from another country," she said.

"People with the most success real-

ize they are not just an employee,

and they're not professional nan-

nies, either. They must have realis-

tic expectations of what an au pair

can provide."

Child Care Crosses Cultural Divide By Jennifer Wake



The Kolm family's au pair, Veronika Skotnicova, watches the four children wh volunteers at a Halloween Carnival booth at Campolindo on Oct. 27. Photo Jennifer Wake

s children get older, their A schedules can become hectic, making choosing proper child care a daunting task. When Moraga resident and attorney Christine Kolm had her four children in an afterschool program, she found herself scrambling to fit everything in.

"When you have little ones, I think it's good to have them in a day care setting where they can socialize in different environments and gain a stronger sense of self," she said. "But when the kids are older, they have homework that has to be done, soccer and different events to attend. I would get home between six and six-thirty and dinner, homework and baths had to be done within a two and a half hour period."

Kolm hired a nanny, but the cost ranged between \$35-45,000 per year. "The really good ones make more," she said.

With her four children ranging in age from kindergarten to middle school, Kolm found an economical alternative that was a better fit for her hectic family schedule: an au pair.

Typically, au pairs range in age from 18 to 26 and come from all over Europe, as well as some from China and Latin America, to live with a host family for an average of one year. In addition to providing childcare, many au pairs assist with light housekeeping, help with meals, and drive children to and from school and extracurricular activities

Annual costs for an au pair range between \$15-18,000, not including room and board. San Francisco-based AuPairCare - just one of several au pair agencies in the country - has placed more than 30,000 au pairs from 40 countries with families across the United States. According to Julia Brewer, who is an area director for AuPair-Care, the program has grown a lot in the past five years.

"It's seen as a good child care solution," she said. "And because English has become the language of business, learning English is a big motivation for the au pairs. English gives them a skill they can take back."

The program is considered an exchange program by the U.S. Department of State, although it's only a one-way exchange, and the rules regarding au pairs (including total hours per day and week they can work) are overseen by this

"You're inviting someone who's from another culture into your home, which has its pluses

and minuses," said Kolm, who recently had an au pair from Poland live with her family for a year, and in August welcomed a new au pair from the Czech Republic. "With an au pair, your family experiences another culture and another language. With in home care, your home becomes the base for your family, rather than a day care facility. Unlike a day care facility, if a child is sick, an au pair can still help provide care. There are fewer bumps in the road. The flip side is that you are inviting a new person into your home to live with you. There are always adjustments that have to be made. But, if you have space in the home and space in your family, it can work."

The toughest part for the au pair, says Brewer, is making the cultural adjustment and fighting homesickness.

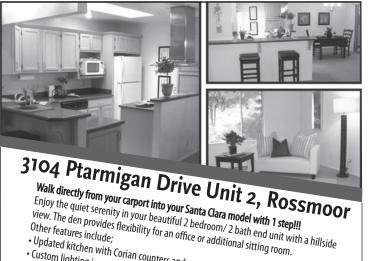
"We provide them with support and organize monthly events," said Brewer, who acts as an intermediary between the au pairs and their host families. "Most of them have never been to the United States. It's a huge adjustment."

Brewer says the biggest mistake families make is thinking their au pair will be like Mary Poppins.

"Families who are the most successful are the ones who treat an

au pair as a family member - like a niece or a best friend's daughter

Kolm agrees. "You have to be patient," she said. "They're dealing with culture shock and being away from people who speak their language and react the same as they do. It takes about three months, but they become part of your family."



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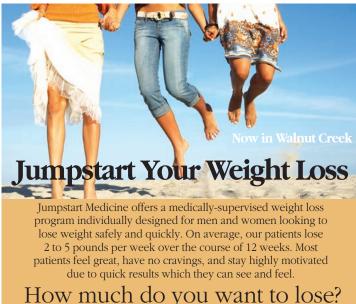
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Lamorida Reads Finale a Great Success By Sophie Braccini



of Lamorinda readers

The author of "Down to a Soundless Sea", Thomas Steinbeck, is a handsome 60something fellow with a wonderful sense of humor. He delighted an audience of more than 120 Lamorindans who came to the Orinda Community Center last Thursday night for the grand finale of the Lamorinda Reads program. Six hundred copies of Steinbeck's book were read, circulated and discussed throughout Lamorinda.

The son of the great John Steinbeck professed a love of stories; true stories, false stories and tall tells as well. He affirmed that all the stories in "The Soundless Sea" were based on real stories. Responding to a question from the audience, Steinbeck explained that it can take him months to write a story, and that the most important part happens in his woodshop or

Photo Sophie Braccini while fishing: "You need to daydream your story," he said, "tell it to your self until it is as familiar to you as your grandmother's story, then you can sit down and write it." His last advice to the audience was to write themselves, "You all have short stories in you, you just have to let them out." Book signing was the final and traditional

ending for the evening.

As she was interacting with guests, Moraga Librarian Linda Waldroup acknowledged that many of the books that had been distributed around town had not been returned to the libraries yet. "They might still be passed on from family members to neighbors," she said, "but I expect they will eventually find their way to our offices and we plan to give the extra copies to the Acalanes School District."

AUHSD Calendar: Time to Get Involved By Sophie Braccini

n October 17th, the Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) unanimously voted to maintain the same academic calendar for the 2008-2009 school year and to appoint a committee to study the impact of alternative calendars for subsequent school years. The vote followed the Staff's recommendation, a 180 degree turn from the August meeting when Superintendent Jim Negri had asked for the adoption of a calendar that would have seen students start a week earlier in August and finish a week earlier in June. After years of negotiations and a period of public outrage, how did it happen that so much time and energy was spent, only to end up back at square one?

Most of the public debate started in August, when parent after parent protested the proposed changes to the calendar. which many felt were being imposed on them and their children. Richard Whitmore, President of the AUHSD Governing Board, offers an explanation: "To change the calendar requires a lot of collaboration, and that collaboration is made more complex by the bargaining aspect." The calendar is part of

the bargaining that takes place between the teachers' union and the District and these negotiations are not public. As a result, "For many parents, the issue was raised and then went away about two years ago, so people were surprised to see it on our agenda again," adds Whitmore.

Parents felt estranged from the process and unsure of its consequences. "Changing the school calendar affects families and other school districts. We are your customers, you need to conduct surveys and hear our concerns," said an outraged father of children registered in both the Acalanes and the Lafayette school districts. Flaws in the communication process were acknowledged across the board. Whitmore agrees: "I think the process we went through between June and August and this final vote have impressed on the Board and district staff the importance of constant communication as difficult issues evolve."

The proposed new calendar has not been permanently shelved. Parents will have an opportunity to get involved, in a dual process featuring informational forums in February and the formation of a Study Committee. The forums will include discussion of the rational behind the recommendation and the consequences of its enactment. "Our objective is the best interest of the students," affirms the Superintendent, "and stress is high on our list of subjects to tackle."

... continued on page 11

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