

HOSTING IN COSTA RICA: A MIX OF MONEY AND MOTHERHOOD

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Hosting in Costa Rica: A Mix of Money and Motherhood

This thesis explores perspectives of 30 women hosting international students in a rural, coastal town in Costa Rica through an International Studies lens – interdisciplinary, critical, and bridging theory and practice. Analysis of 30 semi-structured interview sessions, which included 2 questionnaires, conducted over 10 weeks living with 3 host mothers contributes to understanding the impact of study abroad on host families. Hosting is discussed as a preferred form of paid care work in that it is flexible and enjoyable. Women host for the income as well as for the joy of mothering students. Host perspectives are shared regarding benefits and challenges of and lessons learned from hosting. Recommendations are made for homestay program administrators and international educators, including recommendations for addressing power dynamics to ensure reciprocal exchanges.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Sitting with Marcela in the empty, open air dining area of her small restaurant and house, the ocean view blocked by corn growing in her garden, and thunder cracking somewhere nearby, we're protected from the approaching rain by the corrugated metal roof overhead. She describes the economic necessity of hosting: "Right now things are very bad with the business. If there weren't students, I don't know how we would live, because the students help us a lot."<sup>1,2,3</sup> She lives with her husband who cannot work due to vision loss and poor health, her son who works for a hotel, and her grandson. Just as we were talking about changes in her life due to hosting, her grandson entered with an adorable baby, a child he fathered with a Swiss student whom Marcela hosted. Marcela answers about changes in her life in a high-pitched "baby talk" voice, playing with her great-grandson's toes saying, "It is a change that came." ("Es un cambio que vino.")

Marcela is one of many female heads of household that have turned to hosting to help make ends meet. She has found herself in charge of not only housework traditionally assigned to women, but the financial well-being of her family. She says that she was the very first host mother in Playa Olas and sounded disappointed that she has not been receiving as many students as she used to.<sup>4</sup> She pays a local woman to come clean the house twice a week when she is too busy and a Nicaraguan man helps tend the large

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<sup>1</sup> All participant names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> All quote translations are my own. Original quote in Spanish is provided in text or as a footnote depending on length. I am confident with Spanish to English translations; however, as I do not possess native-like fluency in Spanish, original text for full transparency.

<sup>3</sup> "Ahora está muy mal, el negocio. Si no fueran estudiantes no sé en que vivimos, porque con los estudiantes nos los ayudan mucho."

<sup>4</sup> Playa Olas is a pseudonym, also referred to as simply "Olas."

garden that provides food for her small restaurant. Hosting provides critical income to her household and she enjoys welcoming international students into her home.

Over 11 weeks of research and 30 interviews with host mothers in a rural, coastal town in Costa Rica, I heard many stories about the experiences hosting international students. I explore these experiences through the interdisciplinary and critical lens of an International Studies Masters student attempting to bridge academic theories with the actual practice of international education.<sup>5</sup> I critically examine this “change that came” to Marcela and others in Playa Olas through the relations between international students and individual Costa Rican host mothers, or *mamás ticas*.<sup>6</sup> As a part of an underlying critique of power dynamics, I focus my work on the underrepresented view of the *mamás ticas*, rather than the thoroughly researched study abroad students.

My research has two major objectives: 1) to elucidate the role of homestay programs in promoting women’s social and economic equity in the contemporary Latin American household and society and 2) to inform best practices of homestay programs. For the first objective, I seek to identify women’s household responsibilities and roles, discern whether women view their household roles as changed due to hosting, and examine the broader economic and social impacts of hosting on host mothers. For the second research objective, I will identify benefits and challenges of hosting for host mothers, examine views host mothers hold regarding students, and examine views of host mothers towards the cultures of the students they host. This work is intended to

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<sup>5</sup> The field of international education includes study abroad, international student services, and broadly speaking the internationalization of higher education.

<sup>6</sup> *Mamás ticas* is the term used locally for host mothers. *Tica/tico* is how Costa Ricans refer to themselves and *mama* means mother. While the term *anfitrióna* means host in Spanish, this term was used very rarely.

contribute to the practice of homestay programs and international educators as well as to the academic literature regarding paid care work and alternative tourism.

To understand women's experiences hosting, in this chapter I will first provide context by defining hosting, homestays, alternative tourism, women's roles in the Latin American workforce, intimate labor, the region, and the homestay program. In Chapter II, I will dive into hosting as paid care work exploring the role of hosting in women's empowerment and equity. Chapter III will reveal the benefits of hosting beyond money and share women's views of challenges of hosting and their views regarding the students. Using the interdisciplinary lens of International Studies that marries theory and practice, Chapter II is rooted in theories and research in Women's Studies, while Chapter III is rooted in the practice of international educators. Lastly, in Chapter IV, I will conclude with suggestions for homestay program administrators and international educators.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **The International Education Impetus for the Study**

Extensive research shows that study abroad has positive, long-term effects on students, promoting civic engagement, philanthropy, social entrepreneurship, and advocating for the host culture (Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josic & Jon, 2009; Devereux, 2008). Study abroad is widely applauded as a critical component of a well-rounded university education, leading students to be more complex and creative thinkers, more prepared for workplace success, and more globally engaged in the long-term (Institute for International Education [IIE], 2014). Due to these benefits, increasing the number of students studying abroad is a part of US national policy. The Institute for International Education (IIE) aims to double the total number of US students abroad with their



“Generation Study Abroad” campaign and the US Department of State aims to double the education exchanges between the US and Latin America with their “100,000 Strong in the Americas” initiative.<sup>7</sup> Within international exchange, homestays in particular have been found to improve students’ language acquisition, cultural knowledge, and psychological well-being, as host mothers take the role of surrogate mother, tutor, teacher, and counselor (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002). Students are often encouraged to consider a homestay program as a part of their study abroad or language immersion experience. At Olas Language School, for example, 90% of students select a homestay for their housing.<sup>8</sup>

While the impacts of cross-cultural education on students themselves have been thoroughly studied, we know much less about the impacts in host communities and in the lives of host mothers in particular. Students are often prompted to give feedback on their experience by the host school, their home institution or study abroad program, or researchers. However, very little empirical evidence exists regarding the views and experiences of host communities and host mothers. Thus my research questions are asked of the hosts themselves regarding their experiences and views, rather than the students. At a time of study abroad expansion in Latin America and specifically Costa Rica, research that includes the voices of hosts is critical. This exploration of the impact of study abroad on host mothers in Costa Rica gives a voice to the perspectives of women that will help international educators ensure that study abroad promotes mutual understanding and benefits for people on both sides of the exchange.

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<sup>7</sup> Learn more at: <http://www.iie.org/Programs/Generation-Study-Abroad> and <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/100k/>.

<sup>8</sup> Olas Language School is a pseudonym for the school with which I conducted my research. Their homestay coordinator reported this figure.

## **An International Studies Approach to Hosting**

An International Studies perspective is interdisciplinary, critical, and integrates theory and practice. International Studies (IS) is an interdisciplinary field of study still emerging to become broadly recognized as its own discipline. With very few doctoral programs in IS, most IS academics also have expertise in other disciplines, such as anthropology, geography, and sociology. The engagement of scholars across disciplines allows researchers and practitioners to nimbly adapt to ever-changing global issues (Roscow, 2003).

While International Studies departments are established within academic institutions, those same institutions are becoming increasingly connected to globalization, privatization of funding, and corporate governance models, all structures that IS is well situated to critique (Roscow, 2003). This thesis is in essence examining the impact of the globalization of higher education, which Roscow encourages, and this impact includes sending our students to study abroad. IS encompasses both practitioners in international development, for example, and researchers critically examining that work (e.g. Isbister, 2006). It is through critique that we identify effective practices, address negative impacts in communities, and move toward international affairs that are better for all parties involved.

Homestay research is not primarily found in any single discipline, thus the interdisciplinary nature of International Studies is an ideal framework for addressing homestays. An International Studies approach allows me to draw from relevant research from various academic disciplines including Anthropology, Geography, and Sociology, and relevant areas of study including foreign language, tourism, international education,

and women's studies. With the topic of Latin American host views of international homestay programs, I must draw from a variety of disciplines as there is not enough research in any single discipline to provide sufficient framework. Applying this approach, I will define the subject, share interdisciplinary research on homestays in particular, and discuss relevant literature critical of alternative tourism in Latin American. I will then continue in the following section to present background on the context of women working in Latin America, paid care work, and female-headed households.

### **Defining Hosting**

A homestay involves an international student living with and being hosted by a local family for a set amount of time. The specific definition of a homestay and hosting is often assumed rather than explicit in academic articles. For example:

Theoretically, the homestay makes a most desirable housing option, for it provides the students an immediate entree into the cultural and linguistic environment while protecting them in a smaller, "caring" unit. Surprisingly, however, the homestay component is one of the least studied parts of the study abroad experience. (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004, p. 254).

Here the homestay is implied to be the housing of a student in an unfamiliar culture and language and the work of hosting is suggested to be caring for the student. One non-academic source, a manual for hosts, *Homestay 101 for Hosts*, explicitly defines a homestay as "a non-commercialized, private residence with paying Guests(s) who enjoy staying in the comfort and security of a family home" (Verstrate, 2007, p. 7). The concept of the homestay is introduced as to potential hosts as:

Homestay provides the opportunity to use that extra bedroom as Guest accommodation and offer a safe, welcoming home-away-from-home environment for International Visitors from around the world. What a great way to really get to know people from other cultures *and* to put your home to work! (Verstrate, 2007, p. 2).

The two main parties involved in a homestay are the host and the guest. Often a third party is involved in the administering of the program connecting the host and the guest. While any traveler could participate in homestay, homestays are typically arranged for international students. As the travelers staying with hosts in my study take classes and/or participate in service-learning, I refer to them as students, even though they are also, by definition, tourists as they are generally traveling for pleasure for a time period that does not exceed one year.

The act of hosting typically entails preparing breakfast and dinner, sitting and talking with the student during meals, doing the student's laundry, providing a bedroom for the student (sometimes shared with another student), cleaning the student's living space, and including the student in one's daily life and family events. In addition, hosts may take responsibility for the student's well-being through assisting with homework, giving advice on safety and relationships, caring for them when they are sick, and providing healthy, variable, and pleasing food.

### **Homestay Research**

There are clear obstacles for researchers trying to examine the impact of international exchanges on hosts. Educators and researchers have access to students in their home country, including the students leaving/returning from study abroad and the international students currently studying abroad in the home country. They have partial access to program liaisons in the host country and often this research is reported through internal assessment efforts, e.g. Farthing's 1997 report of program staff for the School for International Training, rather than peer-reviewed journal articles. However, there is very little access to the community members in the destination countries with whom students

live and interact. Given this difficulty, it is no surprise that while the published research regarding the impact of study abroad on students continues to grow, there remains very little empirical understanding of the views and experiences of host communities, generally, or of host mothers, specifically.

Of the international education and International Studies research with hosts, it has mostly focused on hosts in the First World home countries of the researchers, including Australia (Richardson, 2001, 2003), Germany (Weidemann & Blüml, 2009), and the United States (Olberding & Olberding, 2010). This trend continues in New Zealand by researchers in management communication (Campbell, 2004) and environmental management (Bruederle, 2010). Non-academic resources exist though often published in English for hosts in the US, Canada, and Europe such as *Homestay 101 for Hosts* (2007), *Living with Your Exchange Student* (2011), and exchange program websites (e.g. CIEE, 2014). The most formative work with hosts in Latin American has been done by language professors, Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2002, 2010; Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004), who interviewed housing directors, students, and host mothers in Spain and Mexico.

Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2002) identified that the *señora* of the family was responsible for hosting duties, so while the whole family was invited to interview, just the mother participated. Thus in the context in Latin America, the use of “host” specifically refers to the host mother. While they interviewed hosts, interview questions addressed the families’ perception of the *students’* adjustment and language development rather than the hosts’ own experiences. Nevertheless, Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart did come away with findings regarding the hosts’ views and experiences. With the perception that US

students lack strong family ties, “the Mexican *señoras* then see themselves as surrogate mothers in the sense that they are providing something the students do not get at home, filling in the emotional holes – almost like psychologists” (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002, p. 193). Regarding adjustment to the home, hosts agreed that students should learn about the host culture norms prior to arrival; however, students do adapt quickly. Furthermore, “most all felt that the student’s personality and level of openness and maturity were much more important in adjusting than language ability” (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002, p. 193).

Host mothers did not view themselves as having to make lots of adjustments in their lives in order to host students, “hosting study abroad students is perhaps the least disruptive occupation a housewife can take up” (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002, p. 194). Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart state that hosts initially reported no problems with students.<sup>9</sup> Through follow up questions the authors learned hosts did have some complaints about the students related to the following: food issues, telephone charges, dating issues, messy rooms, personality conflicts (students do not communicate or interact with family), slamming doors, and being too busy to spend time with the family.

Host mothers have to navigate many cultural differences and gender norm expectations with the students. In the host family manual, the Olas Language School outlines various common uncomfortable situations and suggests how to best navigate them, such as asking a boyfriend that has been snuck into the house to leave, calmly explaining cultural norms if the student is being unintentionally disrespectful, and calling the school if you believe something has been stolen. Between navigating issues related to

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps this is because, according to their interview guide, the only two questions about problems asked what problems the *students* have generally and in relation to culture adaptation (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002).

dating and sexuality and other communication difficulties related to having a foreign student with limited Spanish proficiency in one's home, host mothering is not only a matter of cooking and cleaning, but also mentoring, teaching, protecting, guiding, responding to inappropriate behavior – in short, being a surrogate mother. Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2002) found that host mothers mostly learned to navigate these problems by talking with other host mothers. Verstrate (2007) notes that very few resources exist for hosts; often the best information comes from the hosts themselves exchanged through local social networks.

### **Critical Views on Alternative Tourism in Latin America**

The term 'alternative tourism' evolved to describe travel that is in opposition to or different from mass tourism, which is often thought of as large numbers of foreigners staying for short periods in mostly foreign owned hotels, perhaps in enclaves not engaging with local people in any meaningful way. One early definition of alternative tourism is when "the 'client' receives accommodation directly in or at the home of the host with, eventually, other services and facilities offered there" (Dernoi, 1981, p. 253). This shows the roots of alternative tourism being in homestays in particular. International students staying in the home of locals and receiving services such as meals and laundry fall under the vast umbrella of alternative tourism. Other alternative tourists involved in homestays in particular include: international volunteers, eco-tourists, international service learning students, and independent travelers. Researchers who take a critical approach exploring local perspectives regarding alternative tourists are particularly applicable to my research.

Two researchers in particular have laid groundwork for my research: sociologist

Nancy G. McGehee who studies the socio-cultural impacts of tourism, including volunteer and rural tourism; and anthropologist Karen Stocker who recently published a book on cultural change due to tourism in four different areas of Costa Rica: a small, coastal town with mostly locally-owned businesses, a larger coastal town with mostly foreign-owned businesses, a mountainous adventure tourism destination, and an indigenous cultural tourism destination (Stocker, 2013). McGehee (2012) specifically applies Critical Theory to her analysis of local impact of volunteer tourism and pairs it with Social Movement Theory, allowing both cynicism and hope to prevail. This examination of Social Movement Theory could also be applied to hosts, considering how their network expands with every student they host. With collaborators, McGehee has also examined views of host communities in rural Arizona, Tijuana, and the Philippines (McGehee & Andereck, 2004, 2009; Zahra & McGehee, 2013). Stocker shares the negative effects, the possibilities, and many of the complicated aspects that are not clearly good or bad. She describes much of what I observed or heard from community members in Playa Olas, though she did not specifically speak with host mothers.

Additional relevant research on local perspectives regarding alternative tourists in Latin America includes work by geographers, Gray and Campbell, who examined local views of volunteer ecotourism in Costa Rica; and sociologist and Latin Americanist, Light Carruyo.<sup>10</sup> Carruyo (2008) provides specific examples of how locals were able to leverage their connections to foreigners to gain prestige in the community and get support from abroad when needed, such as sending a child to live with a friend in the US. Gray and Campbell (2007) point to the benefit to a rural coastal community in Costa Rica

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<sup>10</sup> Relevant to my research, but beyond the scope of this thesis, is research exploring changes in communities resulting from sexual relations between locals and tourists in Costa Rica and elsewhere (e.g. Freidus & Romero-Daza, 2009; Frohlick, 2007; Romero-Daza & Freidus, 2008).



when volunteer eco-tourists stay with hosts rather than in hotels. The host families Gray and Campbell interviewed had formed a local association to determine the wages for families and manage distribution of volunteers to the families in the association. This local management can still exacerbate local divisions because, inevitably, some community members will not be included. For example, those with more resources probably have nicer homes, so may be more likely to host volunteers in their homes and thus earn more money directly from the volunteers. When considering many viewpoints within a locality, absolute equity is impossible; however, direct economic benefits and local control are generally preferable than mainstream tourists who stay at big hotels owned by foreigners (Gray & Campbell, 2007; Stocker, 2013).

The economic benefit Gray and Campbell (2007) address varies by country and program. There are homestay programs that provide no financial compensation of hosts. In the US, exchange programs that are structured such that hosts do not receive financial compensation, hosting may be short term, viewed as volunteering, or a part of an exchange program in which the host can then send their own child abroad to stay in a homestay. I have heard anecdotes of volunteer programs that send individuals from the Global North to the Global South and the hosts are not paid or paid an insufficient amount to cover expenses. Often this occurs when volunteers are considered to be “paying” for their stay through their volunteer work in the community or that the program wants to ensure hosts are hosting out of a desire for cultural exchange rather than economic compensation. To better understand the experience of hosts in the Global South receiving economic benefits from hosting, literature regarding working women in Latin America, paid care work, and intimate labor will provide additional context.

