

## Off the Beaten Path

### A Single Mom's Journey through Adoption

By Community Counselor Catherine Kuntze

*EurAuPair Community Counselor Catherine Kuntze shares her touching, heart-warming story with us:*

"While the other kids wanted to be teachers, doctors or astronauts when they grew up, I always said I wanted to be a single mom with two kids! Ok, I didn't really say that but that's exactly where my life has taken me. I'm a never-been-married, 30-something, full-time working mother of two 10 year-old girls and I'm where I want and am supposed to be at this stage in my life. My name is Catherine and this is my story.

For as long as I can remember I've wanted to adopt a child. I didn't know where from, what age, boy or girl, just that I would do it one day. My first "experience" with adoption was when I was in my early twenties and living with my cousin and his wife who adopted a baby boy from Russia. I didn't pay attention to the process they went through, just celebrated with them in their happiness when they returned home.

Since that time many years went by, most of them faster than others, and I found myself into my 30's with a daughter of my own. I grew up with two younger sisters

and a brother and couldn't imagine my child going through life without either a sister or brother of her own. I can say that now that I'm older. If you would've asked me in my teens if I was thankful I had siblings I'd have told you heck no, who needs them! But seriously, on my 35th birthday I made a promise to myself that if I wasn't married and had the financial means, I'd begin the adoption process when I turned 38.

Fast forward to December 2009. My sister and her family made the (shocking!) announcement that they were adopting a baby boy from Ethiopia. I was honored when they asked me to accompany my brother-in-law to travel with him to pick up their son. While in Ethiopia at the orphanages, I kept noticing all the older children who were waiting for families. Everyone has the basic human need to be loved, and these children were no exception. So, before I left the country I knew I would be adopting an older child from Ethiopia.

I chose Ethiopia for a few reasons. One, they allow single mothers to adopt (important in my case), two, Ethiopia has one of the highest numbers of orphans in the world, and three, it just felt

right. So, in April of 2010 I began the process of adoption. What followed were months of paperwork, interrogations, oops, I mean interviews by social workers, doctor visits, fingerprinting appointments, background checks on everything from my driving history to credit card statements, along with making payments to my agency. This was one of the most difficult and challenging times both mentally and physically of my life. A couple of times I was ready to throw in the towel, but with the encouragement of my family and friends kept moving forward, and in December I was matched with a 10 year-old girl.

In February of 2011 I traveled with my BFF, Deena, to meet my daughter for the first time. Reading hundreds of books and talking with many adoptive parents cannot prepare you for this. I'd like to say our meeting looked like something out of a movie but it didn't even come close. Awkward is the first word that comes to mind. We were both reserved and couldn't communicate very well. I was nervous while she was withdrawn. Did I mention it was awkward? At the end of the week it

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#### About Us...

EurAuPair Intercultural Child Care Programs is a non-profit, public benefit organization designated by the U.S. Department of State to conduct the Au Pair cultural exchange program under the Fulbright Hays Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act of 1961 and is intended "to promote mutual understanding between the people of the United States and other countries by means of educational and cultural exchanges".

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# German Carnival in Iowa

By Community Counselor Erin Frank

On a Wednesday afternoon in July 2011, EurAupair au pair Britta Voihs, hosted by the Schwarck family of Eldora, IA, arranged a German Karneval (carnival) for Eldora library's 'One World, Many Stories' Summer Reading Program. German music played as Britta painted faces, gave out candy, had the kids come

in costume and helped them design parade floats for a parade around the library. It was a great success, also covered by Eldora's local newspaper! Thank you, Britta, for sharing a part of Germany's culture with the Eldora kids!!

*A big Thanks to Community Counselor Erin Frank for sharing the story with The Gazette!*

# Ronald McDonald House Award

EurAupair au pair Miriam Buballa, hosted by the Reagan family of Chagrin Falls, OH, and Community Counselor Kristina Weindel attended the 'Ronald McDonald House 2011 Pillar Award' in Cleveland, OH. After a fantastic dinner reception held at Cleveland's Judson Manor, EurAupair was presented with the 'Pillar Award' as recognition of EurAupair's ongoing support of the Ronald McDonald House in Cleveland.

