

When we first met Klaudia we were immediately drawn to her intelligence and personality, but we weren't sure if she would be interested in joining our family. We were worried that she'd turn and run away the moment she met our three very energetic young boys Elias (9), Aris (6), and Israh (5). Still, our gut told us Klaudia was the right fit for our family and, to our surprise, she was up for the challenge. Despite our early concerns, Klaudia has not only survived our boys, but she has flourished.

Klaudia helps us manage a very busy home including classroom zoom sessions (kindergarten, first grade, and third grade), homework, tutoring, scraped knees, hungry bellies, afterschool activities, and play dates. That in itself is deserving of an award, but Klaudia has done much more and taken full advantage of her time in the US to learn and explore. She has gone on cross-country road trips, and explored the Pacific Northwest and Hawaii, allowing her to learn about the different geographies and cultures that make up America. Klaudia loves animals and dedicated time volunteering at a local animal shelter. When a local Polish shop-owner needed help during difficult times, Klaudia rolled her sleeves and volunteered a helping hand. Indeed, Klaudia has exhibited more citizenship in her short stay here than some Americans do. She has made close friends including not just others in the Au Pair program and those of Polish decent, but others in the community. Her closest friend is Vietnamese-American which has allowed Klaudia insights into immigrant communities that have helped weave together the American fabric. She has taken keen interest in American politics and the Black Lives Matter movement and we've spent multiple late nights talking about race relations, immigration, and criminal justice in America and Poland. Most impressively, she has caused three very rough-and-tumble boys to grow very attached to her.

When we first met Klaudia we worried that her soft-spoken nature might be an impediment to bonding with our gregarious and rambunctious boys, but we shouldn't have worried. Her loving and patient approach has won them over. In addition, the time and energy she puts in playing games with them or teaching them about her culture or how to play guitar shows them that she truly cares about them. It didn't take long for our youngest two boys to tell Klaudia that they loved her. Our oldest doesn't wear his emotions on his sleeves, so it took him a little longer, but it was around Christmas when he started telling strangers that he has two brothers and a sister in a very matter-of-fact way. He didn't qualify the word "sister" or add any explanations. To him, Klaudia is as much a sister as a biological one.

Christmas 2020 was indeed unlike any Christmas we experienced before, in part because we'd never celebrated Christmas before. We are a Muslim family, originally from Afghanistan, now living in California. Klaudia is from Poland and as part of sharing Klaudia's culture and traditions, which is the hallmark of the Au Pair program, we celebrated Christmas and even got a tree, decorated it, and exchanged gifts. On that Christmas Eve, we were preparing a feast in the kitchen while listening to Christmas music. Our boys were dancing around the fireplace when our youngest, Israh walked over to Klaudia and told her he loved her. She picked him up, kissed his forehead and then held him in her arms and danced to the Christmas music while Israh giggled away. We think of that moment fondly because it represents the tapestry of cultures that the Au Pair program represents. We are Muslim and Afghan-American, living in California with our Polish au pair. Together, we are a family.

--- Aref and Maira Wardak