## **Women and Work in Latin America**

Previously an agricultural and fishing-based economy employing almost entirely men, the increase in tourism in Playa Olas has opened up job opportunities, formal and informal, for women in Olas. This shift is not unique to Olas. I will contextualize it here through literature regarding women joining the workforce in Latin America, care work, and female-headed households.

The integration of women into paid labor began in the 1970s and was a part of the goals of the United Nations “Decade for Women” 1975-85 (McClenaghan, 1997). By 2007, in Central America, women comprised 30-40% of the paid work force (Ñopo, 2012). In Costa Rica, the 2013 National Household Questionnaire showed a net rate of participation in the paid workforce of 45% of women and 76% of men (INEC, 2013).<sup>11</sup> Though women are entering the workforce in greater numbers, they also still maintain the majority of responsibility for household and community work (Casellas & Holcomb, 2001). This requires a “second shift” for working women that they return home to still complete all of the house work; this “increased participation in paid employment is often purchased at the expense of time once devoted to personal care, sleep and leisure” (Folbre, 2006, p. 184). Wealthier women can outsource some of the housework through hiring domestic help, typically women of a lower socio-economic status, potentially immigrants (Folbre, 2006). However, poorer women cannot afford to hire domestic help and must rely on friends or family to help fill the care needs, bring children with them as they work, or once old enough leave children to care for themselves and younger siblings.

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<sup>11</sup> These figures have been adjusted, removing individuals deemed outside the labor force from the baseline of all women and men. The gross rate of participation in the paid workforce is 36% women and 58% of men (INEC, 2013).

Women's wages continue to lag behind the men's wages. Even when accounting for education, experience, and job type, women continue to earn 20% less than men on average in Latin America (Ñopo, 2012). In reality, women make far less than men, as they are more likely to work in the informal sector, which has lower wages than the formal sector, and in job types such as domestic service jobs (e.g. housekeeping, childcare, and eldercare) that have the lowest wages of all employment categories (Casellas & Holcomb, 2001; Chant, 2003). Actual pay for women is devalued further when they engage in intimate labor for others that women have generally been doing without payment within their own household (e.g. caring for family members needs or partner's sexual desires) as that work becomes seen as "unskilled work that anyone can perform" (Boris & Parreñas, 2010, p. 11). The monetary valuation of the work of hosting is subject to all of the aforementioned norms of lower pay for informal work, domestic work, intimate labor, and work by women.

### **Care Work, Reproductive Labor, and Intimate Labor**

I view hosting in my research as a form of paid care work; though other labels overlap and are applicable (i.e. social reproduction and intimate labor). Care work is considered to be "activities that involve close personal or emotional interaction... directed toward meeting the needs of children, the elderly, and the sick and disabled... also devoted to meeting the needs of healthy adults" (Folbre, 2006, p. 186). To further refine the concept of care work, Folbre (2006) classifies care work in four categories: unpaid care work, unpaid subsistence production, informal market work, and paid employment. Hosting would be categorized as informal market work, similar to work like babysitting and being a domestic servant.

Another classification of work traditionally done by women that overlaps with care work, and the work of hosting, is social reproductive labor. Social reproduction is:

...the array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and intergenerationally. Reproductive labor includes activities such as purchasing household goods, preparing and serving food, laundering and repairing clothing, maintaining furnishings and appliances, socializing children, providing care and emotional support for adults, and maintaining kin and community ties (Glenn, 1992, p. 1).

Boris and Parreñas (2010) explain that the concept of social reproduction comes out of a political economic tradition viewing this labor for the purpose of sustaining the labor force, but not having an exchange value. They suggest that this labor has already been commoditized and situate it in the context of power relations and globalization processes, using a new label they believe to better encapsulate the work – “intimate labor.” Intimate labor is a term intended to go beyond discrete categories of care work to encompass work that “involves tending to the intimate needs of individuals inside and outside their home” (Boris and Parreñas, 2010).

In the context of intimate labor, Ibarra (2010) discusses Mexican migrant women working in elder care work in California. She explains the concept of personalism – “close personal relations between the employer and employee – that allows employers to continually add tasks and exploit workers, the worker is open to exploitation” and still today, “tasks performed continue to go beyond what the wage allows” (Ibarra, 2010, p. 118). However, Ibarra argues this is not the whole picture. The women she interviewed had previously worked in formal care work and chose to move to private, informal employment due to dissatisfaction regarding improper care of patients, “class and race stratification, patient overload, and inflexible schedules” that denied them contact with their own families (Ibarra, 2010, p. 121). Furthermore, as Ibarra shares, elder care

workers expressed a religious moral imperative to do this work. By fulfilling the needs of the dying, they are doing what is right, and ensuring their place in heaven – a Christian reward far beyond the income the labor generates (Ibarra, 2010). Exploring the activities of intimate labor, social reproduction, and care work, “paid care work” best resonates as a label for the activities and dynamics of hosting students, which I will further explore in Chapter II.

### **Female-headed Households**

The majority of the *mamás ticas* in my study were in charge of meeting all the needs of their household, including financial needs. Machismo and patriarchy are often associated with Latin American culture, but Dore (1997) contends that the notion of Latin America having a ‘traditional family’ that is male-headed and the cornerstone for social harmony is a myth.<sup>12</sup> In the 1980s, scholars ‘discovered’ female heads of households, but assumed it must be a new phenomenon. Although the state and laws did reinforce public and private spaces as patriarchal, female-headed households have made up from one-fifth to one-half of all households throughout Latin America since at least the early 19th century (Dore, 1997). A 2011 household survey in Costa Rica found that one-third of Costa Rican households are headed by women (INEC, 2011). Men may still be considered the head of the household in the majority of the homes, but male-headed households are by no means a ubiquitous norm.

Female-headed households were defined in 2003 as a “generic term for a household where the senior woman or household head lacks a co-resident male partner”

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<sup>12</sup> Melhuus (1996) explores the definition and significance of *machismo* as well as stereotypes of women. Machismo is associated with masculinity and male power or dominance, but can be extended to aggression. Melhuus discusses that men’s first responsibility is to maintain the family. If a married man is dependent on his wife’s income, he is labeled as “mantenido” (“maintained”).

(Chant, 2003, p. 170). Six years later, the same researcher notes an expansion of the definition to be:

...the person (fifteen years or more) who is considered to be the household head by other members, or who earns the largest share of economic resources. Headship tends only to be ascribed to women where they lack a co-resident male partner (INEC, 2000, p. 58). (Chant, 2009, p. 24).

By 2009, even though headship “tends” to only be passed to women when a man is not present, there is a shift to account for female-headed households with male partners.

An increase in female-headed households is likely in part due to the increased presence of women in the workforce that promotes less reliance on male partner’s income (Casellas & Holcomb, 2001). Beyond increased income for women, other factors that have contributed to female headship, include: increased property and legal rights, migration of partners, changing social norms, falling birth rates, increased life expectancy, rising separation and divorce rates, and support of social services (Chant, 2009). Chant also discusses some social benefits for women of female-headed households, such as removing domestic violence from the home, having greater control over the influences in their children’s lives, and control over the amount of money spent on maintenance of the household. With all of these variables coinciding, female household headship is now a more viable, if not preferred, option for women (Chant, 2009). This disruption of the assumptions that male-headed households are the norm and best economically and socially allows a more complex understanding of the dynamics affecting female-headed households.

Chant’s work in particular raises questions as to whether *mamá*s *ticas* view themselves as the heads of household, with or without partners, how common headship is, and whether female-headship is viewed as a positive or negative experience. In

addition to household headship questions, the literature on women and work in Latin America raises questions about whether hosting work is paid equitably, how the work of hosting might contribute to a “second shift,” what emotional labor is included in caring for students, and what rewards exist for women beyond money. I will address these questions and further exploring how love and money interact in the paid care work of hosting in Chapter II.

## **Study Setting and Methods**

### **Increased Tourism in Costa Rica**

Tourism, including alternative tourism and students studying abroad, continues to increase in Costa Rica and in my research site, Playa Olan. The Costa Rican government has been promoting tourism since 1930 and calls the country an “ideal vacation” spot (ICT, 2013; ICT, 2012). Costa Rica has developed the most competitive tourism market in all of Latin America (MIDEPLAN, 2010). In 2012, international tourist arrivals topped two million for the fourth year. The 2.3 million inbound international tourists in 2012 equate to just under half of the entire population (4.8 million) of Costa Rica (ICT, 2011; World Bank, 2014a, 2014b). In addition to all-inclusive resorts, Costa Rica has a thriving alternative tourism market including culture, adventure, volunteer, eco-, rural, and student tourism. In 2010-11, Costa Rica became the top choice for US students studying abroad within Latin America with a 15.5% increase in students over the prior year and has maintained that level for 2011-12 academic year (IIE, 2012 & 2013). The proportion of students to all incoming tourists in Costa Rica is the highest of all of the top 25 leading destinations for US study abroad students (IIE, 2013).

While affected by many of the same historical dynamics as other Latin American countries, Costa Rica is viewed as exceptional.<sup>13</sup> Costa Rica is the only country in Latin America that has had a stable democracy for over 30 years and the legitimacy of that democracy has not been in question, which increases Costa Rica's tourism appeal as a safe place to travel (Blake, 2004). Costa Rica is also welcoming to US tourists with some English spoken, US dollars accepted by many in the tourism industry, widely available internet, and the *pura vida* attitude that foreigners find inviting and appealing.<sup>14</sup> My research site, Playa Olas, fits well within typical Costa Rican tourism with all of the aforementioned being true, as well as Olas offers good surfing, a beautiful beach, bars and restaurants open late every night of the week, hostels, a language school, and non-profits that accept international volunteers.

### **Guanacaste Province Particulars**

Playa Olas is situated on the northwest coast of Costa Rica in the province of Guanacaste (see Figure 1). Chant (2002) describes Guanacaste as subject to higher levels of unemployment, under-employment, and poverty. This has been a result of reliance on agriculture (cattle ranching, rice and sugar production), which has produced an insufficient number of jobs for the working population and is seasonal work. In the

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<sup>13</sup> Colonial conquest decimated the indigenous population, though settlers could not afford to import slaves so Costa Rica became a peasant economy (Green, 2003). Reliance on coffee as the main agricultural export left Costa Rica's economy vulnerable within the global market. In the 1970s, Costa Rica implemented International Monetary Fund and World Bank Structural Adjustment Program policies to address high levels of foreign debt (Green, 2003). The US has continuously interfered in national politics, such as through U.S. military presence to discourage European incursion in the early 1900s, the dominance of the United Fruit Company, constructing the Pan-American highway, and supporting Nicaraguan Contras operating in Costa Rica during the Nicaraguan revolution (Palmer & Molina, 2004). Xenophobia, logging of the rainforest, widening gap between the economic classes, and drug trafficking are all current national problems, similar to experiences of other Latin American nations (Palmer & Molina, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> *Pura vida* literally translates to "pure life," though a more accurate translation may be "full of life." It is used as a greeting, showing agreement, indicating how you are doing, saying thanks, saying goodbye, and more. It encompasses the idea that Costa Rica is a place "full of life" where people can explore the outdoors, have adventures and be fulfilled.



1990s, tourism took off in the region leading to more employment opportunities, though again in seasonal employment. This seasonal work and high levels of poverty have led to migration out of Guanacaste to other regions, both temporarily and permanent. This high level of migration has been connected to formal marriage being considerably less common in Guanacaste than in other parts of the country, high percentages of births to single women (64 percent compared the national total of 43 percent), and high numbers of female-headed households (Chant, 1997; Chant, 2002). In Playa Olas specifically, very few locals seem interested in migrating away for Olas. Instead, there is in-migration



**Figure 1:** Map of Costa Rica (CIA, 2014)

from Nicaraguan migrant workers and from wealthy Europeans and North Americans who fall in love with the beach and decide to stay, often opening up a business to support their new lifestyle.

### **Olas Homestay Program**

The Olas Language School in Playa Olas, with which I worked, offers students intensive Spanish classes, homestays, and a variety of extracurricular classes taught by host mothers or other locals. The vast majority of students come from Germany, Switzerland, the US, and Canada. According to the homestay coordinator, approximately

90 percent of students choose to stay in the homestay program and in 2012 over 2,000 weeks of class were taken by students. Thus, approximately 1,800 weeks were spent by students in homestays, an average of 31 weeks per year for the 59 active host moms.

Olas Language School is a private business that intentionally supports the local community. The school supports the operation of a non-profit that provides after-school programming for local children. Also, according to school staff, the homestay program is operated using a non-profit model. The students pay \$24 a day for the homestay. Half of the students come through an agency that takes 20% (or \$4.80) and the other half sign up with the school directly. Over all, the school's commission is 10% as, on average, they receive \$21.60 per student per night, keeping \$1.60 for administrative expenses and paying \$20 to the families. This \$20 generally covers the expenses of room and board with just a little left over for the host (see full discussion regarding compensation in Chapter II). The homestay program manual specifies the host mother's obligations for this payment are: serving breakfast and dinner, sitting and talking with the student in Spanish during meals, and doing the student's laundry twice a week.

The school intentionally recruited host mothers when first established around the year 2000, but since then, women who have applied to become host mothers have learned about the program by word of mouth. Being in a town of 3,000 with over 100 women in the school's database having hosted at some point, it is likely that every single resident of the town has at least basic knowledge of the homestay program. Women apply to host students by filling out an application, acquiring all required amenities for the student (e.g. desk, bed, area for clothes), and passing a home visit from school staff. The program has not set a cap on how many mothers they will accept and continues to accept new mothers,

despite the complaints from current mothers that they do not receive enough students. According to the school homestay coordinator, students are placed with host mothers based on the following criteria: 1) fit based on the student's expressed wishes (e.g. no pets), 2) seniority of the mother in the program, 3) ratings of host mother and home on weekly evaluations by students, and 4) the economic need of the mother. Power dynamics can be seen in how students are assigned to hosts. Students have the power to set expectations or assert needs that the school meets. Women who have been in the program longer and are scored highly by students receive priority. Then, while the homestay coordinator was unable or unwilling to assign an actual rating to each mother's socio-economic status, there must be at least an unspoken understanding of each woman's financial well-being in order to assign students based on economic need. However, the economic need cannot be too great or students would not be comfortable staying in the home.

As a part of the homestay program, hosts are brought together approximately twice a year for a group meeting. At the meeting, school staff can share any recurring comments they have been seeing from students and give the mothers their accumulative ratings from students' weekly evaluations. Students rate hosts on communication, quality and variety of food, and cleanliness and facilities in the home. With these evaluations as a factor in assignment of students, women are in competition with each other for high scores. Host mothers are also invited to gather together at the school for various holiday celebrations, such as the Annexation Day of the province of Guanacaste to Costa Rica or Mother's Day. The celebrations at school are an opportunity for families to connect and

socialize, but can also be a site for competition. For example, at the Annexation Day celebration hosts brought traditional food to enter in a competition for the best dish.

## **Research Methods**

During a brief visit in 2012, I visited Playa Olas and met with an Olas Language School employee who supervises volunteers to discuss the impact of students and volunteers on the local community. It was her suggestion that I address the larger question of impact by starting with the host mothers. Upon my return the US, I wrote to her and she connected me with the Olas Language School's director and homestay coordinator, who approved my research plan and granted access to work with host mothers. As a sign of support, the director waived the administrative fee for arranging my homestay.

In preparation for the field research and interviews, during spring 2013, I administered a pilot questionnaire, online, to U.S. families in the Eugene area who host international students. The questionnaire was forwarded to host family contacts by the University of Oregon Friendship Foundation for International Students short-term homestay coordinator. The questionnaire, which required approximately 10 minutes to complete, asked hosts about the benefits and challenges of hosting, about their perceptions of international students, and about changes to family life as a result of hosting. Thirty-four hosts completed the questionnaire. This pilot allowed the testing of questions to be used in the main project. For example, through the pilot it became clear that participants were clearly more able to say what they liked and disliked about hosting rather than identifying items as benefits or challenges. The substance of the pilot

responses is not incorporated in this thesis in order to focus discussion on main research project in Costa Rica.

I returned to Playa Olas, Costa Rica, in June 2013 to conduct research for 11 weeks. I lived with three different host mothers during this time, conducted in-person interviews in Spanish with 30 host mothers, and interviewed nine school staff. Everyone who completed an interview was given a jar of Oregon jam. The Olas Language School provided a list of 59 women who were active host mothers at the time. From that list of 59 women, approximately one third of participants were selected through a random generation of numbers, a third were suggested by the school director for providing a range of perspectives, and a third were selected through convenience sampling of mothers who participated in school activities. The school director and I agreed that it would be best for a school representative to make the initial call to the host mothers to explain the project and obtain their consent to participate. However, in reality, school staff were extremely busy, constantly interrupted, and communication lacked between the director and the actual staff members making the calls to host mothers. I often felt like an inconvenience to staff and found it difficult for staff to make the calls on a weekly basis to arrange interviews. Thus when I was given approval by the Director to approach mothers in-person through networking, I did so. Convenience sampling allowed me to interview approximately 10 mothers I might not otherwise have been able to interview. In the end, having interviewed over half of the active mothers (30 of 59), I feel confident that I interviewed an appropriate cross-section of mothers to address my research questions. Informed consent was obtained for all interviewees, and all but two gave consent for being audio recorded.

