

Wendy Bautista Peña is an exceptional au pair, a kind and generous human being, and a lifesaver for our struggling family – we cannot imagine what our 2022 would have been like without her dedication, hard-work and loving kindness. Our twin daughters Regina and Katerina were 2.5 years-old when we picked up Wendy from LAX airport in January. Wendy sounded very sweet and kind during our interviews, and we had high hopes that her prior experience in Colombia as a pre-school teacher would help us. Our girls – as delightful as they could be – were deep in “the terrible twos” and as parents we were really struggling. In 2021 my wife suffered a stroke which has left her numb and suffering from dizziness, exhaustion, etc. Between the anxiety of dealing with two children’s rubber-banding emotional growth, her health recovery, and the continuing challenges of the COVID pandemic, we felt underwater! We listened to other parents deal with the petri-dish of preschool and daycare, and we knew for our collective health and sanity we needed to find an alternate approach. As dad I was doing my best to help when I could while working a difficult overtime job. Almost out of personal desperation, we had pinned our hopes that Wendy could truly be the family lifeline we needed.

And in short, she was! Wendy came to our door day-one with a plan for how to tutor and a school our girls, providing them with the structure and routine that aids in learning to self-regulate their emotions. Over the course of 2022 Wendy has grown their knowledge significantly in alphabet, writing, drawing, Spanish, singing, emotional self-expression, and home economics. Our kids went from being a concern in readiness to enter preschool to being more than capable when they began pre-school in the fall. Later, when the winter “tri-demic” of RSV, COVID and the flu hit our family over the course of two months, Wendy dutifully filled the learning gaps for our girls when we had to pull them out of preschool. Regina and Katerina - now four months from turning four - are brilliant, expressive and interesting people with a deep vocabulary to express themselves and inquire about the world. They would not be where they are today without Wendy.

Learning is only a part of Wendy’s contribution since joining our family, and how she exemplifies the best of what an au pair can bring. In the spring Wendy celebrated with us Easter, Mother’s Day, and Kat and Gigi’s third birthday. It was so wonderful to have Wendy with us holding Regina’s hand as our girls went on egg hunts in our backyard. Wendy helped us set up their birthday party in grandma’s backyard, and then with her own money bought our girls Peppa Pig plush dolls. We also loved celebrating Wendy’s birthday in the spring; we Zoom called her family in Columbia and together with ours we all sang Happy Birthday and opened presents. For Mother’s Day Wendy taught our girls a song for their mom and helped them make homemade cards for mom and grandma; these were not things we requested her to do but thoughtful and loving ideas Wendy took upon herself.

Wendy provided family and emotional support to us a month later when we suffered a family setback with a difficult pregnancy loss. She wept openly with my wife in her grief, pain and frustration. She took extra time to help care for our kids as we dealt with hospitalizations, follow-up surgeries, and a flu complication that followed. When Wendy arrived, there were no vaccines available for our daughters. Wendy dutifully adhered to our strict COVID family protocols; if she went out she wore a mask, and if she went somewhere for a long time she would mask up at home until she knew she did not have symptoms. When COVID vaccines arrived in the late summer Wendy was there with us when we took our girls to get their shots. Remarkably, when our girls contracted COVID this December, Wendy simply put on a mask and kept caring for them all the same. When *she* contracted COVID from *them* she still helped out and cared for them despite being ill (we asked her not to and to rest, but since the whole family was sick, she refused to stop: “I’m less sick than everyone else, I will still help!” she cheerfully said through a cough).

In the “ordinary times” between extraordinary moments, Wendy has been a tireless support for all of us. She helps cook and serve meals for the girls. She does their laundry and has helped teach them the importance of putting away toys and cleaning up. She has helped potty train both girls, and patiently helped Kat through a regression period, cleaning up dirty undies for over a month until we were able to find a way forward. She takes the kids for walks and to the park, and comes with them on visits to grandma’s house and helps out there too. She’s continued to help our twins – now “threenagers” – through their tantrums and outbursts. She helps with baths and showers in the evenings and prepares the kids for bed-time. Wendy has formed a hopefully lifelong friendship with my wife’s sister Michelle who is the same age. They go out together frequently and even went together to Disneyland after the park reopened this year... they’ve provided emotional support and friendship to one another amidst the unique times we all find ourselves living in. You could imagine that in all these circumstances and responsibilities you might glimpse some fleeting frustration on Wendy’s face, some hint that the weight of supporting all of us through a tough year has taken a toll. We’ve yet to see it. Wendy has been a marvel of composure, compassion and unflappable good cheer. She joined our family shortly after the holidays, and somehow it seems that the spirit of Christmas – Wendy’s self-professed favorite time of year – never left us in 2022 because Wendy kept it *alive in her heart all year long*: alive through eight-plus-hour car rides from SoCal to Flagstaff to visit ailing relatives and show our kids snow for the first time; alive through drying our kids off after summer swim lessons at the YMCA and escapes to the local kiddie beach; alive through first-day-of-preschool meltdowns, Thanksgiving dinners and our family illnesses. Alive when she warmly hugs our daughters and says “I love you! Goodnight and see you in the morning.” We are alive with cheer and celebration at the close of 2022 because of Wendy Bautista Peña, our family’s own au pair of the year.