Miriam and Kristina, as well as Miriam's twin sister Janine, who visited from Germany, enjoyed the evening and felt honored to receive the award on EurAupair's behalf.



*Au Pair Miriam and Community Counselor Kristina in the center, after having received the Pillar Award.*

# Annual Chicago Boat Tour

By Community Counselor Dawn Rothermel



*Some of the au pairs and counselors enjoyed a picnic beforehand on the lush lawn of Navy Pier.*

It was a glorious sunny and cool Sunday, the 28th of August, 2011, when approximately 30 au pairs, 17 Community Counselors and friends boarded Shoreline Sightseeing's boat for a trip down the Chicago River. The tour departed Ogden Slip, near famed Navy Pier, and proceeded down the Chicago River, taking in parts of both the north and south branches. The docent highlighted various architectural gems along the river, including little known facts such as there are 37 drawbridges that span the Chicago River, giving all aboard an intimate history of Chicago's skyline.

# My American Dream

By Au Pair of the Year and IAPA Au Pair of the Year finalist Melanie Bluhm

*EurAupair Au Pair of the Year and IAPA Au Pair of the Year finalist Melanie Bluhm writes about her unforgettable year with the Cameron family:*

“When I started thinking about being an Au pair - exactly two years ago - I knew it would be an exceptional experience. But back then I didn't have an idea how exceptional! I had already worked with children for five years at that point and was almost done with studying to become a preschool teacher. Quite a bit of experience you would think! At least this is what I thought when I read the first email sent from an American family with three little children under three years - two year old twins Chloe and Sophia and 9 months old baby Hannah. No problem? Well, we'll see about that.

I liked the Cameron family from Wayne, PA immediately and that impression improved with every email and soon followed phone calls. I was more than excited when we matched! They were the first family that contacted me and I'm sure I could not have done better. But let's come to that later. On August 24 2009 I left my little German village to fly to the United States! Unbelievable!

After an awesome and pretty much sleepless week in New York City (well, it doesn't get its nickname from nowhere, does it?) I finally met the family I would spend the next twelve months with! I had always been a pretty calm person.

Neither exams nor having a whole bunch of preschool kids by myself the first time could make me feel too nervous. On this Friday afternoon, sitting in a bus to Philadelphia, PA I felt more nervous than I would have doing five exams at the same time - unprepared! Talking to the other au pairs I realized I wasn't alone with that feeling. That helped.

I remembered like it was yesterday when my host dad picked me up at the airport pretending my two suitcases were not heavy at all. Well, his heavy breathing and deep red face said something else, but not even Hulk himself could have lifted a girls one-year luggage without trouble. My host dad talked to me in the car - probably about Hulk, I don't know. I barely heard yes and no. Before I came to the US I thought my English was pretty good. I guess the reason for that could have been that I'd never talked to an English person before. Smiling and nodding were supposed to give the impression that I understood what he was talking about. I don't think he bought it.

To welcome me, my new host family gave a little party with close friends of the family and two other au pairs present. It helped a lot to have other girls around who had experienced the same - leaving their home country, family, friends and everything they knew to find something completely new and unknown! “My” girls and my hostmum had not been there yet, it was only shortly after nap time.



I was still more nervous than ever before in my life. Then I heard a car in a driveway and little voices.

There they were! Very excited I went outside to say hello to my new family and with a huge relief I realized that they were just as nice as I expected! Chloe and Sophia, both still two at this time were pretty shy in the beginning and 10 months old Hannah was asleep.

During dinner I didn't talk very much - an experience my host family would not have again. For dessert we had chocolate brownies - my favorite! And then I did something I would not have done with many people in this universe - I shared my brownie with beautiful baby Hannah and I did it with the most possible pleasure.