I actually completed 31 interviews with host mothers, but elected to drop one participant, Julieta, who runs a hotel at which students are sometimes placed. Julieta's niece who works at the hotel serves the students breakfast. Julieta cooks at the restaurant and comes out from the kitchen when she is able to talk with the students over dinner. It seems that students who might have higher demands or requirements, such as air conditioning, can be placed in this local, family-operated hotel. This may be a welcoming, supportive environment, but for my purposes of discussing the experience of host mothers responsible for the care of the students, Julieta does not meet that criterion, hence her responses were excluded from the study.

In addition to interviews with host mothers, I interviewed nine school staff, which included all of the staff providing direct services to students, as well as the director of the school. Only the interview with the school director and the first interview with the homestay coordinator were recorded due to the frequency of interruptions when staff members were also on shift that made for an impractical environment for recording. The information provided by staff gave context for understanding the program; however, for the purpose of this thesis, they are generally excluded in order to focus the discussion on the view of host mothers in particular.

I conducted interviews with women in Spanish. Interviews were approximately one hour long and consisted of closed-ended and open-ended questions as well as a pile sorting activity. I used two translators recommended to me by the Olas Language School. One translated from English to Spanish, the second translated the Spanish back into English. Questions were provided to the school and their input was elicited on numerous occasions. The first interview I conducted was with my own host mother. I was joined by

the bilingual school staff member who translated my interview questions into Spanish. After this first interview, with feedback from the staff member, the interview instrument was edited for clarity. I was able to follow up with this first participant to ask her questions that were added or changed after her initial interview.

One part of the interview included a questionnaire in the form of two pile sorts. For the pile sorting activity, participants were asked to sort cards with words on them into categories (see Figure 2). The first pile sort was intended to address my research question of the benefits and challenges of hosting. Participants were asked to order cards according to how much they like or dislike 15 different aspects of hosting, such as cooking, giving advice, or learning about other cultures. The second pile sort was created to address my research questions regarding women's responsibilities in their home and changes to responsibilities due to hosting. Women were asked to sort 27 aspects of daily life to indicate if there had been a change in the activity due to hosting, from large increase to large decrease, such as eating with family, ability to travel, and time spent in the home. For many women the pile sorts prompted stories and examples, allowing for rich qualitative data along with quantitative responses. For women who did not initiate such stories, more open-ended questions preceding and following the sort allowed for participants to share more. See Appendix A for full interview questions including the pile sort.



**Figure 2:** Host mother completing pile sort on likes/dislikes

Field notes were also regularly recorded following informal discussions with host mothers, staff, students, and community members. I accepted various invitations from host mothers to further interact including a birthday party, a baby shower, cooking lessons, and playing on a soccer team with several *mamás ticas*. I stayed with one host mother for my first six weeks and then two separate host mothers for two weeks each. These informal interactions and connections with my own host mothers allowed for an enriched understanding of the experience of hosts. I also took two full weeks of Spanish classes at the school upon my arrival and then two hours of private classes each week thereafter. This helped me become familiar with the school's operations and allowed me to fine tune my language abilities. I was joined for nine weeks in the field by my husband who also took two weeks of Spanish classes and private lessons, and conducted his own



research project on an unrelated topic. Together we reflected on cultural lessons, the homestay experience, and what we were learning from our host mothers.

Living in Olas and joining in various activities, such as the women's soccer team, provided opportunities to interact with community members who are not currently hosting or who have never hosted. However, all information formally collected through interviews was with *current* hosts and staff. Thus, the information contained in this thesis is focused on the experiences and views of current host mothers. Women who stopped hosting may have different points of view, but are beyond the scope of this work.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data from the interviews and field notes were first examined using open coding, as described by Charmaz (2006). After coding of three interviews, I examined the codes and narrowed them down to relevant focus codes to use. I re-coded the first interviews with the focus codes. Interviews were transcribed in Spanish, though one interview (with Daniela) was fully translated to English for the purpose of receiving coding feedback from a professor and peer reader, with which I refined the focus codes again. These codes were applied to all transcribed interviews and notes using AtlasTI qualitative data software. Quantitative data was collected through the interview questions and pile sort questionnaires. This data was recorded in Excel and I explored the data, sorting and applying basic formulas.

### **Considerations**

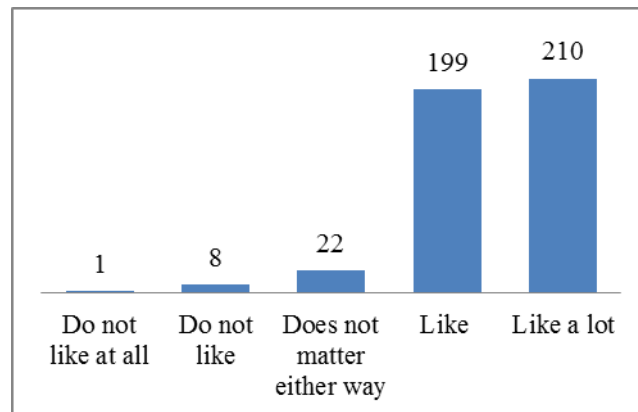
My connection with Olas Language School gave me access to interviewing and living with host mothers. In the informed consent procedure, I clarified that I would not use their real name, nor identify them in my report to the school or to anyone else in the

community for that matter. A few mothers used the interview as an opportunity to provide feedback to the school, for example articulating displeasure with the distribution of students, but more often women seemed hesitant to say anything that might be seen negatively by the school or could potentially jeopardize receiving students in the future.

In introducing myself to the host mothers, I also clearly identified myself as a student from the United States and they usually already knew or they would ask with which *mamá tica* I was staying. This could have limited what they were willing to share regarding traits of students or people from the United States or regarding something they worried could be repeated to my own host mother. I recall in an interview with Alejandra when I asked if there was anything that has surprised her about her students' culture. I saw a look across her face as if she immediately thought of something, then her face dropped and she paused for a few seconds. I reminded her that she did not have to answer any question she did not want to answer. She shook her head and indicated that we should go on to the next question. I lived with Alejandra for six weeks and throughout that time she shared more about her views on students than what came out in the recorded interview. I am sure that she is not alone in being hesitant to share potential criticism of students or the homestay program.

In addition to the influence of my identity and connection to the school, Costa Rican culture plays a role in how mothers responded and how they think about my questions. In my experience Costa Ricans (also known as Ticos) are eager to please, host, and accommodate visitors. They may avoid saying something negative or refusing a request. For example, in inviting a Tico to do something they may be more likely to say yes then not show up than to say no in the first place. They also generally refuse to get

upset about issues (excluding some political issues). I remember being told that there is no reason to get upset over problems; it does not help to solve the problem. Ticos, at least in this small coastal town, embraced a laid-back and easy-going attitude. They embraced the Costa Rican versatile saying *pura vida*. Considering all of this, it is understandable that some mothers would insist that everything about hosting is great. For example, in the first pile sort, I asked women whether they liked or disliked 15 aspects of hosting. Though a 5 point scale, most women only replied with 4 (I like this) and 5 (I like this a lot) (see Figure 3). Nonetheless, through responses about why they host, changes in their life due to hosting, and specific student stories, mothers provided a more nuanced understanding of the varied benefits, challenges, and mothers' impressions of students and students' cultures, as I will discuss in Chapter III.



**Figure 3:** Total count of responses regarding aspects of hosting that are liked/disliked

### Host Mother Selection

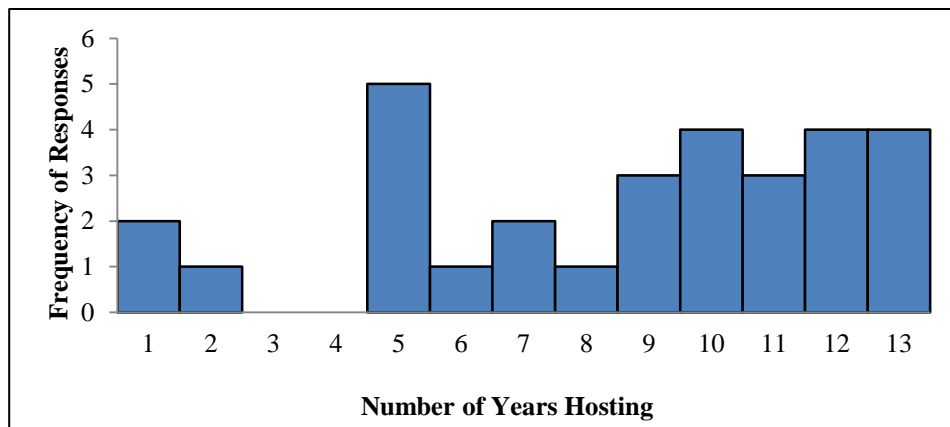
Of the host mothers I interviewed, Catalina is typical host. She is 50 years old and from a town near Olan. Catalina attended school through sixth grade and manages the household finances, including renting out other properties for additional income. She is married with two children, ages 20 and 25, who mostly live at home. Catalina has been hosting nine years and keeps a record of each student that comes. At the time of the

interview she had hosted 101 students, mostly from Switzerland and the US. On average, Catalina host ones or two students at a time for a month each.

The women I interviewed were an average of 49 years old, generally 31-62, with two outliers of age 22 and 83. Most of the women (18) were from Olan or the surrounding area (7), with only five women being from other provinces within Costa Rica. Most women completed some or all of high school, though a third completed sixth grade or less. Various women commented that it was common for girls to stop schooling at sixth grade when they were growing up and that has since changed with their children finishing high school. Five women attended school beyond high school for professional licensures, a bachelor's, or theology degree. Only 4 of the 30 women clearly held jobs outside of the home, 11 held no other jobs, and the other half earn additional income through a home-based business, such as cooking food to be sold informally, renting bicycles, running a small restaurant, or managing other rental property. Of the women with home-based businesses, 8 of them (27% of all of the women) benefit from student business and 4 of those are opportunities that only occurred due to the women's connection with the school.

Regarding family structure, 18 women were married (or in a civil union) and living with their husband. Of the 12 women living without partners, 4 were separated from their husbands, 3 were divorced, and 5 women were single. Twenty-eight women had children of their own, with an average of two to three children and one or two of those children still living at home. It is common for unmarried adult children to continue living with their mother in the house or on her property in an attached apartment; 19 host mothers had children over the age of 18 living with them. Eight women had additional children they were raising as their own, either a grandchild or their sibling's child.

The women had been hosting for 8.5 years on average with the full range running 3 months to 13 years. Only three women had hosted for less than two years (see Figure 4). Generally women receive one to two students at a time to host with the exception of just a few houses where the hosts can handle more and sometimes host special groups that want to stay together. Women report that a typical student stays for one month. In sum, an average host mother in my study is 49 years old, obtained a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education, from Olas, married, with 2.5 children, runs a side business from the home; she has been hosting for the last 9 years with 1-2 students staying at a time for usually a month each.



**Figure 4:** Number of years hosting

Women already caring for children and in need of additional household income can earn money by incorporating an international student into the household, adding one more person into the daily domestic routine. If needed, these women can still engage in additional paid labor between breakfast and dinner, while meeting their household and hosting obligations. As I will discuss in Chapter II, a main motivation for hosting is in fact money, though it is not the only motivation. In Chapter III, I will explore the other reasons women host, as well as challenges and women's perceptions of the students. Lastly, I will conclude in Chapter IV with recommendations for the field and future research.

## CHAPTER II

### ADDING MONEY TO THE MIX: HOSTING AS PAID CARE WORK

Women participate in the paid care work of hosting in addition to maintaining all of their other household responsibilities. In Chapter I, I introduced the concepts of paid care work (e.g. Folbre, 2006) and intimate labor (e.g. Boris & Parreñas, 2010), as well as described the activities involved in hosting. In the case of hosting, either label can be applied, but given the primacy of income generation in women's reasons for hosting and the primary role of taking care of students' needs for food and shelter, I prefer the term paid care work to describe hosting labor.

In the introduction to their book *Intimate Labors* (2010), Boris and Parreñas, situate intimate labor in the context of globalization and ask, "What types of intimate labor does the global circulation of goods, ideas, and peoples encourage?" (p. 9). In this chapter, I present hosting as another type of intimate labor (or paid care work) brought about by the global circulation of people, specifically students. This examination is rooted in Women's Studies literature and seeks to address my first research objective of elucidating the role of homestay programs in promoting women's social and economic equity in the contemporary Latin American household and society. I will situate hosting as paid care work in the local context, explore the importance of hosting income, identify the additional labor required to host, the role of *mamá ticas* in their household (i.e. they do everything), and conclude with my assessment of the extent to which hosting empowers women and promotes women's equity in Latin America.

## Local Context for Paid Care Work

As discussed in Chapter I, women in Latin America are increasingly joining the paid workforce. Dynamics in Playa Olas mirror those national and regional trends.

Daniela is 60 years old and her first great-granddaughter was born just weeks after our interview. She lives in a simple home with one of her sons who works full-time in a restaurant and has room to host one student at a time. She has been separated from her husband for 20 years and talked about seeing the transformation of the town:

I think that when the foreigners arrived, different changes had already begun. Because this was just a mountain, therefore there were not possibilities. Perhaps there were, but it was the men who worked, planting all that is cultivated - corn, rice, beans, this is tough work. [I know it was] tough, because I saw it. And the women didn't work like they do now. The only work was in the home and there you don't earn money. Yes, I think the change is beautiful because we [women] all work and have money and do less work that is hard...<sup>15</sup>

Daniela began working in hotels after she separated from her husband. Regarding women's equality with men, she adds, with a little more energy and passion in her voice:

It is totally different because the woman always had to do what the husband said. Now, no. Now with this equality it is completely different... Because, you know, for my part, I didn't have money available to buy something for myself. If my husband didn't give me money, I was not going to buy anything. Now no. Now it is different because I have my money. I can buy something nice for myself.<sup>16</sup>

Daniela sees a change in the status of women due to access to independent income. While she first listing her motivation for hosting as income, here she equates this income with

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<sup>15</sup> Yo pienso que cuando el extranjero entró, ya empezaron llegar, ya fueron cambios diferentes. Porque, esto era solo montana entonces no había posibilidades. Tal vez sí, pero de los barones trabajar, sembrar todo lo que es cultivo, maíz, arroz, frijoles, es algo duro. Duro porque eso lo vi. Y de las señoras no tenían su trabajo como ahora. Solo trabajo de la casa. Allí no se gana dinero. Si, entonces, pienso es un cambio bonito porque ahora todas trabajamos y tenemos el dinero y menos trabajo que es duro.

<sup>16</sup> Sí. Es totalmente diferente porque la mujer siempre tenían que hacerlo que el marido decía, sí. Ahora no. Ahora con esto igualdad es totalmente diferente... Porque, usted sabe, por mi paso, yo no pudiera disponerme dinero para comprarme algo para mí. Porque si mi marido no me daba dinero, yo no, no voy a comprar. Ahora no. Ahora es tan diferente porque tengo mi dinero. Yo voy a comprar algo lindo para mí.

gender equality. For Daniela, being able to buy something nice for herself, for example her beautiful cooking pans, is much more than a luxury, it is an example of women's equality that she did not have 20 years ago in her marriage. Women such as Emilia, a young mother married to a lawyer, supports this notion as she chose to host because she wanted the independence that came with having her own income to spend as she chooses on herself and their son. Hosting is one of the paid work opportunities available to women in Olas. *Mamás ticas* clearly situated hosting as paid work in their responses to the open ended question "Why do you host?" 24 of 30 mothers' first responses were connected to financial reasons (see Figure 5). Catalina, who was a seamstress before developing carpal tunnel, responded, "Well, for the economic support." ("Porque, bueno, por la ayuda económica.") Barbara, an 83 year old host living apart from her husband, replied, "Because it is a source of income, the only one I have. One has to have something to live, right?"<sup>17</sup> And Marcela, the host introduced in the beginning of Chapter I who runs a small restaurant out of her home, suggests that hosting provides a little financial security, particularly when it is the low tourist season or business is bad.

In the first questionnaire pile sort regarding likes and dislikes about hosting, women rated "making friends from around the world" just higher than "receiving additional income." With the responses from just two moms tipping in favor of "making friends," "making friends" and "making money" essentially tied as the best part of hosting. This exactly in line with how the Olas Language School frames hosting to the women who sign up to host students:

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<sup>17</sup> "Porque un fuente de entrada, nada más, esto lo tengo de entrada. Hay que vivir de algo, ¿no?"





women, or one of the family members, delivers a paper invoice to the school. Then, their payment is directly deposited once a week in a bank account that must be in the host mother's name and her name alone. This was an intentional decision made by the school director in the beginning. The school originally distributed checks in the host mother's name, and as technology increased, they moved to direct deposit. The amount paid for hosting and host pay is distributed varies greatly by program. I have heard stories of hosts in Central America only being paid \$7 per day, for example.

Hosting as paid care work that can be done from the home may be work that is less threatening of male power and gender roles, thus an opportunity for women who are seeking independent money from a potentially controlling partner. In Stocker's work with women participating in a craft co-operative, she found that women set up a system in which they could work from home and send their finished products in with the milk delivery truck: "It pushed the boundaries just enough to be permissible. Even so, it still constituted a dramatic shift in gender roles, and also created a women's network that did not exist before the cooperative" (Stocker, 2013). I suspect similar narratives could be found with Olat's hosts, particularly 10 years ago when the homestay was still in its inception and women were newly entering the paid workforce.

### **Talking Finances**

While I intended to learn about each host's household income and how much money is left over after basic expenses, it was clear after the first interview and talking with school staff that women felt uncomfortable answering this. It seems that internally women did want to have enough left over after expenses to spend a little on their families, household, and selves, while externally not wanting to be perceived as making

money from hosting. Since I determined that I could not ask the women about household income, I asked the homestay coordinator to indicate the perceived economic status of each mother, presuming she would have a sense for this as she said economic need was a factor in distributing students. However, she also felt uncomfortable with the question and declined to respond. Money and income from hosting is both apparent and private, with almost no one wanting to talk about actual dollar amounts.

