

This child care has international flair

By Anne Sullivan
staff writer

Fitting child care needs with family needs is a task facing many American families. Three years ago Bryan and Cathy Harris of Farmington Hills were expecting their third child and searching for a method of child care that would suit their family needs.

The Harrises wanted to provide child care in their home, for their three children, Adam, now 10, Dustin 8, and Andy 2 1/2 (Bryan has a 15-year-old son, Jonathan, from a previous marriage). They investigated child care alternatives. "We looked into hiring a nanny," said Bryan Harris. "But they wanted \$250 a week plus health insurance. Financially, that was not possible for us."

A story about au pairs on the evening news caught his attention, and he and Cathy decided to investigate that method of child care. It eventually led them to contract child care services from Au Pair of America.

Both Harrises had successful careers in the asphalt business, and neither could give up their career. "Cathy owns her own paving business, and I work for an asphalt company in Milford," said Bryan Harris. "She says we're in competition," he chuckled. "But she does small jobs, like driveways, and we do the big stuff."

THE HARRISES applied to Au Pair of America. They went through the screening and application process, interviewed potential au pairs, and selected one they thought would best fit into their family. Two and a half years ago they hosted their first au pair.

The object of the program is to host a young person from a foreign country, make them a member of the family, while they perform child care for their host family, according to Bryan Harris. "An au pair means on a par and we were looking for someone who wanted to be a part of our family," said Bryan Harris. "We wanted someone who wasn't just looking to punch a clock and get out."

Both Bryan and Cathy are happy with the au pair program, and have recently taken on their fifth au pair. "It doesn't cost more than good child care," said Cathy Harris.

"It's affordable. It averages out to about \$160 a week, there's good cultural exchange for us, the kids, and the au pair."

lly for 12 months, spend one month traveling around the United States, and return home.

FOR EACH au pair they've contracted, the Harrises pay an origination fee, a \$100 a week stipend, and provide transportation. Conny Dengg, of Kottlingbrunn, Austria, is the newest au pair in the Harris household.

She arrived at the Harrises in mid-November, to replace Gina Verstraete, of Brugge, Belgium, who left the day after Christmas. The six-week overlap is not common, but was a personal decision made by the Harrises. "We wanted Gina to train the new au pair," said Cathy Harris.

"It's very hard to get an au pair in December because of the holidays. We could either get one in mid-November, or mid-January, and we didn't want a gap." The philosophy worked for the Harrises. Conny has learned her way around the area and feels comfortable in the community. And the transition in the family is going smooth.

"When I first came here, the children would say 'Conny, who's Gina?' and now they come to me," said Conny.

As Conny is adjusting to America and the Harris family, the Harris children are adjusting to Conny, treating her like a member of the family. Shortly after arriving in Farmington Hills, Conny went out on her first excursion alone. "Adam, our oldest son sat up and paced the floor waiting for her to come home," said Cathy Harris. "Adam's our worrier and it was after 10:30 p.m., he knew the malls were closed and was concerned that Conny wasn't home," said Cathy Harris.

As part of the cultural exchange, the Harris have introduced American customs to their au pairs. "We take them all to Meijer's, and they love it. Sometimes they go there at 2 a.m. just to be there," said Cathy Harris. "Gina had never had a Thanksgiving, or Halloween."

"Christmas is very different in America," said Gina, and admits she likes the way they celebrate Christmas. She also wants to take home her Halloween mementos.

THE HARRISES changed agencies this time around, hiring Conny from Au Pair Home Care. To acquire Conny's services, they said \$2,775 in fees to the agency, filled out questionnaires, and they were computer matched by Home Care.

"When we had our first au pair, there were only about 50 au pairs in Oakland County," said Bryan Harris.



The Harris family of Farmington Hills host an au pair to provide at home child care for their three children. The family includes (back row, from left) Bryan Harris, Cathy Harris, Conny Dengg

of Kottlingbrunn, Austria, Gina Verstraete of Brugge, Belgium; (front row, from left) Dustin Harris, 8, and Adam Harris, 10. Andy Harris (left), 2 1/2, looks on.

"Now there are between 250 and 300 host families."

