



**EXTENDED FAMILY** The Masseys, in Ohio, with exchange students from Germany and Palestine

ident of the Foundation for International Travel, says it is rising. Many, he observes, are boomers who have finished paying college tuition and think, "We have so much to give a child."

Friends of Ann and Richard Morris, 51 and 55, a teacher's aide and a civil servant in Chesapeake, Va., told the couple earlier this year they were nuts to take in a teenager at their stage of life. But they arranged for one anyway from the Center for Cultural Interchange (icc). "Four bedrooms is too many for us," Ann

says. "We need to fill them."

Such older couples can make ideal surrogate parents. They have survived their kids' adolescence and actually want more teenagers at home. They are experienced and confident. If they think it's more fun for their guest to have a "sibling," they host two kids at once.

Besides enjoying the energy of teenagers, these couples savor the foreign flavor their guests bring. Many of the couples are avid travelers who have experienced kindness abroad. As hosts, they feel they're making a small contribution to international understanding. Some, notes Northern Wisconsin AFS Intercultural Programs USA coordinator Amy Myers, were exchange students with the agency (formerly American Field Service) in the 1960s, and feel that they finally have time and space to put up a student.

Some couples who welcome kids year after year even become local representatives for their program. Becky and David Massey, 56 and 58, a food-service director and a factory worker in Oregon, Ohio, are typical. Through the Aspect Foundation, they welcomed kids from Germany, Ecuador and Palestine, among other faraway places. As volunteer representatives, the Masseys enlist host families and mediate any problems that arise during the school year.

# Full House Again

A growing number of empty nesters are flinging open their doors to exchange students from abroad

By FRANCINE RUSSO

When Inge Gabel of North Tonawanda, N.Y., watched her son Matthew disappear through the airport gate for a year abroad before college, she felt desolate. Her daughter was long gone, and now Matthew was also leaving. But her nest wasn't quite empty. Michael, 17, a recently arrived exchange

student, put his arms around her and consoled her. "Mom," he said, "we're gonna get through this." It was a spur-of-the-moment comment from a Costa Rican whom she had known for just two weeks, but it turned out to be remarkably prescient.

Michael's yearlong stay with Inge, 56, a hair stylist, and her husband Jim, 60, an electrician, turned out to be the first in a string of stints by exchange students. He enlivened the house with his jokes, bonded with Jim over chopping wood and devoured Inge's cherry squirt cake. "He was just what the doctor ordered," Inge says.

For the majority of students like Michael, a trip to study in the U.S. lands them in a household with other school-age children. But a growing number of empty nesters are flinging open their doors to children from around the world. Despite global political turmoil, in the 2003-04 academic year more than 27,000 high school students from countries such as South Korea, Yemen, Uzbekistan and Peru lived with U.S. families, according to the Council on Standards for International Travel, the industry's trade association. Although the number of hosts who are empty nesters is not known, Ted Bennett, pres-



Mike Medina, 51, a government employee in Menifee, Calif., cried for weeks after his first yearlong “daughters” left him and his wife Theresa, also 51. For the couple’s anniversary, Domitelle from France and Carola from Germany had cooked them a surprise four-course dinner and served them in waiter costume while votive candles flickered. That was early on; the relationship got only better from there.

Gail Marshall, whose grown son had turned their house into “boy central,” enjoyed having two “daughters” last year, from Iceland and France: the three women loved cooking, trading intimacies and getting done up at the salon together. Another year, Richard Marshall, a singer in his church choir, finally found a musical soul mate in a German “daughter.” He taught her the tune for Itsy Bitsy Spider, which they sang in the car, making up their own lyrics.

Yet for all those pleasures, no one claims that having teenagers makes for an uninterrupted idyll. Disputes can erupt over issues like curfews, drinking or smoking, and feelings may be

easily hurt. Most of those graduate parents just roll with the punches, but if they do need help, the agency coordinator mediates. In the rare extreme case, the rep will find the student another home.

For most of those couples, the only really hard part is seeing their student off. But saying goodbye is rarely the end. Calls, e-mails and even visits continue for years after. When Larilyn Carpenter celebrated her birthday this August, she was showered with messages—from Mareika in Germany, Luciano and Omar in Brazil and Martin in Slovakia. Last year she and her husband Greg, 57, a retired educator, traveled all over Brazil, visiting Valentin in Cabofrio, Luciano in Curitiba, Carlos in Florianopolis and Omar in Chapeco.

As for Gail and Richard Marshall, their last two times as hosts felt so perfect that the Marshalls feared that they could never repeat the experience. So they decided not to be hosts this year. But as fall approached, they were reconsidering. “Now,” Gail says wistfully, “we really feel like empty nesters.”

Typically, these volunteers match interested families with likely candidates, showing prospective hosts students’ applications, letters and photos. Couples with grown daughters may opt for the familiarity of a girl—or choose a boy to experience having a son. Elaine Dawkins, 67, a widowed horse rancher in Jerome, Idaho, for example, chose Heidi from Denmark, because the girl belonged to Pony Club, an international equestrian organization for kids.

A host family agrees to provide a bed and three meals a day for a student and to treat the visitor as a family member, meting out both chores and hugs. The students come with health insurance and spending money. Some affluent empty nesters treat their kids to travel and other goodies, but hosts don’t have to spend much, says Inge Gabel. “I always cook for more than two anyway,” she says, “and we live near Niagara Falls and take all our kids there.”

These young people bring their stand-in parents a sharper, fresher per-

**HOST PARENTS** Thai student Aran Torchareon with the Gabels, right, and with their grandson, above

ary, a toolshed in a field. Larilyn Carpenter, 56, a school principal in Waukesha, Wis., treasures the memory of her Brazilian “son” Luciano’s tearing around outside her house late at night, rolling in his first snowfall. “I went from window to window watching him,” she recalls.

In a world beset by political strife, these young ambassadors make politics personal. A French exchange student lived with Gail and Richard Marshall, 54 and 56, editors at the Fresno Bee, during the “freedom fries” period of Franco-American relations. When the girl’s brother called, spewing blanket attacks on Americans, the young diplomat retorted, “I’m here. I know what Americans are thinking and saying.”

“She made sure he got informed,” Gail says. “That’s the great civics lesson here.”

More than politics or culture, though, being a host ends up being about parenting. Many kids call the adults Mom and Dad. When the school year ends, saying goodbye can be traumatic. “Our first time, we were in tears at the airport,” recalls Becky Massey. “We didn’t eat or talk for a day. We didn’t realize how deep the attachment would be.”



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spective—and lots of laughs. A girl from Moldavia, for example, expected peanut butter to be butter studded with peanuts. A boy from Holland, told he would sleep in the “bunkhouse,” what the family called their add-on bedroom, was visibly relieved to find that it wasn’t, as in his Dutch-English diction-