Marcela, the head of household running a small restaurant and hosting, was one of few women open to talking specifics about her household finances. During her interview, she rattled off some figures; I later followed up and asked if she could go through those again with me. She was happy to and sat down with a calculator. Per her estimation (converted to US dollars), breakfast and dinner cost \$11.60 a day and the room expenses \$5 a day, for a total of \$16.60 a day, which does not include washing clothes twice a week. I would estimate laundry to cost about \$1.40 a day for soap, cost of water, and about 2 hours of time per student per week depending on whether clothes were washed by hand, in a semi-automatic washer (manually add and empty water), or fully automatic washer. An approximate total of \$18 in expenses, receiving \$20 a day, leaves the host approximately \$2 of earnings a day, according to Marcela's estimation. While \$2 is the minimum hourly wage, it also is not going to contribute greatly to expenses. Table 1 provides a list of the cost of different items and amount paid to an individual for various services. Other mothers may plan their expenses differently to ensure a greater profit margin. Mia, for example, suggested that half of the money she earns is profit.

For most mothers, their earnings just cover their costs with a very small amount left over. Mothers regularly commented on high food prices, high utility costs, and

generally high living expenses. Women mentioned students leaving on fans and lights and wanting to eat meat; energy use and quality diets create additional expenses for the household (also see section below on spoiling students). The Olas Language School has increased the homestay rate over the years. Marcela said that in the very beginning, 13 years ago, they received \$20 for the whole week, yet several mothers still perceive \$20 a day to be insufficient given current cost of living. As Marcela and Carolina both explained that with just one student there is not a “ganancia” (“profit”), but with more students or additional other income, one may be better positioned for getting ahead.

**Table 1:** Sample expenses and wages from personal receipts while in Olas

<b>Item or Service</b>	<b>Cost in USD</b>
Lunch by street vendor	\$4
Fresh fruit shake	\$4
Traditional meal ( <i>casado</i> ) in restaurant	\$10
12-pack beer in grocery store	\$12.50
Shampoo bottle (Herbal Essence)	\$5.72
Soccer shoes	\$31
New bicycle (basic cruiser)	\$185
Typical local hourly wage	\$3
Extra breakfast by host mom	\$4
Extra dinner by host mom	\$6
1 hr Translation	\$5
Private 1hr Spanish lesson by a local instructor (tourist activity/price)	\$20
1 hr surfing lesson (tourist activity/price)	\$30

Isidora, whose husband and son run an auto-mechanic shop, hosts as a way to bring in a little bit of income, but from the comfort of her own home rather than having to work on the street, selling food for example. When asked if she has any recommendations for new host mothers, Isidora shares this advice:

That they do not view this as an economic business, more like a possibility to learn. There are many who see this as an economic business and they think they do not need [other work]; for example, the moms living alone, without another person in the house, without a spouse. They see this as a business and they cannot get ahead with only this, with only the income from students it's not possible. Therefore, I say see this more as a way to learn.<sup>20</sup>

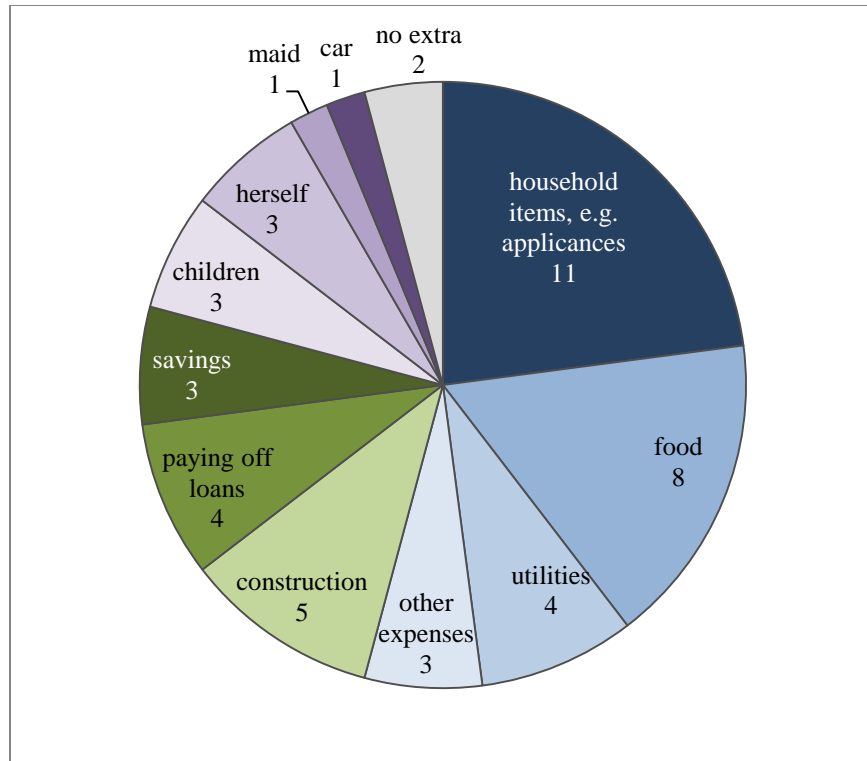
Isidora specifically recommends that women do not try to depend on hosting income alone, but with her husband bringing in income from the mechanic

Despite a narrative about hosting income being how a household gets by and just meeting basic expenses, in the pile sort 22 of 30 women shop and her hosting income, they can create a more stable financial future. indicated an increase in their ability to buy things they personally desire due to hosting (“cosas que quiero”). The remaining women who indicated no change in this financial ability likely did so because hosting replaced income from a past job so they are maintaining their economic situation through hosting. For some, hosting is how they progress or get ahead. This is seen through construction projects, paying off house loans, and putting the money into savings. When asked how they spend earnings, the most common response was items for their home, e.g. appliances and cooking pans (see Figure 6). These items may increase quality of life (e.g. making household tasks easier through using automatic coffee maker), provide a source of pride in one's home, and make the home more appealing to students.

While only three women mentioned spending money on themselves for things such as shoes and clothes, women may perceive some of these household item purchases to be spending on themselves. For example, Daniela told me with a note of pride and joy

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<sup>20</sup> “Que vean esto no como un negocio económico, más como una posibilidad de aprender. Porque muchos vean esto como un negocio económico y crean que con esto no necesitan [otro trabajo]; por ejemplo las mamás que viven solas, no tienen otra persona en la casa, no esposo. Veán eso como un negocio y no se pueden salir adelante solamente con esto, con el ingreso de estudiante no se pueden. Entonces le digo véalo más como la forma de aprender.”



**Figure 6:** Women's responses to how they spend profit from hosting income

in her voice about the beautiful new cooking pans she bought with hosting income. There may also be a social bias in the responses as women do not want to be seen as one of 'those' women who only hosts for money and there are cultural expectations that women should sacrifice for their family (Yarris, 2011; Melhuus, 1996). Regardless of social pressures to not be perceived as spending extravagantly, women's responses regarding how hosting earnings are spent is an indication that some money is indeed left over after the expenses to spend on the household.

### **Remaining Competitive**

Over time, mothers figure out what students like and how to accommodate their desires. Making students happy is both personally rewarding as well as crucial to remaining a competitive host mother receiving students. One area where this becomes most apparent is in the food mothers decide to serve. Food can be one of the greatest

expenses and women walk a balancing act to serve quality and variable food that students will enjoy and conserving expenses so they are able to direct money toward other expenses. Families with great financial need may feel great pressure to conserve money spent on food, yet students do have expectations for the food they receive and may complain or even request to change houses if they deem the food to not be good enough. Florencia explained that she likes cooking and always asks the students what they do and do not like to eat, “I cook them what they like... I make them happy. In this way, I always please them.”<sup>21</sup> Barbara, an 83 year old host mother who previously hosted tourists, said:

I spoil them. It doesn't matter what time they wake up, I will make them breakfast. A cold breakfast is awful... The spouse of [a school staff] says that you set out the dinner and breakfast. If they don't arrive, they don't arrive. If it is cold, they eat it cold. I do not do this.<sup>22</sup>

Both Florencia and Barbara received satisfaction in making the students happy, but keeping students happy also ensures that they continue to receive students.

Florencia told me a story of two students who left their placement with one host due to poor food quality and moved in with her. Florencia explains that the students reported they were only served one egg and a piece of bread for breakfast every morning and only served water to drink, never juice or soda. One of these students stayed for a full seven months. That seems like an enormous loss of income for a host for reportedly

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<sup>21</sup> “Yo les cocino a ellos a que ellos les gustan...Yo las complazco. Siempre estoy complaciendo así.”

<sup>22</sup> “Yo los chineo. No importa la hora que se levanta, yo les hago desayuno. Un desayuno frio es feo... El esposo de [empleado] dice que usted pone su cena, su desayuno allí. Si no llego, no llego, si es frio, se comen frio. Yo no.”

serving low quality food.<sup>23</sup> Florencia explains that in her home “food is never scarce.” (“la comida nunca le falta.”) She goes so far as to offer students lunch (for free) if they are at home at lunchtime without food. She adds, “It is not that I have an obligation, but that my heart tells me I should feed them.”<sup>24</sup>

Florencia shared the story of students switching to her house immediately after explaining that the students complete evaluations, giving the mothers “una nota”(“a grade”). She says, “I always have 90, 95, 80 is the lowest my marks drop, never 50.”<sup>25</sup> Many programs request written feedback from students at least at the end of their stay. These requests may be focused on self-reflection, evaluation of the program, or other related topics. At Olas Language School, every Friday students complete an evaluation which includes rating the homestay and the home. From the school’s point of view, this is a proactive measure that allows them to address issues while there is still time left. A staff member scans through all the evaluations each week to watch for any red flags of issues that need to be addressed immediately. Then twice a year, all the host mothers are gathered together for a school meeting at which the staff address any reoccurring comments from students and share the personal scores with each mother. Mothers are very aware of these evaluations and their scores. Several mothers mentioned their scores to me as a point of pride.

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<sup>23</sup> The school would be involved with any host placement changes. I do not know if there were other reasons for these students to switch hosts as I could not discuss the details of this particular situation without risking the confidentiality of the participant.

<sup>24</sup> “Yo les cocino a ellos que ellos les gustan... No es que yo tenga la obligación pero mi corazón me dice que yo les debo de dar de comer.”

<sup>25</sup> “Siempre tengo 90, 95, 80 es la mínima que se baja, nunca 50.”



The reason for going above and beyond the financial compensation could be explained by personalization in care work, i.e. the worker feels connect to the person for whom they care. Rather than the traditional argument that this encourages exploitation of the worker, my data suggests the connection the mother feels with the student gives her personal joy to make them happy. At the same time women want to be rated highly by their students in order to continue to receive students.

### **The Work of Hosting: A Shift and a Half**

Hosting requires additional effort, but does not require an entire “second shift,” as Folbre (2006) explained women who work a shift outside the home and return home to have their second shift of all of the household duties. Hosting students uniquely addresses some of the issues typically seen for care workers: one can care for their own children, students can be entertainment for children, and additional housework does not demand the equivalent of an entire separate job.

Host mothers generally combine the care of students with the care for the rest of the family, including cleaning, cooking, laundry, and meals. Hosts can do this work from their home and thus are able to care for their own children at the same time as they care for students. They spend less time caring for both family and students than they would if they had to care for them completely separately; hence this is a more synergistic relationship than care work performed outside the home. While I had presumed, based on my own cultural lens regarding chores, that women might feel bothered or frustrated with the extra household work that hosting requires, all said they like cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry. Of all 30 responses to each of those chores, only two women said they did not like cooking. When I shared my personal view of not enjoying cleaning with a few

women, they commented that it must be done so it might as well be enjoyed. The household is a fact of life and doing a little extra for students is not particularly bothersome for *mamás ticas*.

Amanda, Emilia, Isidora, Victoria, and Paula all have young children in the house and expressed additional familial benefits students can bring by teaching children another language and entertaining the children. Paula was the only one to state explicitly some concern about the students interacting with her 2 year old grandchild. She described herself as “very cautious” (“muy desconfiada”) about the students with her grandchild until she has a chance to know who they really are, because she really does not know anything about the student until they arrive and there are no background checks. Paula said that after a particularly “loving” (“cariñoso”) student that her grandchild will continue to ask for them for some weeks after they leave. In addition to emotional ties, children may enjoy the gifts that students bring. Isidora’s 10 year old daughter and grandson were present for our interview and Isidora let me ask them what they like most about having students in the house, to which her grandson replied:

Grandson: That they give us presents.

Sara: [laugh] Yes, of course!

Grandson: And that they take us to the beach, and having them around the house.

Isidora: [softly as if a prompt or suggestion for him] To share

Grandson: Yes.<sup>26</sup>

Catalina, a 50 year old host mother who after 9 years hosting had just hosted her 101<sup>st</sup> student (she keeps a record of all her students), said that in the beginning her

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<sup>26</sup> Nieto: Que nos dan regalos.

Sara: jaja ¡sí, cómo no!

Nieto: Y que nos llevan a la playa, y tenerlos en la casa.

Isidora: Compartir (softly as a suggestion to say)

Nieto: Sí.

children were jealous of the attention she gave students claiming she put the student first and them last. She laughed about it and added, “They didn’t like it much, but by now they have gotten used to it. Now it is normal whether or not there are [students].”<sup>27</sup> While not mentioned by others, I also did not prompt women to discuss that specifically. Catalina’s comment indicates that findings by Parreñas (2003) may also be applicable to hosts caring for non-biological children; children cannot help but feel some jealousy about the time their mother spends caring for other children even though the mother is still in the home.

In the pile sort regarding changes due to hosting, half of the mothers indicated no change in the amount of housework (cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry). Just over a quarter indicated a small increase in housework and just over a fifth indicated a large increase in housework (see Table 2). Responses regarding an increase in cooking were slightly higher than cleaning and doing laundry. Mothers’ comments mirrored the pile sort responses. Florencia, the aforementioned 55 year old woman whose husband travels for work, responded that cleaning and laundry are the same, but she cooks a little more. When asked about the amount of time she spends at home she adds, “It’s the same, because I always have to clean, always have to cook, always have to wash clothes,

**Table 2:** Amount of change in household chores

	A lot more	A little more	The same	A little less	A lot less
Cooking	9	9	10	1	1
Cleaning	6	6	18	0	0
Laundry	4	9	17	0	0
Total	19	24	45	1	1

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<sup>27</sup> “Ellos no les gustaba mucho, pero ya ahora ya se acostumbraron, ya es normal. Si hay, si no hay.”

always.”<sup>28</sup> Housework is a normal part of Florencia’s life, though she explains to me that she cooks a little more when hosting. Regarding the two mothers who indicated that they cook less now, both cooked as their job prior to hosting, so in contrast, they cook less now. Nonetheless, for some, the load of housework and the other obligations is too much and they desire to have additional help. Some have children old enough to help with housework, while the more financially secure of the mothers hire a domestic worker, though typically for limited hours each week.

### **Passing on the Work: Care Chains**

Care chains patterns do emerge as some *mamás ticas* hire Nicaraguan immigrants for domestic labor. Care chains exist when wealthier women can hire others to help with cooking, cleaning and child care, while the less advantaged women brought in as domestic workers for the wealthy then have to leave their children at home alone or with family creating a global care chain (Folbre, 2006; Yeates, 2005).

Yarris (2014) conducted research with Nicaraguan grandmothers providing care for their grandchildren as their children had migrated for work, often to Costa Rica. Curious about the receiving end of that migration and the extension of research on global care chains, I asked hosts if they hire domestic help and if so, whether that person was from Nicaragua. Of the 30 hosts, half employ a domestic worker regularly, mostly once or twice a week. Eight of those 15 with paid domestic help employ Nicaraguan women. I unfortunately did not have nor create the opportunity to speak with these Nicaraguan workers to understand their perspectives and whether they have children still in Nicaragua.

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<sup>28</sup> “Lo mismo, porque siempre tengo que limpiar, siempre tengo que cocinar, siempre tengo que lavar, siempre.”

As with migration patterns worldwide, negative stereotypes regarding migrant workers exist, in this case from Costa Ricans against Nicaraguans. Even a host mother married to a Nicaraguan man said her husband is as an exception and described Nicaraguans as generally uneducated people with poor hygiene and health. This suggests that these host mothers are contributing in some way to the exploitation of migrant domestic labor and continuation of care chains if the migrants have children for which they are not caring.

### **Women's Roles in the Home: *Soyla* Does It All**

Carolina's patio dining area is wonderfully cool. She has it set up with two large tables and a few rocking chairs on the outer edge of the patio, a roof and large trees shade the area. She described that the farm hands, employees, and family sit at one table and the students always sit at the other table. She does not eat with either of them, instead sitting in a rocking chair behind and between the two. This way she said she could jump up to get things people need. I think of this chair, behind and between the two tables as her command center, perhaps because of the power she exudes as she sits there with a riding crop, swatting at flies, chickens, or whatever else might roam up to the open porch of which she disapproves (see Figure 7). She connects the two worlds, the family and students. She manages both and more.