From that moment on we became friends. It took me a little bit longer with the big girls. It should happen the next day when we played outside in the yard. The girls were playing in the sand and I asked them to cook a mud pie for me! They were probably wondering why somebody would want to eat mud pie but they started cooking. After a while they did not only prepare mud pie, but also mud hamburgers, mud hot dogs and mud ice cream. It was delicious! (On this point I have to say that they actually ate way more healthy than that but mud green beans were hard to make). After that nice mud lunch (that luckily and also surprisingly nobody ate for real) I became friends with Chloe and Sophia. This day was almost 18 months ago and I can look back at a most wonderful, eventful and sometimes a little bit challenging year.

Taking care of three girls isn't easy and there are not many college courses that can prepare you for that if you're only 21 years old. But not only that these three little girls were the most amazing and special girls you could imagine; I also had great

host parents who did two things. They showed me their appreciation for what I did and they also managed to make me feel like a full family member and they did that so well that I never suffered homesickness or ever regretted my decision. They included me in every family activity and vacation and I never felt like a guest or an employee but always like somebody they wanted to be there. I've met many Au pairs during that year and because of that I know all these things are nothing to be taken for granted. We shared hobbies we had already in common like movies and books and also found new things we could do (and I'm very proud to announce that I made an American watch soccer). But besides that my host parents supported me by giving me the opportunity to make all I could out of my experience. I saw and did everything I wanted to - little things like a drive-in movie and big things like a trip to Miami Beach. They supported me with everything I needed for my travel month and I was able to visit places I would never have dreamed of two years before. It was very hard to say goodbye to my new family, my new friends and America and in place of all the nervousness and excitement I felt the day I arrived I felt deep sadness the day I left.

But I knew this goodbye will not be forever and instead of being sad I started to be thankful for the wonderful time I spent in the United States and for the great and lovely people I can still call family.

In my opinion the Au pair program is a great opportunity for young people and I can absolutely recommend it to everybody. Since my return to Germany I've been supporting the German agency by being an interviewer for Au pair candidates who have made the same decision I made two years ago - to go to the US and live my dream!”



# My Life in Paradise

By Jeannett Trolle, Denmark

*Jeannett Trolle from Denmark, hosted by the Sorenson family of Kailua, HI, reflects on her au pair experience:*

“So now I have 3 weeks left in the U.S. When I finish, I have lived the American life for 19 months. It is hard to understand that this amazing experience is so close to being finished. I will miss everything when I come home, but at least all the experiences I have, will last for a lifetime.

I was so lucky to have experienced life in 2 different states in America; Leavenworth, Kansas and Kailua, Hawaii. I have now lived one year in Hawaii, and can only say it is true what people say when they say that it is Paradise:) “No shoes, no shirt, no problem” is the rule I have lived for 12 months and I have fully adapted now! Sun and summer, that is something I will miss greatly, and all the things Oahu has to offer. Every weekend I have been hiking a mountain, stand-up paddle boarding at sea, relaxing at all the white beaches and enjoying life at our own pool in the backyard.

Now when I sit here and reflect on my experience, it comes to my mind all the friends I have got over here - especially Line from Sweden, my great contact person Ashley

and last but not least: the sense of now having an American family! I would like to send a big Thank You back to say thanks for the support and everything you are doing to make the au pair experience so overwhelmingly great.

I cannot understand that it is now time to leave my host family, that I am probably never going to hear my host child introduce me as “my Jen” - not just Jen, not Nanny, no “my Jen” that’s what I am for her, the only Jen in the world! Priceless is all you have to say.”



*Jeannett and host sister Athena Ann*



*Jeannett and her Swedish au pair friend Line at Lanikai Trail Hike*

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was difficult to leave because I didn’t know when I would return to finally bring my daughter home.

The next several months were hard. For various reasons my case was being rejected by the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. And then, finally in June, I got the call. They’re ready for me.

We’ve been home now for two months and, truthfully, it hasn’t been easy. And I thought the adoption process was hard! I think what I failed to realize was that the real work starts when you’re home. Together...as a family. Each day brings a new challenge. We have good days and bad days and are still trying to find our new normal. We have good days and bad days and are still trying to find our new normal. We’ve got a long road ahead but I take comfort in knowing this was all part of the plan that was laid out for me.”



*The family together for the first time*