

## **Au-pairs: A European solution to Canadian childcare**

*By Juanita Bawagan*

Sarah Brandon's "Summer 2012" photo album looks like it's straight out of any girl's dream Eurotrip — a family visit in Belgium, the bustling streets of Madrid and endless landscapes of historic churches and picturesque waterfronts. The first photo shows her celebrating her 19th birthday with a little girl beside her.

Brandon didn't come to Madrid for a Eurotrip, she came to watch over this little girl named Susi as her au-pair.

"It allows for you to experience a lot of things and find out about a different culture," Brandon said from her home in Mississauga, ON.

The au-pair program has long been a popular concept in Europe. For the most part, university-aged girls move in with a European family and look after their children in exchange for room, board and some modest spending money.

For Brandon, being an au-pair in Spain was easy. After setting up an online profile and skyping with her host family a few times she was on her way to Madrid for two months.

However, when one of her friends from Madrid arranged to come to Canada as an au-pair she was turned away at the border.

It's a much different story for those seeking to be au-pairs in Canada.

### **The double standard**

Unlike countries in the European Union, Canada does not have an official au-pair program.

For a long time, one of only options was the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) where domestic workers act as nannies for about two years and eventually obtain permanent resident status.

The number of live-care givers approved has been declining but it's not because of a decreased demand for childcare, said Stephanie Petermann. She works with the Association of Caregiver and Nanny Agencies in Canada. Just last year, she said, it also became the only au-pair agency in Canada.

"We just wanted to give families another option for childcare," she said from the association's office in Vancouver.

The association doesn't see au-pairs as a replacement to the LCP but something to work alongside it. Families need to be flexible with au-pairs who see this as a short-term cultural exchange while caregivers are on contract and it's a formal employment.

"It's not better, just different," Petermann said.

Au-pairs typically come on a temporary work holiday visa available to youth aged 18-35 and have to pay for their own travel costs. The LCP is populated with mothers, many of whom are from the Philippines, and are looking to become permanent residents in order to bring their families over.

Rike Hauschild, 23, is a German au-pair the agency matched with a family in Victoria.

"I love Canada but I don't want to live here," she said.

“I just wanted to go to another country to have a one-year break because I finished my university in September and . . . I didn’t want to start working.”

Hauschild had travelled around Canada while she was in high school and really wanted to return. But when she looked for au-pair agencies, they were few and far between in comparison to the hundreds of options in Germany.

Hauschild opted to pay to go through an agency but she said many others go without an agency.

### **Illegal au-pairs**

“I’ve definitely heard of some cases where families take advantage of the au-pairs,” said Brandon.

“There are some who see them almost as a servant.”

Brandon didn’t go through an agency but she said it might be less risky for a more long-term case and in situations where there are no au-pair laws, like in Canada.

Petermann said the association had to set up their own rules: creating a contract about the pocket money for au-pairs, the amount of time off they can get since many of them want to travel across Canada and the number of hours they work on a regular basis.

Petermann said she doesn’t know why Canada doesn’t have an au-pair program and said she is hoping for a federal government-oriented program in future.

## **Going forward**

It seems as though the idea of au-pairs is gaining steam.

In October, agencies gathered in Toronto for an international conference that looked at the development of au-pairs programs in Canada.

It was given even more of a push after Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Jason Kenney said he would be looking at allowing for longer holiday work visas following his trip to Ireland.

For now, the Association of Caregiver and Nanny Agencies in Canada will be focusing on matching up au-pairs, many of which are looking to come in the summer after school.

As Brandon wraps up her second year of university, she will be flying off from Canada to Madrid again because she enjoyed her last summer so much.

She said she grew very close with Susi and it was like they were sisters.

“I think when I’m older I’d want to get an au pair. I think that it’s awesome because you can get someone to be part of your family,” she said.

“I want Susi to be my au-pair.”