Carolina clarified the concept of a second shift, of being responsible for the work and the home, in local terms. She is the matriarch of a large family; she divorced her husband and runs the farm she inherited. Normally Carolina talked without full regard as to whether she was on topic or if I was catching everything, but she paused in a



**Figure 7:** Carolina in her chair supervising everything

conversation to intentionally and slowly state, “*Soy Soyla. Soy la de todo.*” As explained in a Costa Rican book of sayings, *Soyla* is defined as “I am she or he who does everything.” (“*Soy la o el que hace todo.*”) (Arauz, 2010, p. 136). Carolina does indeed do it all (or at least supervises it all being done). She manages several farm hands, a domestic worker who she supervises including ensuring the house’s food is made with love, her son who makes and sells cheese every day, a second house on her property in which she hosts volunteers, and family relations in her large extended family. She also offered to teach me to make local foods. We met on a Saturday morning to make a traditional farmhand breakfast, *gallo pinto*, and another day to make a stew, *guiso de chilote*, from a traditional indigenous Chorotega recipe. In addition to all the things she was doing, she made time to teach me about her traditions.

As Alejandra says, “I am the head of the house. I am that one who does everything. I am the one who buys everything.”<sup>29</sup> In addition to the roles of financial and household management, there are social roles that women take on. Through the pile sort about changes, women reported feeling more like a counselor or teacher since they started hosting. Ten reported a great increase, 15 a small increase, and just five reported no change in this feeling. In the pile sorts about likes a dislikes, giving advice was strongly rate with 16 indicating that they greatly enjoy giving advice, 13 indicated the enjoy it and only one mother indicated that she didn’t care either way about giving advice, which might be because she runs a school and supervises teachers, so it is likely that she is constantly giving feedback and advice to people. Hosts take on these extra roles, giving advice to students about safety and travel, helping them with their Spanish, and counseling them through problems, such as dating difficulties.

Of the 30 women in my study, 12 women did not have a partner living with them and all were clearly in charge of everything for the house. Of the remaining 18 women married or living with their partner, 9 clearly identified as head of household, in charge of financial management, income generation and all of the cooking, cleaning, hosting, and so on. Thus, I would describe 21 of 30 as *Soyla* or the one in charge of everything in the home. Isidora, age 43 whose husband runs a mechanic shop, was one of only a few women who clearly stated that her husband is the head of household. There was a note of pride in her voice that he provides for the family. Even with that, she stated that she does determine how to spend money from hosting and when I asked her what she does, she responded, “A little bit of everything! I am a nurse, a hairstylist, a little bit of everything,

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<sup>29</sup> “Soy la jefa de la casa. Yo soy la que haga todo. Yo soy la que compra todo.”

a cook.”<sup>30</sup> *Soyla*, being the one who does everything, incorporates women holding traditional responsibilities of women, in addition to some of the stereotypical responsibilities of men, such as finances and control within the home. Hosting complements all that they are already doing, including the emotional work of mothering such as being a counselor, a tutor, and an advisor.

Some women, like Alejandra, spoke with pride regarding carrying the responsibility of being head of house. “Truly, I feel good as the head of household and I am very proud.”<sup>31</sup> Carolina described being head of the household as “tiring” (“cansado”). Marcela, a married woman running a small restaurant and caring for a sick husband, mirrored this sentiment referring to being head of household as “tough” (“duro”). Even if this is tiring, these women have chosen (or perhaps been forced by economic pressures) to add to their already full roles by hosting.

### **Female Head of Household: Three Examples of Married Women**

Single women living without a male partner are clearly defined as the head of household and are the ones to do everything. Below I provide three examples of married women living with their partner who self-identify as the head of household: Catalina whose husband had a drinking problem, Maria whose husband is handy but hands his income over to her, and Natalia who quietly leads the household.

Catalina is 50 years old and married. Her husband owns a farm outside of town with his brothers, but the income is sporadic and unreliable. She had expressed all the things she does to keep the household running and said she is the head of household. To

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<sup>30</sup> “¡De todo! Soy enfermera, [inaudible], peluquera, de todo, cocinera.”

<sup>31</sup> “De verdad, siento bien ser la jefe y me siento muy orgullosa.”



clarify the potential change since hosting, I asked if she felt like the head of household prior to hosting. Catalina replied:

I have almost always been the head of household because my husband is scatterbrained (“cabeza de chompipe”). But yes, now I feel, at least I made the house loans myself. Because he- he has a drinking problem. However, I am used to being in charge things. I have the whole day, because he would forget. Therefore, I think yes, a little more [in charge than before].<sup>32, 33</sup>

As Catalina explains, with disapproval, that her husband has a drinking problem and she takes care of everything.

Maria used to be a waitress with a fixed salary, but in 2002 she experienced a tremendous change when she and her husband moved to Olas to take over his family’s small motel and convenience store. She had no experience in such undertakings and received just a little advice from her stepson. She runs everything and though her husband is helpful as a handyman, he does what she directs and hands any of his earnings to her to manage. Maria manages the business, the finances, and hosting. She made the decision to host as she says it helps provide a stable weekly income. Maria had thought that hosting was only for poor families and that she could not host, but someone encouraged her to check into it. She is glad she did, because she found it to be the contrary. She says that students are rather “demanding” (“exigente”), so having a nicer home is actually better. The students stay in her motel rooms, but she cooks the meals and they all eat together. She enjoys having the students and regarding when they are

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<sup>32</sup> “Casi siempre he sido como cabeza porque mi esposo tiene cabeza de chompipe. Pero sí, ahora yo me siento, al menos, el préstamo de las casas yo hice yo. Porque él- el problema de la bebida. En cambio, yo me hago cargo de las cosas, yo tengo todo el día, porque él se olvida. Entonces, creo que sí, un poco más.”

<sup>33</sup> Translation note: “cabeza de chompipe” literally means “head of a turkey.” I believe this is an alternative version of the saying “cabeza of chorlito” meaning dimwit, scatterbrain, featherbrain, or airhead.

gone she says, “I am missing something” (“Me hace falta”). Beyond providing income she says students are entertainment and company.

Natalia, a 34 year old married mother of three, spends almost her entire day in the kitchen, and does so to provide for her family. She prepares and serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner for her family and students. In between those meals, she prepares snacks to sell at the Olas Language School during the class breaks. Natalia loads up the snacks, sweets, fresh fruit, and empanadas, in her bicycle basket, rides to school, sets up a table just outside the school gate and hopes to sell out. She also bakes bread twice a week to sell at her aunt’s store. Natalia agreed to be interviewed, but her only available time was at the end of her day, after dinner at 7:30. We sat in the living room with her husband and twin girls watching TV while we talked. In my first standard questions, I asked who lives in the house and what they do. When I asked what her husband does, she made a face as if to say he does nothing, but followed up to say he works in construction “when there is work” (“cuando hay”). As a neighbor for six weeks, I know Natalia’s husband spends a lot of time sitting on the porch, takes care of yard work, and participates in church activities. Later in the interview when I asked her who the head of household is, she said that she is, but lowered her voice so her husband could not hear. Even if it was the truth, perhaps this it would be an insult to his ego if stated clearly. Natalia quietly manages the household and the finances. Natalia, like Catalina and Maria, takes on the responsibility for the family’s emotional and financial well-being.

### **Exerting Power as *Soyla*: Making Hosting Work**

As the one doing it all or responsible for everything in the household, women skillfully manage hosting so that it works for their individual needs. Hosting could be

seen as reinforcing gender roles of women providing care for members of the household and engaging in domestic work. However, it is also empowering as women have more control over what happens in their home. That power and control can be seen through how women have found ways to make hosting work for them, whether through increased boundaries, flexibility, rigidity, or communication.

Chicanas in the US have been found to restructure domestic work “to eliminate the most exploitative aspects of the occupation” (Romero, 1990, p. 36). They treated the home as a workplace and restructured the work to be like a small business owner or contractor. “The modified working conditions lessened the opportunity for psychological exploitation and the extraction of emotional labor.” ((Romero, 1990, p. 40). Like these Chicana domestic workers, host mothers have found ways to structure the relationship to be less exploitative and exert control to create a sustainable and enjoyable experience.

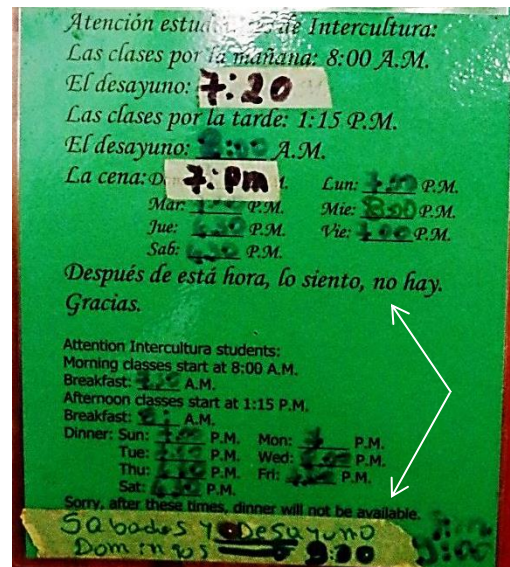
Alejandra talked about differentiating between her problems and the students’ problems. She makes sure to fulfill the requirements of a host mother, namely serving breakfast and dinner and conversing with the students in Spanish. However, she views issues of them staying out late, drinking, and so on, as up the student and tries to not concern herself with their behavior. She is drawing a line here that the student is not her child and she says this helps her not worry. She also makes hosting work for her by moving the dinner time based on her soccer game schedule. She invites students to watch or play in the game and asks if it is okay to have dinner up to an hour earlier or later so that she can make it to games.

Alejandra is not alone in asking for flexibility in meals. Several women talked about making the hosting schedule work for them: Victoria who runs a school, Sofia who

does a lot of exercise and community work, and Emilia who is a stay-at-home mom, all leave food and instructions for students to eat breakfast on their own if the students are not awake before they need to leave the house. Amanda, whose daughter works at the school running the homestay program, sometimes bargains one night off for a lunch on another day to allow her to take small trips.

Gabriela has a different style that works for her. She is 51 and has two adult children, one of whom lives with her and the other who lives with his girlfriend. Gabriela takes her responsibility as a host mother seriously, following and enforcing rules with some sternness, and she greatly enjoys it. Gabriela has been hosting since the school was founded 13 years ago and provides students a meal schedule that allows her to attend church meetings and teach the school's cooking classes. Gabriela told me, as is stated on her meal time chart (see Figure 8) that if a student is late for a meal, they are not given food. While the Olas Host Manual is printed and given to all mothers, it was mostly unclear if mothers remember reading it.

However, Gabriela has it on her dining room table along with a Spanish-English dictionary she uses as a last resort to communicate with new students. Gabriela's rigidity was not commonly expressed, but it works for her and that seems to be what is important – finding something that suits one's life so hosting is not more taxing than rewarding. Each mother should be empowered to make hosting be an



**Figure 8:** Gabriela's meal time chart posted on the student's bedroom door

experience that truly works for their household. Recommendations for homestay programs to enhancing women's ability to negotiate this power will be addressed in Chapter IV.

### **For Money and More**

Isidora whose husband runs the mechanic shop expressed the specific sentiment of feeling like a professional as a host mother and that the thing she likes the least is when a student tries to pay her directly for time they want to stay beyond their enrollment in classes. She finds it uncomfortable to accept cash for a student staying a few extra nights after they have already staying with her for weeks. Isidora's responses speak to the complicated reality between a student being like a child in the family and a paying guest. Isidora both feels like a professional host receiving income and like a caregiver who should not charge for doing a little extra. She hosts for the income and feels hosting should not be seen as a business but an opportunity to learn. This could be seen as a contradiction, one undermining the other, but I think both can be true. Women need the income and hosting is desirable beyond income. It is socially acceptable to host for money and the joy of mothering, but not hosting only for the money. This tension is common in care work. Care workers claim other benefits or motivation beyond income generation. As it generally pays less than other jobs, the work requires additional motivation or benefits.

Research with grandmothers as primary caregivers for their grandchild in Nicaragua also points to caregivers acknowledging the value of or need for remittances; however, that is not the reason they provide care, nor do caregivers want to be seen as providing care for money (Yarris, 2011). In the case of grandmothers they have a special

loving bond with their grandchildren. Host mothers did not express that they love their students, but rather that they enjoy the act of hosting, which I will describe in more detail in Chapter III. In the words of Monica, a host mother for the last year and a half with a husband and two children:

I like to serve delicious food, that the plate is beautiful. Yes, it makes me happy. There are people that aren't in it for the love of the student, but more for the money. But, not me. I like the money, but I also enjoy providing good service, because the people pay to come here and things go well. Yes, I like [hosting].<sup>34</sup>

Women can, as Monica does, both acknowledge that they host for additional income and critiquing other moms who they perceive to be hosting only for the money.

### **If Money Was Not an Issue**

I asked women if they won the lottery, whether they would continue to host. The vast majority replied yes, with only two dissenting voices. While it is difficult to know what a person would really do in that situation, the confirmation of continuing to host when money is no longer relevant indicates that hosting is done for more than just income generation, but it has other benefits from women's perspective. Only two *mamá*s admitted that they would absolutely quit hosting if they won the lottery and didn't need the income anymore. For one of the two, Magdalena, this seems entirely indicative of her attitude toward hosting. Other mothers vaguely referenced with disapproval in their voice that "some women" only host for the money, but that was not the case for them. Magdalena seemed to fit the negative example that other host moms alluded to as she was curt in her responses, had the lowest enjoyment score from the pile sort, and her

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<sup>34</sup> "Me gusta servir algo rico, que el plato se vea bonito. Sí. Me encanta. Hay gente que tal vez no están por amor al estudiante, no por un poco más el dinero. Pero para mí no. Me gusta el dinero pero también me gusta dar buen servicio. Porque la gente paga, para venir y estar bien. Entonces me gusta."

open comments focused on the school not sending her enough students to meet her financial needs.

The second mother who admitted to quitting if she could, stated that women who actually need the income should have priority for receiving students and it would not be fair if she continued hosting when it was no longer an economic necessity. She also has a dream of buying a farm in the country, which would preclude her from being the requisite walking distance to the school in order to host. This prioritization for hosts' financial need clarifies her view that hosting is an income generation option in a competitive market. Nonetheless, the majority are expressing, some more passionately than others, that they would continue hosting even if they did not have financial need. As Carolina suggested, if she won the lottery she would take a vacation (and not host) but would return to hosting because she enjoys it. The indication of enjoying hosting and choosing hosting even if they did not need the money signals that there are other benefits of hosting.

### **Conclusion**

The work of hosting does not fall into either/or dichotomies, it is a practice of multiplicity. Women already manage many roles and responsibilities within the household. Hosting adds on to that workload, but can be synergistically incorporated into the normal workflow of women. Hosting reinforces women taking responsibility for domestic and care work, while also providing income that can be liberating and empowering in socially acceptable ways. Women host for money and for other benefits of hosting and motherhood. For women who are not head of household and do not hold outside employment, hosting is absolutely a way to increase their power in the home as

the women are paid directly by the school. For women who are heads of household or already maintain other employment, when fairly financially compensated, hosting is a way that women can get ahead a little by including another person in their household. For this to be a feasible option, women must find ways to make the hosting situation fit their needs. Also, due to the challenge discussed in Chapter III, hosting is not a solution for all women. In my estimation, hosting is only worth the effort if the *mamá tica* actively enjoys the work. I will describe the reasons women do enjoy hosting work, as well as challenges and their views of the students in Chapter III.



## CHAPTER III

### EXTENDING MOTHERHOOD TO STUDENTS: WHAT *MAMÁS TICAS* THINK

In this chapter I will share how women perceive the work of hosting, including benefits, challenges, and their impressions of students and students' cultures. This chapter is intended to inform the practices of international educators by sharing the Latin American host perspective of international exchange, a perspective rarely heard. Moving beyond the financial benefits of hosting discussed in the previous chapter, *mamás ticas* enjoy being mothers and including international students in their mothering. They enjoy the practical benefits (hosting is flexible work that fits well in women's lives), overall health benefits (emotional, mental, and even physical benefits of staying active and having company), and most of all students who are open to becoming members of the family. Women, as skilled mothers, navigate uncomfortable situations with ease and humor. Challenges lie in students' personalities, attitudes, and expectations, and lack of trust and communication can complicate matters. While there was not a cohesive view held about specific cultures, students are seen as studious *fiesteros* who eat healthy and are more independent from their families.

#### **Flexible Work from Home: A Smart Choice**

Hosting is generally seen as more flexible, less strenuous, and more rewarding than most jobs outside the home, which are mostly in the tourism industry. Mothers contrasted the work of hosting to that of working in restaurants or hotels. Hosting is done from within one's own home with the major time commitments being structured around breakfast and dinner. Essentially, hosting is a practical decision for women who need a less physically demanding job, need to care for family members, or want a more flexible

employer. Hosting can also increase women's networks and opportunities, opening up other income generating opportunities related to serving students.

Daniela explained to me that after separating from her husband, she began working in the hotel industry in the kitchen and cleaning rooms, but that it was hard work. "Now I work with my little room (for students). The fact is that I don't have to kill myself as much. Do you understand? So, to me, it's a better option, because one feels better."<sup>35</sup> Marcela echoed this sentiment, "Now I feel much better. Because before I worked a lot in hotels, therefore I was always running here and there... Now it is much less stressful – healthier."<sup>36</sup>

Women have also begun hosting after needing to leave other jobs. For example, Valeria had to stop working in hotels in 1998 due to back problems. She began hosting in 2001, with two adult children living at home, and one room to host for students; hosting is work she found to be easier on her back. Between hosting and occasionally selling desserts, she is able to cover expenses. Catalina, now 50, first worked as a seamstress, but had to have surgery in both arms for carpal tunnel and could not continue her work. Since then she has been renting out apartments and hosting students in her own home for the last nine years. She says hosting is an activity she is physically able to do. At 83, Barbara, is the eldest host mother in the program. She used to cook breakfast, lunch, and dinner for about 50 people and had many Costa Rican tourists staying in her rooms for rent. Barbara says that she stopped that work when tourism trends changed and those same tourists started renting houses together and cooking for themselves or eating out. Hosting

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<sup>35</sup> "Ahora trabajo con mi pequeño habitación. De hecho, no me, no tengo que matarme tanto. Me entiende? Entonces, a yo, mejor posibilidad porque una le pasa mejor."

