

Dear Au Pair in America,

We are forever grateful to our wonderful and compassionate au pair, Jessica Lopes Lucas. We knew from the first meeting on zoom, Jess was a perfect fit into our family not only because of her warmth, positive, playful energy but because she shares the same birthday as our twin 3 year old boys, Gabriel and Mychael! February 25<sup>th</sup> is a big celebration day in our house! It is my absolute pleasure to nominate Jess for the au pair of the Year award based on her sincere commitment to cultural exchange, dedication to our family, her amazing community involvement, and to devotion to support us while we serve our country.

My husband and I proudly serve our country in the Navy, we understand the hardship a deployment imposes on all members of the family. We knew 2023 would be challenging because in February, my husband, Steve, deployed for 10 months. We also knew finding a mature, loving young woman was very important for our family to survive the deployment but also for my husband to know he was leaving his family with someone who would support me during this arduous time. During our interviews, we told Jess about the deployment, she did not waver in her decision to match with us. In fact, she was excited to be a part of a military family and have such an important role. I cannot image a better fit for me, my boys, and family as we navigated this past year as a deployed family.

When Jess arrived she immediately took on the role as a loving Aunt with the boy's best interest first and foremost. She taught the boys to be independent, get dressed by themselves, make their bed, and have amazing manners (in both English and Portuguese). Being an au pair Extraordinaire, she has experience teaching young children and spends dedicated time every day with the kids ensuring they are practicing skills needed for Kindergarten! She looks up activities to build strength in their hands for learning to write. When the boys started Pre-K in September, the teachers went out of their way to tell me how well prepared the boys were for school, all thanks to Jess and her dedication to passion of teaching!

She embraces the cultural exchange to the maximum extent possible. In her first week, we had a discussion about differences between Brazil and the US. When units of measurements came up, I mentioned we use "feet" and "inches" for measure, and she asked, "Who's Feet?" We had a very good chuckle about her response and still joke about it. Somewhere along the way she stopped referring to meters and really makes an effort to use feet and inches. It is such an endearing quality, although we are still working on Celsius to Fahrenheit. ;) There are countless family adventures she joined from visiting the Cherry Blossoms in DC, to strawberry picking in summer, apple picking in the fall, carving pumpkins, making a train costume from cardboard boxes for Halloween (the boys LOVE trains) to decorating the Christmas tree two years in a row. Not only does she do cultural activities with the family, but she has explored the United States, Europe, and Mexico, traveling is her passion! She posts in au pair groups about desires to travel and from those groups she manifests travel buddies and friendships all over the country. I am amazed by her confidence, energy and vivacious spirit!

Jess has a passion for sharing experiences with her au pair community. She enthusiastically volunteers at the kid's school to teach, sing and share her Brazilian culture. Jess has made friends through her college courses, the local au pair community or during her travels. She is known for hosting intimate Brazilian BBQ's in our backyard to share delicious foods with us and other au pairs. She invites other au pairs to our family adventures. Typically, these are girls whose host family does not participate in "traditional" US customs. For example, we had multiple girls over carving pumpkins because Jess wanted to share the experience an American Halloween tradition. She has filled our home warmth, joy and laughter and the boys love to have the "girls" over to share in these traditions. When a family member is deployed, holidays tend to be the hardest time. We were able to get through a year of holidays much easier because we had a house full wonderful people who adored our boys made an empty home full of love and happiness.

If Jess, isn't the standard for au pair of the Year, then I don't know who is! She has served our family, her community and the United States above and beyond what we ever expected.

Sincerely,

DyAnna Rodriguez and the Rodriguez Family