The Harrises believe hosting an au pair is like any other living situation, if you get along and mesh well, it's great. It hasn't all been easy for the Harrises nor other host families. With Au Pair Home Care, a support group of host families is provided, and the Harrises attend the meetings, share their experiences, and learn what other families have experienced.

"Having an au pair is like having a teenage daughter in your house," said Bryan Harris. "Most of them are 19 or 20 years old. We've had two real good au pairs, and two who didn't work out. But two of our best au pairs were rejected by other host families."

The Harrises obtained Gina after their third au pair hadn't worked out. She is now hosted by a family in Georgia. Gina came to Farmington Hills, via Chicago, from a family where she didn't quite mesh. "You want someone who will fit into our family and who you can communi-

cate with," said Cathy Harris.

"They become a part of the family," said Bryan Harris, which includes vacationing and visiting with family members. "I know some families who leave the au pair home when they vacation, one family left her behind when the whole family went to California, and I'm not sure whose idea it was (for the au pair to stay home)," said Bryan Harris. "And another family left her home with the kids and took a vacation, but we include the au pair in our holidays and vacations."

THERE IS A transition for both the families and the au pair as well as a learning curve with each new au pair.

"You can't take things for granted," said Bryan Harris, who related a story he heard from another au pair host family, when the host mother said she'd be back in a minute, and went upstairs. The au pair thought she literally meant 60 seconds, and became very concerned

when she wasn't back down after several minutes.

"One of our au pairs was lost and driving around for two or three hours, and we didn't know," said Bryan Harris. "She was driving a car load of girls and they ended up in Manchester. They never phoned, but eventually found their way back. We implemented a new rule, and tell all the au pairs that if they're driving, and lost for more than 20 minutes, they're to call."

In the home, the au pairs are responsible for taking care of the children. They usually work 45 hours a week, for which they receive the \$100 stipend, room and board, and transportation. Their chores around the house include taking care of the children, fixing meals for them, cleaning up after the children and themselves, and doing the children's laundry.

To apply to the au pair program, Gina paid \$5,000 Belgian francs, the equivalent of \$300 American. If she remains in the program for the 12

months, her deposit is returned. She also goes through extensive application and interviewing process to determine if she would be an adequate child care giver. Conny went through a similar process in her company.

Gina left the Harrises home Dec. 26, and headed for a vacation in Orlando, Florida, where she will stay with Bryan's parents. Her vacation also includes a trip to Tennessee, where she wants to visit Graceland; Elvis Presley's home, a trip to Madison Wisconsin, to visit with Cathy's relatives. She will also attend a 3-day conference in Toledo, with Mike and Beth Padula, Cathy's sister and brother-in-law.

Gina is attempting to get a six-month extension on her visa, to work for the Padula's, of Dearborn Heights, who recently had a baby. The extension is pending, and if Gina doesn't know by Jan. 29, she will be on a plane back to Belgium.

"The hardest part is putting them on the plane and saying goodbye," said Cathy Harris.

Program on grief is planned

McCauley Funeral Home will sponsor "The Aftermath of Suicide: Shock, Guilt, Anger and Grief." The free program will be held Thursday, Jan. 30, at 7 p.m. at the Farmington Hills Branch Library, 32737 W. 12 Mile Road, between Orchard Lake and Farmington roads.

McCauley Funeral Home staff grief counselor Elaine S. Burton will lead an open discussion and provide suggestions for understanding and coping with suicide.

The seminar coincides with McCauley Funeral Home's \$200 donation to supplement the library's bereavement collection. The funds will be used to purchase additional materials on suicides and AIDS related deaths.

The collection was established with an earlier contribution from the funeral home in 1989. For more information call 553-9120.

Volunteers are needed

Oakland Family Services has recently received a federal grant from the United States Department of Health and Human Services for CHAMPS (Children And Youth Having And Maintaining Positive Self-esteem), an intervention program for children of chemically dependent parents. This innovative program will target 120 children living in Pontiac.

Volunteers are needed to provide a warm and positive environment to these children of neglect. Some opportunities include tutoring, group activities, and transporting children to and from the agency. Daytime and evening hours are available.

If you have some time to give and some love to share, call Jean-Marie Steele or Sheri Kaplan at 858-7766.

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