<sup>36</sup> "Ahora siento más mejor. Por lo menos antes yo trabajaba mucho en los hoteles. Entonces corria pa' aca, corria pa' aquí.... menos estrés totalmente. Más saludable."

students and volunteer groups is what she sees as her only option for work. Barbara does not have any family members living with her, though she rents a room to a Nicaraguan couple who assist her with some tasks. While we did not intimately discuss her finances or her physical abilities, I believe hosting provides her critical income in place of retirement funds and she could not physically manage many other jobs.

Paula's situation combines multiple reasons mothers prefer hosting to other work. She hosts because of health limitations, it allows her provide childcare for her granddaughter, and she enjoys the company. Paula (age 38) lives with her husband (age 47), daughter (age 20), and granddaughter (age two). She studied to be a chef and loves cooking; however, her doctor told her she had to quit working in restaurants due to her high blood pressure. Now she takes care of her granddaughter while her daughter works in a restaurant and enjoys the company of students as her husband is a taxi driver and is gone a lot. Hosting is a job that suits her needs (providing childcare, keeping her blood pressure down, and social interaction) and allows her to use her passion for cooking.

Being able to simultaneously care for family members, whether children, spouses, or parents, is a feature of hosting work that makes it more practical and preferable to having to do paid work outside of the home. When Natalia began hosting 11-12 years ago, she was married with one son and worked in a hotel. Since starting hosting, she had twins and quit hotel work.

Sara: The [twin] girls are 9 now, so you were pregnant with them while you were hosting students?

Natalia: Yes. And I thought I wouldn't be able to host after they were born in case they would cry or something. But, a week or two passed [after they were born] that I didn't receive students, but I decided to try [to return to hosting] and see how it would work out because the girls didn't cry at all, just to eat.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Sara: Ellas tienen nueve años y por eso, ¿usted estuvo embarazada cuando estaba dando hospedaje?

Natalia continues on to say that it did work out, hosting and having happy infants.

Returning to the financial incentive of hosting, Natalia explains how hosting connected her to more work:

I started [selling food at the school] when I could not work anymore because of the girls and I needed to do something. So, I asked the school if I could bring some desserts. I started with *arroz con leche*. Not always, but some days, and after some time the students requested that I come every day. So, for the last two or three years, I go every day.<sup>38</sup>

Hosting and the income associated has allowed Natalia to meet her desire to be at home with her kids and provided an opportunity for her to connect with the school for additional income in selling snacks at the school during breaks. Other mothers use school connections for earning additional income through teaching extracurricular classes (e.g. cooking, dance, and jewelry making), selling lunch, and renting bikes. Family members of the mothers also tie into these connections to promote their surfing school, tours, or other small businesses to students. In this way hosting allows women to expand their social network and increase the opportunities to which they have access.

In addition to the flexible nature of hosting work within the home, homestay program administrators can also flex the workload for mothers by sending more or less students according to mothers' needs. Valentina, age 62 and hosting for five years now, spoke about how she had been hosting and running a restaurant when she needed to quit her restaurant job to care for her sick husband. After a break from hosting due to her husband being in the hospital, they started receiving students again. Valentina interacts

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Natalia: Sí. y después cuando ellas nacieron, pensé no recibir no sé si lloran o algo. Pero estuve que uno, dos semanas que no recibe pero después voy a intentar para ver y funciona porque ellas no lloran ni nada, solamente, para comer.

<sup>38</sup> Pero yo empecé [cuando] no podía trabajar por ellas, y necesité hacer algo. Entonces, pregunté en la escuela si puedo llevar algunos postres. Empecé con arroz con leche. No siempre, algunos días y después - los estudiantes quieren todos los días. Entonces, para ir siempre, tengo dos o tres años.

with the students more now as they all eat at home together rather than in her restaurant and she enjoys hosting more now. She also has greater financial need due to her lost income and hospital bills. She credits the school for helping her meet her financial needs by sending her more students and for longer stays. She is relieved she has the support of the school.

Homestay program administrators can also accommodate families needing a break without removing them from the program all together, because there are always mothers who can take on extra students to make up the difference, without having to replace the mothers altogether. While attending one host mother's birthday party, a neighbor said his family usually receives students, but his wife was taking a few months off as she stayed with her daughter who just had a baby. The understanding was that once his wife returned, they would resume receiving students. Other program accommodations may occur on a case-by-case basis; such as for Barbara, the 83-year-old previously mentioned, who said she is not required to physically go to the school each week to process her weekly payment like the other mothers.

Furthermore, Olas Language School created another practical benefit for all families by distributing pay every week as opposed to most jobs which pay every two or four weeks. The pay is deposited directly into the mothers' bank accounts and the program requires that accounts must be the mother's name alone, not of a male partner, further enforcing benefits of autonomy over the earnings. As mothers commented on high food costs and living expenses (a challenge addressed in the previous chapter), weekly paychecks help women cover those expenses.

These mothers and others shared stories of how hosting can be a pragmatic and accommodating solution for gaining income as it is less physically demanding than other jobs, allows mothers to care for other family members at home, creates opportunities for further work serving students, and program administrators can accommodate changes in mothers' needs as well as distribute weekly payments directly into women's accounts. In a rural area where year-round formal jobs are uncommon, very few families receive employment benefits, such as maternity leave, family and medical leave, worker's compensation, and retirement. Hosting brings income into the family and accommodates women's needs that otherwise are not often met through other types of formal employment.

### **Increased Mental and Physical Health**

Each interview I conducted gave me a better sense of host experiences and some interviews hit me with "aha!" moments revealing a new aspect of hosting, such as the health benefits of hosting. In my very first interview with my own host mother Alejandra, I came to understand the transformation of her self-esteem directly and indirectly due to hosting. Then Daniela showed me how hosting is fulfilling and keeps her healthy by staying active. These women are not alone in their experiences; they are representative of many others. To illustrate the contributions of hosting to women's mental and physical health, I will share the stories of these women in greater detail.

#### **A Mother's Self-esteem**

When I asked Barbara, age 83, about her self-esteem she replied, "Naturally, yes. When one is a mother, one has very strong self-esteem." ("Lógica, sí. Cuando es mamá tiene estima muy grande.") Barbara demonstrated pride and pleasure that she is a "mother

of the foreigners” (“mamá de los extranjeros”). She added playfully that she must be famous in Europe because of all the students who have taken her picture back with them and was happy for me to take pictures and share copies with her (see Figure 9).



**Figure 9:** Barbara in front of her house

In my original list of pile sort questions, I did not include self-esteem. However, through conversation during the first host mother interview, Alejandra, she suggested it be added. Alejandra’s story is indicative of the potential of hosting, as well as the complexities that come with being in charge of the house and home. She shared about how hosting has led to an increase in her self-esteem over the years. I will share her story in more detail at the end of this chapter.

Amanda, age 61, began hosting 10 years prior so her youngest daughter, Pia, could learn English. Amanda had her first child at 24 and had three more children, the last when she was 38. Pia did in fact learn English as Amanda had hoped and is currently

working and attending college. Pia and her 5 year old son live with Amanda. Amanda cares for her grandson while Pia works and studies. Amanda seems very happy to provide this care along with hosting one student at a time. She reports that her self-esteem has increased because she feels “más útil” (“more useful”) and students leave her messages in a notebook when they leave, leaving her with a notebook full of beautiful and complementary messages that she can reflect on. Amanda hopes to add another room onto her house so she can host two students at a time.

Both of Alejandra and Amanda are examples of the 12 women who indicated in the changes pile sort that they have seen a large increase in their self-esteem due to hosting. Barbara is an example from the nine women who indicated an increase and the remaining nine women reported no change in their self-esteem due to hosting. The women who indicated no change generally entered hosting with an already strong self-esteem, so while they may enjoy hosting, it does not improve their already strong self-esteem. Carolina, discussed in the *Soyla* section in the previous chapter, is an example of one of these women.

### **Staying Active and Healthy Through Company of Students**

Daniela is single, having left her abusive husband about 20 years ago. One of her adult sons lives with her but is usually gone as he works a lot of hours in a restaurant for tourists. Everyday Daniela gets up at 6am, has a cup of coffee, and gets going for the day. She likes to walk along the beach in the morning picking up trash, for which she believes mostly non-local Costa Ricans are responsible. Daniela, who also told me how hosting is physically easier on her body than working in a hotel, went on to explain: “When I don’t have students, I feel very, very sad... I can’t just sit around. It makes me sick. When I



have a student, I am cleaning the house, doing laundry, I'm earning. I am like this [motion to running around]. I have my mind and health.”<sup>39</sup> Daniela has made some tough life decisions (e.g. separation from her husband and quitting hotel work) to craft a life she enjoys, perhaps this could be seen as embracing the *pura vida* lifestyle, that she values being active, believing that is how one stays physically healthy and mentally sharp as they age, but prefers lower stress work that she can take her time with and enjoy.

Daniela is not alone in finding connection and joy in the company of students. Alejandra shares that only one student worked to engage with her shy teenage daughter, finally making a lasting family-like connection. Marcela enjoys when students keep her company in the kitchen while she cooks. “Although there are some who don’t want to do anything, there are others who do really enjoy cooperating/participating,” Marcela shares.<sup>40</sup> Mia enjoys when students join her in playing or watching her soccer games. Fernanda, 58 years old, married with no children lovingly described picnics on the beach with students as a highlight of hosting.

Florenica, age 55, whose husband travels for work, finds herself alone at home when she isn’t hosting because her four children live in the capital city. After being the primary caregiver for one of her grandchildren for five years while her daughter attended school, her granddaughter returned to living with her daughter. Florencia describes a strong desire for hosting more students and being sad without them. My field notes on July 31, 2013, after interviewing Florencia read:

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<sup>39</sup> Cuando no tengo [estudiantes], siento muy muy triste... Me siento así [motion to how she is sitting around right now], me enfermo. Cuando tengo yo estoy limpiando la casa, lavando la ropa, estoy logrando. Estoy así [motion to running around], tengo mi mente.

<sup>40</sup> “Aunque no les gusta hacer nada, pero hay otros que si le gusta mucho cooperara.”

**Aha!** Hosting has emotional/mental benefits, women enjoy having friends around the world, they express being very happy hosting, it is a way to stay active and healthy as aging, and so far most women reported an increased self-esteem. The lack of hosting can also have negative emotional/mental consequences. For women without children they care for in the home and without much to do, when they don't have students it makes them sad "me pone triste." They [express that they] don't have anything to do, lack purpose. This may be similar to the experience of empty nest or unemployment.

Her interview was the eleventh that I had conducted and her elaboration on the sadness of being without students made the potential pattern more obvious. Daniela had also expressed that being without students makes her sad, as had Maria, "I feel sad without students. I am used to having them. Without students the days seem very long. I feel like I am missing something. More than money, they are entertainment and company."<sup>41</sup>

These students coming and going keep women, particularly older women who would otherwise be alone, active, connected, and give a sense of purpose, much like motherhood. Others with more active lives may enjoy the connections with students as well as the freedom from the extra responsibilities when they are without students.

### **Open Students Make for Happy Mothers**

As mentioned in Chapter II, the most highly rated items in the likes/dislikes pile sort were "making friends from around the world" and "receiving additional income." The next three highly rated items are: being a surrogate mother ("mamá sustituta"), having house guests ("huéspedes"), and giving advice to students. Though, a few mothers argued that "house guests" is not the correct word, as the students are more like children. Perhaps, ideally, the students act like children. Women often talked about the best students being the ones who come open ("abierto") to being one of the family. When I

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<sup>41</sup> "Siento mal sin estudiantes. Estoy acostumbrada a tenerlos. Sin estudiantes parece como días muy largo. Me hace falta. Más que dinero, ellos son entretenimiento y compañía."

asked what advice mothers had for the preparation of students prior to their arrival, various suggested that students should be “open” to really joining the family. Hosts value students that jump in to family life and engage, talk, and spend time with the family. As Isidora suggests, students should “feel like one of the family.” She says, “This is very important to me. That they come open, not to everyone, because we are not open to everyone, but that they come open to be part of the family.”<sup>42</sup> Women described openness to include behaviors such as: speaking in Spanish even though it is difficult for a new learner, talking with the family at meals, accepting an invitation to do something with the family instead of going out with other students, or exchanging language lessons with a family member.

The fondest memories shared were of students who openly engaged with the family, participated in daily activities, and developed lasting connections. Every mother had at least one student, if not many, that stand out in this regard. Daniela explained, “There are so many that you don't remember but there are special ones.” Her tone and face soften a bit as she spoke about a student, around 50 years old, who arrived on Mother’s Day bearing a gift. Daniela said with sincerity, “The special thing is that it is as if he were really my son.” Upon leaving he promised to return in five years and he did. He returned and presented his girlfriend to Daniela as one might their own parents. He now lives in a town nearby and three times he has come to pick up Daniela and take her for a visit at his home.

This openness to being one of the family, when women can truly be surrogate mothers, enjoy the company of the students, and give advice as mothers do for children,

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<sup>42</sup> “Que se sienten parte de la familia. Eso es para mí es muy importante. Que venir abiertos, no a todo, porque nosotros somos no a todo, pero que vengan abiertos a ser parte de la familia.”

this is when women get the most joy out of hosting. When I asked Marcela what she thought about being a surrogate mother, she responded, “I love it because I have many children in all corners of the world.” (“Me encanta porque tengo varios hijos por todos lados.”) The experience of mothering and hosting were often described interchangeably as “beautiful” (“bonita” and “lindo”). Women’s primary reasons to start hosting may have been for income, but it is not what keeps them hosting for over a decade. Only women who find beauty and joy in hosting, much like they do motherhood, will make this a part of their life.

### **Open Students Make for Happy Families**

Husbands, children, parents, and other family members living in a household are also positively affected when students take initiative to be open and engaging. The host mother holds the main responsibility for the student, so she actively tries to engage the student. However, family members are often simply around, living their lives, and accustomed to students coming and going for years in their home. In the beginning it may be difficult to adjust, for example Catalina mentioned her children used to be jealous accusing her of prioritizing the host students over them, but now they have gotten used to hosting and it does not matter if there are or are not students in the house.<sup>43</sup>

Many of the mothers have been hosting for so long, the initial changes in their family may not be as fresh in their memory. Monica, however, has only been hosting for one and a half years, so the changes in her husband are apparent to her. Monica said that at first she was a little nervous about hosting, “. . . perhaps because of my husband.

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<sup>43</sup> This is similar to prior research findings that the children of migrant Filipina care workers are sometimes jealous of the time their mothers spend caring for other children (Parreñas, 2003).

Because my husband was, *was* a very serious person.”<sup>44</sup> She explains that with her, he is kind and helpful around the house, but people outside of the home ask her if her husband is “frustrated” (“frustrado”) or even “tough/bad-tempered” (“bravo”). However, the students changed him, “He has changed 90% of his character... with the students he is a beauty. All, all of the students say he is a good husband because he is nice.”<sup>45</sup> I clarified that this happened in just a year and a half and asked if she could see the change occurring. Monica replied:

He changed a little at a time and now he shares with the students. They are happy. He goes outside with a student who smokes. They talk and talk, and don’t want to leave. And when she goes, they hug and hug, very happy.<sup>46</sup>

It was common to hear that children and partners wait to see how the student acts, and then reciprocates accordingly – ignoring the student if the student ignored them, playing and talking with the student if the student indicates desire to do so. These connections also reach beyond immediate family. As mentioned in the methods section, I dropped one participant, Julieta, from the study due to students staying at her hotel rather than her home. However, prior to her interview, I ate alone at the hotel restaurant for lunch. I chatted with the waiter, a friend of Julieta’s son, and he asked about my research. He wanted to share his thoughts about students as he is often the one serving them and talking with them each dinner throughout their stay. He disparaged the students who were unwilling to practice Spanish outside of class, expressing that they are missing their opportunity to really learn and improve. On the other hand, he was enthusiastic about the

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<sup>44</sup> “...Tal vez por mi esposo. Porque Mi esposo era, *era* una persona muy seria.”

<sup>45</sup> “Él ha cambiado como – el 90% de cómo es su carácter... con los estudiantes es una belleza. Todo, todo los estudiantes dicen es buen esposo porque él es simpático.”

<sup>46</sup> “Cambió un poco, poco, poco. Y ahora comparte con los estudiantes. Felices. Él se va con la chica que fuma afuera. Hablan y hablan y no quieren ir, y se van abrazan, abrazan. Muy felices.”

opportunity for cultural exchange with the students when the students are willing to speak in Spanish. He offers to take students with him on his one day off each week to go surfing or go watch his soccer games when his team travels to nearby towns for games. It makes him happy when students are open to saying 'yes' and go with him on these day trips where he can share his culture. Students open to new experiences and being a member of the family enrich the experience of all involved.

