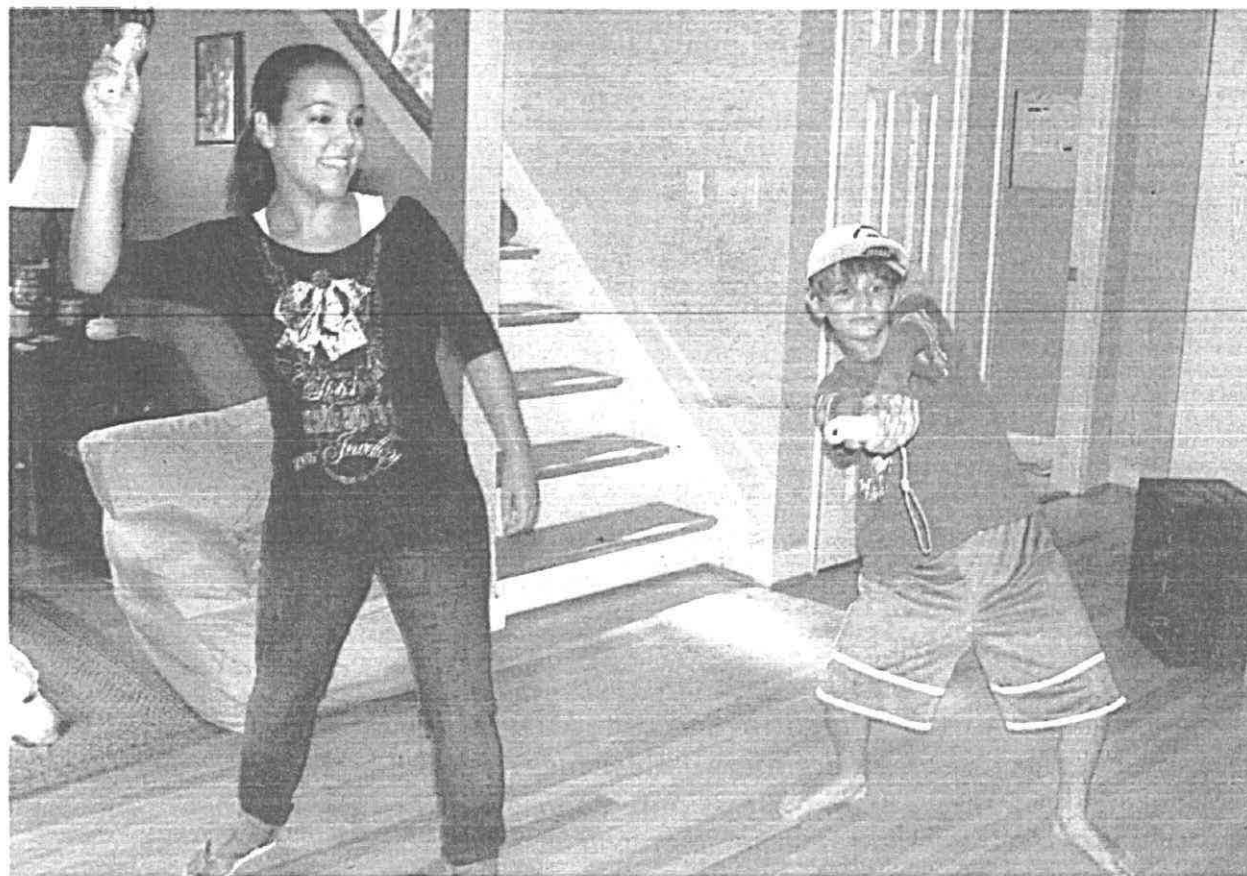
her city life in Belo Horizonte, the third-largest city in Brazil with a population of nearly 2.5 million. Leaving family behind, coming to a foreign country, and experiencing a new culture has been exciting but sometimes she feels a little homesick, Rose said.

"The hardest part is being away from what you're used to," she said.

Rose handles any problems that arise with a positive attitude.

"If you have a bad day, you can't just go home. You've got to get over it," she said. "Plus the family gives powerful hugs."

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PHOTOS BY ANN M. DUFFIE

Au pair Roseana Miranda, who is from Brazil, and her charge Jack Dabney, 11, take time out for a game of Wii.