### **Navigating Uncomfortable Situations with Ease and Humor**

The homestay manual, which I reviewed prior to my arrival to Olas, lists uncomfortable situations that can occur and suggests responses to each situation. In sum, the situations discussed in the manual are:

- A new boyfriend being snuck into the student's room
- The student eating food at night that is intended for breakfast
- Students expects you to serve them breakfast at 10am or whenever they get up
- A friend of your student wants to move into your home, leaving their own host family
- The student leaves for a trip and brings back a lot of dirty laundry
- Money is stolen that the student left in your house
- The student has sexual preferences or religious beliefs different than yours
- The student is disrespectful, for example: walks barefoot in the house, leaves the lights on even when not in his room, invites your younger daughter out at night

I asked host mothers interviewed if they have encountered these situations, which are most common, and what other uncomfortable situations arise when hosting. I had anticipated women would express that these situations happen with frequency and that the situations would be perceived as a frustrating challenge of hosting. I did hear stories of, or personally witnessed, all of the situations above occurring within homes. However, women generally expressed that these did not occur or were not a problem. Women who host for years seem to develop a comfort or humor around handling sticky situations. Numerous women explained stories to me that horrified me, but they laughed about.

While this could have been an act for me, it seemed genuine. Situations that might bother a novice host become normal, expected, and entertaining. I suspect hosts that find the reoccurrence of these sorts of situations to be aggravating do not last in the role of host for years.

While not a major issue for most, students not waking up for or arriving for meals was a common situation. This was not a problem with good communication between the host mother and student, but can cause tension when students skip meals without telling the host mother. Eating leftovers is not common in Olathe, so if a mother prepares a meal and waits around for the student to arrive but they never do, then the food might be thrown away, wasting the host's money and time, as well as indicating disrespect to the host mother.

I was surprised at the varied responses to the question of boyfriends/partners being snuck into the house. Eleven mothers admitted to me that students have snuck in "night visitors" and a few more suggested students have tried to sneak someone in and they weren't successful. I suspect given other stories I heard from locals, the incidence of partners staying over is more common than was reported to me. Three particularly candid mothers clarified that they are not actually bothered by students having partners stay over under two conditions: 1) there is an external entrance to the student's room so that the partner is not in the family's living area, and 2) the mother knows and approves of the partner. The latter was explained in the context of worrying about thieves. Students are known to have electronics and wealth, making them targets for theft, including through amorous subterfuge of ending with stealing from the student's room and leaving in the

middle of the night.<sup>47</sup> In a small town like Olas, most hosts know all of the locals that live in the area. Meeting the partner allows the mother to ensure they are trustworthy and if something does go missing, the mother would be able to track down the partner to confront them. If the host mother does not know the partner, they are likely from a larger city and not to be trusted as hosts explained to me.<sup>48</sup> Partners were ubiquitously assumed to be Costa Rican males and female students. When asking one mother to clarify about international student partners, she dismissed them as not being problematic or suspect for theft. Male students are much fewer in number and are subject to different scrutiny or less likely to be bringing home a partner. Some mothers truly do not have to worry about any boyfriends sneaking in. For example, Monica has two rooms for students but also has an aggressive and noisy dog. She said the dog is nice to students, but strangers are treated with hostility. Having met this dog, I can attest to fact that I would not come to her house as an unwelcomed stranger.

While the aforementioned uncomfortable situations suggested by the school are the most common, the list of potential uncomfortable situations is never-ending. When I asked Catalina if she had anything else to add at the end of her interview, she shared about an uncomfortable situation for her husband that, in typical host mother fashion, she found funny instead of frustrating. She had a male student staying with her for a month, about the age of her own son. Catalina described that the student would get up each

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<sup>47</sup>I only heard of this actually happening a few times, but the threat was real. Take Carolina, for example, who always stayed at home or had someone stay in the house to ensure nothing was stolen. She says, “Si yo le permito traer muchachos allí a su habitación y no conocen los hombres... No conoces, no sabes si es un ladron - no ha pasado, pero pueda.”

<sup>48</sup> I note that the language I used here is mostly gendered. As described to me by two school staff and confirmed by my own observation, there are many foreign females and local males looking for each other. This is the most likely pairing that a host mother is to encounter. Though anything could happen; such as an older man bringing home three female prostitutes as one mom had to deal with at 3AM.



morning, pass through the house wearing just his boxers, open the front door, check the weather, then return to his room, dress, and come out for breakfast. She continued:

Well, my husband was bothered every time, but he did not say anything about it until after the student left. Then he says to the girls at the [school] office, “Please, if you send me a guy, please ensure he doesn’t walk around in the house in his boxers.” [laugh]... I told him that I could have easily talked with the student and it would have stopped... Why wouldn’t he say anything? My son said that [my husband] was tormented all month and didn’t say anything. How stupid. I always talk with the student and could have said something.<sup>49</sup>

Catalina, like most of the women, expects there to be uncomfortable situations. They do not bother her, she handles them with grace and humor. Again, most of these women first raised their own children, and have been raising foreign children for approximately a decade. The *mamás ticas* have developed expertise and skill in navigating sticky situations and cultural mishaps such that these situations are generally not perceived as challenges or even things they dislike. More often than not, uncomfortable situations simply provide women a good laugh.

### **Challenges**

Despite women being almost unanimous about the enjoyment of hosting and not actually being bothered by uncomfortable situations, stories of specific students illuminated some of the challenges, along with positive responses that were followed by the qualifier “but it depends on the student” (“pero depende en el estudiante”). Challenges mostly revolved around students’ personalities, expectations of and attitude toward the homestay experience. When trust or communication breaks down, the challenges can be further exasperated. Unfortunately, it seems that in Olas mothers may

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<sup>49</sup> Pues a mi esposo, se molestó siempre. Pero nunca me lo diga hasta que él se fue. Entonces se lo digo a las chicas en recepción, “Por favor si me mandan un chico, que no pase en bóxer por la casa.” Jaja... Le dije, simplemente yo hablo con él y ya. ¿Porque no digo nada? Y mi hijo dijo, “Todo el mes fue atormentado y no dijo nada.” Que estúpido, siempre hablo con el estudiante y pudiera decirlo.

not have each other to rely on to solve difficulties. In Chapter IV, I will suggest some programmatic options for reducing challenges, but it is important to understand the challenges as described by the host mothers, because it is likely impossible to remove all of the challenges from hosting, just as motherhood of one's one children is not without challenges.

### **Personality, Expectations, and Attitudes**

Each student brings with them their unique personality, expectations, and attitudes, which is mixed with each host mother's unique personality, expectations, and attitudes – anything can happen. Most common descriptions of difficult students include: “delicate or squeamish” (“*delicados*”), “messy” (“*disordenados*”), “spoiled” (“*chineados*”), and “reserved” (“*reservados*”). These descriptions were generally used to describe an average difficult student, though all of them can be taken to extremes.

Students who are *delicados* are described as squealing over bugs or complaining about bugs and animals that are typical in the tropics. This might be expected at first, but then students are expected to adapt and understand living in a rural, tropical area means living a little closer to nature. (Refer to Figure 9 of Barbara for a housing structure typical of about a third of the homes, with an open air eating area, and metal roof.) Students who complain to mothers or, even worse, complain directly to the school without first talking with their host or blame their host mother for bugs being attracted to food the student left out in their room, are at least frustrating, but may be offensive. For example, Isidora, who has been hosting for 12 years, casually mentioned that a student complained to the school about bugs in the house, but the student had left food in the bathroom that attracted the bugs in the first place. Agustina, a host for the past five years while maintaining a

restaurant job, had a student go directly to the school to report she saw a rat in her room and wanted to change homes. Agustina expressed sadness, and perhaps embarrassment, that she did not know about the situation and would have set traps and resolved the problem if the student had given her a chance.

At a birthday party of a host mother, a guest explained to me bluntly that *delicados* need to “get over it.” The host would not and did not say this to me directly, but judging from her non-verbal cues, she was in agreement with her guest. Mia, mother of two teenage boys, described taking two students over to a gathering at her mother’s house when the girls started complaining about the bugs in Costa Rica. She says she “had it” (“hasta aquí”) with their complaints and said to them:

Let me tell you something. When you choose to come to Costa Rica, where did you two think you were going? What information did you have of the country? Did you know that Costa Rica is a tropical country? And that we have everything here? (Imitating voice of the girls: “Yes.”) So why are you complaining about a spider?! We have everything. You made a mistake choosing this country.<sup>50</sup>

For example, the contrast of *delicados* may be students who understand bugs and creatures are a fact of life and are happy to have geckos in the home as they eat smaller and peskier bugs such as mosquitos. I recall the two other students at one home where I stayed would sit on the porch and cheer on the geckos as they stalked their prey for mundane evening entertainment (see Figure 10) and were saddened when our host smashed a tarantula they had guided out of our house because they knew it would not have harmed us. Students having unrealistic expectations and understanding of the physical environment can change a situation from a casual encounter with nature into an

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<sup>50</sup> Le dijera una cosa. ¿Cuándo ustedes escogerían venir a costa rica, ustedes para donde pensaban que iban? Digo, ¿qué información tenían del país? ¿Ustedes sabían que Costa Rica es un país tropical? ¿Y tenemos de todo? ‘si’ ¿Entonces, porque quejan de una araña? Sí, tenemos de todo. Ustedes equivocaron del país.

ordeal that leaves the host frustrated or hurt. Complaints and shrieks can come across as if the home and the locality are not good enough.



**Figure 10:** Gecko capturing prey on our porch

Carolina introduced me to the concept of “cochino,” meaning “filthy as a pig,” through a story about a couple of female students who were *cochinas* to the point that she was angry about cleaning after them and two male students staying with them asked to move. At my next interview, I checked my understanding of the word and Isidora corrected me that *cochino* is too strong, “disorganized or messy” (“disordenado”) is more appropriate. She went on to give an example at the intersection of messy and the next descriptor, “spoiled” (“chineado”):

One extremely cheeky thing, dear, is that they complain that the house is dirty. Not here at my house, but when we go to the school host mother meetings, the school officials comment that students report the cleaning is not done at some houses. I’ll tell you what - in all of “Olas,” all of the houses are clean, but the students come in and in five seconds there isn’t anything clean.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Una cosa cariña, sumamente brisa es, que se quejan porque la casa es sucia. No aquí, pero cuando voy, vamos a reuniones con la escuela y ellas comentan que es que los estudiantes dicen que las casas a veces no hacen limpieza. Yo le digo, Vea. En todo “Olas” todas las casas son limpias, pero ellos llegan y son cinco segundos y no hay nada limpio.

Carolina also put a label, *chineado*, to what most hosts described as problematic behavior in their stories but without applying a specific label. The behavior generally described is the student expecting the mother to meet unreasonable and/or unspoken needs, or may be when the student does whatever they want without regard for the feelings of others. For example, a student who sleeps in until 11am but then expects to be served breakfast despite the fact that the family ate hours ago and the mother may not be available for preparing a second round of breakfast that late in the day. I might label this behavior as spoiled, entitled, or inconsiderate. Or in the context of Chapter II, one could argue that there are students who believe that since they are paying the host mother, they can demand the service they want. There is an agreement regarding how much students pay and what they receive, such as a bed of their own, breakfast, dinner, conversation during meals, and laundry cleaned. However, nowhere does it state that a host must feed a student whenever the student feels like eating, thus expecting this may be demanding more than is fair. See Appendix B for examples from Emilia of the good, the bad, and the ugly of students' personality, expectations, and attitude. The examples become more extreme when trust is involved and/or the students are mentally unstable in some way.

Students who are *reservados* may make dinner time conversation effortful and unenjoyable. *Reservado* is conceptually opposed to the concept shared earlier of "open" ("abierto"). As hosts use it, *reservado* goes beyond shy or introverted, which is something hosts generally understand, to be distant, cold, closed off, and unwilling to engage.

Mia, a soccer team manager and mother of two boys, finds the first week crucial for students adapting to the culture and makes a large effort to include and accommodate

them for the first week. Then, if they are still not engaging in conversation and communicating, she leaves them be, but this can still negatively affect the family. Mia has taught her children that it is rude to have conversations without including someone who is at the table, so if a student will not engage in conversation, they all just sit there, eating in silence.

Camila explains that she tries to ask questions to prompt conversation, but more reserved students do not always participate or share additional information, nor do they ask reciprocal questions. Camila gave the example of the following exchange:

Camila: Do you have siblings?

Student: Yes.

Camila: How many?

Student: 2

Camila: Do they have names?

Student: Yes.

Mia and Camila explain that despite effort and intention from the side of the host mother, some students will not engage in conversation even while seated for dinner. Also, Mia, along with other mothers such as Elizabeth and Monica, describe how students may eat and then go straight to their room after dinner, close the door, and spend the rest of the night in their room. They did not say this was offensive or problematic, just that they find it odd. The rest of the family will often sit around after dinner, chat, watch TV, or go to a soccer game. In my role as a student being hosted, I was often unsure whether I should join the family in watching TV or sitting on the porch together. Coming from my cultural norms, I did not want to intrude on their time with family, and I am extroverted, entering into family space can be even more difficult for students with only basic Spanish, introverts, or simply may be exhausted after speaking in a foreign language all day.

Better understanding of family and cultural norms may make students more willing to join in the casual family time.

Mia took her request for students to be *abierto*, rather than *reservado*, to a deeper level to include understanding when “things happen” (“*pasan cosas*”) in everyday family life. Mia explained that with extended families, there are more people and greater likelihood that something will happen out of the control of the host mother. An example Mia gave that I also experienced first-hand during one homestay is that a family member may be an alcoholic and come home belligerent waking up the whole household. Emilia gave an example of how hurt and frustrated she was when she abruptly had to take her son to the hospital and the student, knowing this, still complained to the school about Emilia missing a meal. As Mia says, “There are things that one cannot avoid. One cannot control the lives of all of the family... You have to be open because this is the home, it is real life.”<sup>52</sup> She adds that if students are not interested in being open, they should “stay in a hotel, living their normal life there” (“*queda en un hotel, haciendo su vida allí, normal*”).

### **Lack of Trust**

When I asked mothers what they advise student about, everyone mentioned trust and safety. Essentially, students are seen as too trusting - they leave valuables accessible to thieves, whether in the bus, on the beach, in a bar, at their house or with suitors.

Florencia elaborates:

It is not that it is so dangerous here, but one should always take care, because there outsiders who come to do harm. I’m usually advising: Don’t take your

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<sup>52</sup> “Hay cosas que no puede evitar. No puede manejar la vida de toda la familia... Tiene que estar abierto porque es la casa, es la vida real.”

camera. If you do take it, be very careful because you can't trust that everyone is good. I'm always giving them advice.<sup>53</sup>

A tangible example is a pattern I noticed outside the school. Many students rent bicycles from their host family or a local shop. They then ride their bicycle to school and leave their bicycle unlocked or poorly locked in the street outside the school. This is an area that not always guarded and is a public access point to the beach. School staff and hosts recommend that students lock up their bicycles. I counted the bicycles in front of the school on five separate occasions noting whether a bicycle was locked up properly, left completely unlocked, or left unsecured with the lock simply around the frame and the tire, but not actually attached to anything else. Less than half of the bikes were locked properly with 116 bikes counted total over the five days (see Figure 11 and Figure 12). Without any rental contracts in place, it is up to the student and the host to determine how to resolve the situation when a bike is stolen. Under the best of circumstances, the student replaces the bike. Under the worst of circumstances, the student underestimates the value of the bike and the ability of the family to replace it, refuses to fully replace the bike and leaves the home on bad terms.

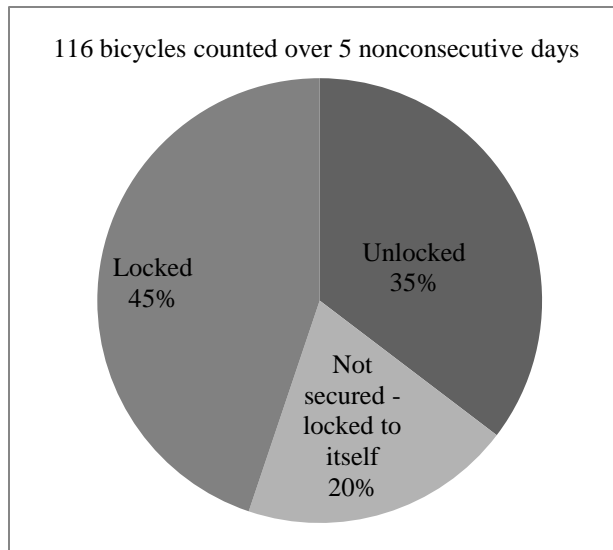


**Figure 11:** Unsecured, unlocked, and locked bicycles

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<sup>53</sup> No es que aquí es tan peligroso, tengan cuidado, siempre. Porque hay otras personas que vienen de otros lugares hacer daño. Normalmente siempre estoy aconsejando. No lleva la camera. Si va a llevar, mucho cuidado. Porque no se confíen en las personas no son bueno. Siempre estoy dando consejo para ellos.





**Figure 12:** Bicycles left outside of the school

This trust, or perhaps reframed as carelessness, can be simply unfortunate or downright ugly depending on how students handle the situation when something has been stolen or presumed stolen. School staff shared how a few times students were quick to blame a host or a maid for theft, not understanding the significant ramifications in a small town for such accusations. A host mother could be removed from the program or a maid fired; gossip about the dismissal could ruin one’s reputation and ability to find new employment. Carolina attested to this fact as she had a student accuse a maid of stealing and it put her in a difficult place trying to determine the facts and who to trust more. Mia recounted a story of one of her students accusing her of stealing clothes. The student was upset and threatening to call the police over what Mia described as ratty clothes no one would steal. Mia told the student to go ahead and call the police, so she did. The whole neighborhood saw the police arrive and eventually student found her “stolen” clothes where she left them – in the bottom of her beach bag. Isidora clearly recalls an older student, about 70 years old, who accused her of stealing his wallet. He became irate yelling and cursing at her. She tried to get him to calm down and look again for his wallet

in his room. Eventually he did and found his wallet in his pants pocket from the day before. These experiences can be scarring for hosts, leaving bad memories that they carry with them for years, and reveal the power that students do possess leaving mothers vulnerable to students' complaints whether they are legitimate or not.

### **Lack of Communication**

Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2002) found communication with students was found to be one of the largest obstacles for host mothers. Lack of communication is absolutely a challenge for host mothers in Olas and more communication could be a solution to many of the other challenges mothers identified. Mothers expressed frustration, embarrassment, and being hurt when students do not talk to them directly about problems but rather to the school. Camila, a single mom who runs a small restaurant, says that students should talk to her first if they have a problem, not just go to school; she can't fix it if she doesn't know it.

Sometimes students fail to tell their families that something is wrong, but tell other students or even directly talk to the host family of a friend from school. Various mothers had examples of other hosts who provide an unacceptably low level of service or comfort, which they knew about because a student told them. For example, one mother expressed compassion and concern for a student's friend who reportedly broke down crying at her house because she did not want to eat another dinner of only rice and beans. No one admitted to me that they were the subject to damaging gossip, but gossip or stories shared by students of what they perceive as poor treatment or circumstances can be passed on throughout the community to damage hosts' reputations. School staff also hear the stories whether directly or indirectly from students and can lead to hosts

receiving fewer students in the future. I witnessed school staff navigating situations of complaints both from students and from mothers. Staff demonstrated concern for complaints, but also kept an open mind talking to the other party involved prior to determining if any action would be taken. In this school, it is very unlikely that there would be negative ramifications for the mother for petty or unfounded claims from a student. Students with complaints may be sent away with a reminder that air conditioning is a luxury that they cannot expect, for example, or in an extreme case the student may be removed from the home. In the latter case, the issue at hand is likely more serious than a simple miscommunication.

### **Social Network Non-conducive for Support**

Competition among mothers for receiving students may make create an environment where the network of *mamá s ticas* is not supportive. The Olas Language School host family manual states that the school is aware of competition between host mothers to have students staying with them and clarifies that placements are not a sign of favoritism, but rather of making good matches between students and families. In homestay programs in Mexico and Spain where only 15-30% of applicant families were being accepted, researchers still found that hosts develop networks and problem solve by discussing students with one another (Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002). In interviews, I included the question “Do you talk to other host moms about hosting?” I did not intend to imply the potentially negative connotation of being a gossip, though that was frequently the inference. I tried a follow-up question with some mothers who I read to be saying ‘no’ as a way to manage their image, “Do you share with other moms about the experience of hosting?” Still, many mothers inferred a negative connotation. For

example, Isidora first replied with a hesitant “yes” and then stated, “Well, the host moms here are terrible, right? I don’t know if [your host mom] told you, but they ask, ‘How many students do you have?’ If I have one, I reply “three.”<sup>54</sup> Isidora further explained that she does not like to hear moms complain, “I don’t have any and she does!” Thus, she playfully undermines the question with false responses.

Most of the mothers replied that they do not talk with other moms about hosting. Seven replied that they only speak with a family member who also hosts or about a specific topic such as recipe sharing. Monica and Paula represent the extremes in responses. The potential for competition of receiving students and for gossip spreading, may lead some women to attempt to be particularly private about their experiences hosting. Monica said that she does not like talking about hosting with other moms, “...I don’t like it because they may copy me, my way! Haha! I am unique! I don’t know how others are. I don’t even talk with my sister.”<sup>55</sup> Monica’s sister also hosts and is the one who recommended that Monica start hosting. They are neighbors with just their mother’s house in between them. The family often gathers on their mother’s porch, talking and watching the world pass by with Monica’s dog alerting them to any strangers approaching. Monica adds in a light-hearted but honest tone, “Even my sister doesn’t know what I do! Haha. Sure we talk about the basics, but not here in the home. We have different ways.”

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<sup>54</sup> Isidora: Pues aquí las mamás son terribles, ¿verdad? Sara: ¿En qué manera?

I: No sé si [tu mamá] le comentado, pero es como, “¿Cuántos estudiantes tienen?” Yo, si tengo uno, le digo tres.

<sup>55</sup> Sara: ¿Habla con otras mamás acerca de alojamiento?

M: No mucho, no mucho. No me gusta hablar de yo soy con otras personas. Yo escucho a otros, pero no conmigo. yo – no me gusta porque pues copia a mí, mi forma. Jajaja. Yo soy única! Jejeje. No sé las otras como son. Porque ni con mi hermana. Mi hermana no sabe cómo soy yo! Jaja Si hablamos lo básico pero aquí en la casa no. Son formas diferentes.

Monica shared a story of overhearing a host mother talking on her cell phone on the bus complaining about her student not being pleased with the food. While Monica does not want to share with others about her hosting experience, she acknowledges that others do. Paula also acknowledges that people talk about their students. She says she doesn't worry about students talking about her, because she is confident in her service. Paula says that everyone always talks about what is going on with their students, e.g. how messy they are, how much they eat, if they are serious and if they won't talk. She sees this as a way to learn lessons from others' experiences.

In sum, challenges can be simply miscommunications, differences in personality or expectations, or the result from students breaking the rules. While, I expected that mothers would rely on each other to learn from and solve challenges and problems, there is a competitive tension that may make women in Olas more likely to try to solve issues on their own. Also, the challenges (and the benefits) can affect not only the mother, but can affect the entire family. However, host mothers and families find ways to ensure that the benefits outweigh the challenges or they likely do not continue with the homestay program.

### **Host Mothers' Views of Students**

*There are all types [of students], just like Ticos. There are good Ticos, there are bad Ticos. There are also good foreigners, really great kids that come here. [pause] And others...* -Marcela, hosting for 13 years<sup>56</sup>

When asked what they have learned about other cultures, host moms often responded that they do not learn much, because students do not share much, except maybe about types of food they eat at home. After a few interviews I thought I identified

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<sup>56</sup> Hay de todo. Como los ticos. Hay ticos buenos, hay ticos malos. Y también extranjeros buenos, chicos muuuy buenos que vienen aquí. [pausa] Hay otros..."

that the translation of the word “learn” as “aprender” invoked a sense of formal, educational learning. So, I followed up the question with “What do you know now about culture, in the US for example, that you did not know before hosting?” This elicited some more responses, though I still needed to engage with follow up questions to attempt to tease out mothers’ understanding of different cultures. Even then, responses were limited. Perhaps this is not an aspect of hosting that they think about frequently. Also, the concept of learning is potentially more rigid in Costa Rica than in the US. The US director of an afterschool program in Playa Olas explained that parents were sometimes hesitant to send their children to the program, which incorporates art, singing, dancing, and sports into their curriculum, because it is perceived as playing instead of learning. There may have also been times when my identity as from the US affected what mothers were willing to share. Nonetheless, through conversation and stories, I did come to understand some impressions held by mothers.

Mothers made different distinctions regarding what differentiates students – age, nationality, gender, and personality types (as discussed above). Florencia enjoys hosting young students. She finds the trouble the teenagers get into entertaining and enjoys being a mother to them. Meanwhile, Sofia prefers students that are more mature, particularly ones who are paying for the trip themselves, rather than their parents. Sofia explains that with young students, around age 18 living off of their parents’ money, she has to worry about them more and take more control. She says it is not their fault; they’re young, on vacation and experimenting with everything. Sofia also prefers the role of friend than that of mother. She has no children of her own and lives alone, though near other family

members. To emphasize the point of younger students requiring more supervision, she shares the following two anecdotes.

One student was so intoxicated that the host mother's brother had to take the student home from the club. The student then proceeded to vomit the whole next day (sound travels unfortunately well at Sofia's). At dinner, Sofia made her something to sooth her stomach, but she stayed in her room refusing to eat. Sofia took the food to her and angrily demanded that she eat. With another student staring on in disbelief, the sick student ate bite-by-bite. Food did indeed help and the next day the student was incredibly thankful. The student's mother in the US sent Sofia a gift to thank her for caring for her daughter.

Another time, Sofia saw one of her students out dancing at a night club with a group that was acting very silly and jumping around. Sofia asked if these were her friends, and she confirmed that they were and are fun to be around. The boys from the group were renting big, heavy, scooters for a trip to a beach a few hours away despite being very thin and inexperienced with scooters. The student wanted to go with them. Sofia recommended that she not go explaining that the gravel is loose and heavy scooters are difficult to operate. The student went anyway, convinced nothing would happen. Not an hour later, Sofia received a call. There had been an accident. As soon as Sofia arrived to the scene the student started crying. Her leg had gotten stuck in the tire during the accident and she fractured her foot. Sofia took her to the hospital, questioned the doctors to ensure the best care possible, and waited with her all night until she was sent away with a cast up to her knee and crutches. The student stayed on in Olas at Sofia's. She took the winding staircase to her room step-by-step with Sofia following behind with her

books – every day for the next two months. (See Figure 13 for Sofia’s beautiful, spiral staircase that is slightly treacherous with two good legs.)

Florencia also elaborated on the how younger students may require more attention; however, it seems that Florencia went the opposite direction than Sofia in that she actively enjoys dealing with teenagers:

For me, they are a lot of fun... I had two girls, under age 18, and I was the mother to care for them y not allow them to go out at night. I told them, “You cannot be out later than 10pm.” And there was one of them that snuck out in the night. Their professor called me and said, “Could you pass the phone to my girl in the group with me?” I said to her, “Yes, I’ll go to her room.” And she was not there. She had snuck out. I don’t know, the girls have the house keys. Ah, but it is funny, right? Alright then, what am I going to do? And in the next moment they returned, I found them. But it is very fun with adolescents.<sup>57</sup>



**Figure 113:** Sofia's staircase to student rooms

Sofia and Florenica demonstrate that it is a matter of perspective whether the antics of teenagers are frustrating or entertaining. Sofia has does not have any children of her own, though she cared for her young niece as if she were her own daughter for various years, but nonetheless, Sofia has never had teenagers of her own in the house. Florencia on the other hand has raised four children to adulthood and misses them.

Monica explained that learning about the culture of the students happens infrequently, because it is not very important to either party - her or the students. As if on

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<sup>57</sup> Ellos son muy divertidos para mí... Tuve unas chicas que ellas eran menores de edad. Y yo era la mamá de cuidarlos y no salir por la noche. Yo, “Ustedes no pueden salir más tarde de la diez.” Y había una de ellas que me estaba escapando en la noche. Me llama su profesora y dice, “¿Usted puede pasar el teléfono a mi niña que anda con nosotros en el grupo?” Yo le digo “Sí, voy a la habitación” y no está. Se me había escapado. Como yo no sé, porque las llaves las tienen ellos. Ah, pero es algo divertido, ¿verdad? Ahora sí, ¿qué voy a hacer? Y en el momentito vinieron de regreso, la encontraron. Pero es muy divertido con las adolescentes.



cue, Monica's 19 year-old son came home for lunch and joined in the interview for a few minutes. He added that hosting students "also allows them to get to know other cultures." In response to asking what he has learned, he replied, "First, the languages. That is the most interesting. English, German... Many people talk about the difference in the foods, comparing the food here to the food there. So, yes, this company is positive for the family." This son is also hoping that a connection to an older couple from California who stayed with them will pan out for him to be able to live with them and attend school in the US. While his mother did not find cultural learning about the US particularly necessary for her, it will likely prove useful for her son if he does leave to study in the US.

### **Independence**

Three mothers, Camila, Paula, and Valentina described the cultural differences in the independence of the students that visit. They described how in the US and other countries, children move out of their parents' home at age 18, work, and live with a friend or a partner. Camila and Paula used the term "glued" ("pegado") to describe the relationship between Tico children and parents. Tico children are closer to their family perhaps and often live at home until they get married. Multiple generations may live together, or immediately next door to each other, particularly common if a daughter has a child without being married. Valentina described Tico parents as inserting themselves ("meterse") in the lives of their children more. She went on to say that foreign students are more liberal. Paula's response echoed that of Valentina describing students as more liberal, adding that they are more open to talking about the government and politics. It

was not clear whether this independence and openness to talk politics related in any way to maturity.

### **Issues of Health**

How students relate to illness and medicine is a cultural difference first mentioned by Natalia. She finds it uncomfortable when students are ill because they do not want to take any medicine unless prescribed by a medical professional, so she is left only able to serve them tea, even if she knows what they need. Gabriela affirmed this impression as she explained that she was trained as a pharmacist. When a student is sick she shows them her medical card demonstrating that she is licensed and then students will take the medicine she suggests.

Sixteen of the 30 mothers indicated that they eat healthier now that they host. They eat more vegetables and fruit, as well as greater variety of food. This is generally perceived as the preference of students, though several mothers noted that their family is also happier with this variety of food. Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2002) found that determining what food to prepare was a main challenge for host mothers in their study. This was not a main complaint of hosts that I interviewed, with only two mothers saying they dislike determining what food to prepare, another four mothers reported not caring one way or another about the decision process, while the rest reported enjoying food decisions. I did not prompt mothers specifically to talk about cooking for vegetarians, only two brought up the topic saying that it can be difficult to make a vegetarian meal for just one person while everyone else eats meat.

## **Studious *Fiesteros***

This sectioned open with a quote from Marcela trailing off about how there are all types, good students and others... Marcela's grandson chimed in to finish her thought, "...who do a lot of partying." He said that students go out to clubs a lot. Victoria, a single mother who also runs a grade school, is amazed by how much energy students have. She says they all go out and come home late (though are careful to not wake her kids). Then they get up and go to school in morning regardless of the party the night before. Victoria acknowledges that they are young people in vacation mode, so it makes sense to her that they want to go out at night. Camila admires how dedicated students are to their studies, noting that they read more than Ticos.

Twenty years ago work in Playa Olas was predominately fishing and farming based. Since the paving of the road to the nearest city, the commute dropped from three hours on a crowded, bumpy, dusty bus to one hour with typically sufficient seating and one's clothes stay clean (no dust). In 2001 when the school's director was scouting a location for a coastal extension of her school, she specifically chose Olas because the town was run by locals with few tourists and the surf was safe for novice surfers and swimmers. There were just a few small hotels and restaurants when the school began. Now two other schools for foreigners have been established, as well as numerous hotels, hostels, restaurants, bars, and clubs. As the town history is told, what was once the humble beach front home of the town's founder is now a popular club run by the founder's son with loud music until 1 AM. Every night of the week, there is a party somewhere; and every night students can be found frequenting those parties. There is no

doubt that international students are seen as partiers (“fiesteros”), though some assume that students act differently at home in their normal life.

### **Cultural Stereotypes Are Mixed**

The rest of the descriptions of students and students’ cultures were not homogenous. Daniela told me, “There are some who are very messy and some are tidy. Haha. The same as with Ticos.” Marcela said that her own son is messy too; students are no different. Carolina described Germans as messy. Meanwhile Isidora described Swiss and Europeans in general as “very organized” (“super ordenados”), while North Americans are messy. Isidora happen to have one German and one Canadian staying with her in that moment. See photos in Figure 14. Can you guess which room is which? Well, the rooms demonstrated evidence for accuracy of Isidora’s stereotypes - room one is the German’s room and room two is the Canadian’s room, complete with bread left out on the bed.

Magdalena described Germans as the best students, being nicer and more disciplined. Josephina described Swiss students and male students as less *delicada*. Camila described Swiss students as the most open and engaging. A Swiss student who was staying with Camila at the time suggested that it is not a nationality difference, but a



**Figure 14:** Room 1



Room 2

situational one. He explained that less adventurous Swiss people who want to travel stay in Europe. It is the more open and adventurous Swiss that venture to Costa Rica. Another situational factor for the Germans staying with Carolina is that they arrange to come through a gap year program that has done all the logistical arrangements and the students simply pick Costa Rica from a list of options with Costa Rica described as a coastal paradise with the opportunity to save sea turtles. Given the variance in mothers' descriptions and the other factors to consider such as maturity, I cannot make any claims regarding specific cultural stereotypes commonly held by mothers toward students, though generally students are seen as studious party people who are healthy and independent.

### **Conclusion**

Hosting international students is an act of mothering. Just as with motherhood with one's own children, there are benefits and challenges. Benefits of hosting include the flexibility of the work and the mental health benefits of having company and staying active. Experienced host mothers are able to easily navigate situational challenges, but certain personality, expectation, or attitude conflicts can be troublesome, particularly when trust is violated or communication is lacking. Host mothers see students as independent, healthy, and studious *fiesteros*, but did not hold ubiquitous cultural stereotypes. These women host because they enjoy it. They enjoy being mothers and continuing to mother of international students having a network of children around the world.

### Post Script: Alejandra's Story

Fifteen years ago Alejandra was working in a restaurant while her mother cared for her son. Her son called his grandmother *mamá* rather than his mother because Alejandra was gone so much. Alejandra describes her old self as being “very timid” (“muy tímida”), wearing baggy clothes to hide her body, and was afraid to share her opinions at the school or other activities. She said, “Before I was afraid to say ‘bingo.’ Now, no. BINGO! I smile a lot. I dance. I go out to eat. Before I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t eat in front of people... Now no, why? Because I am the same as others.”<sup>58</sup>

I asked her what changed. She explained that several things have changed. First she did not talk a lot before, she felt that she did not know how to “talk very well” (“hablar muy correctamente”) or “say words correctly” (“decir palabras bien dichas”). She was only able to attend primary school through third grade. However, now with her son having finished high school and going to university, little by little she learned from him and now she can correct students, she says, “I now feel like a woman more – more important. I have my house, my business, and people know me.”<sup>59</sup>

In reflecting on her past, Alejandra shares with a hint disappointment in her voice, “When I had my son, I was 16 years old. I would go out dancing and everything. I don’t know. I didn’t feel very responsible.” She goes continues, though her tone changes to a confident pride, “But, after having my house, my second child, I felt more responsible.

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<sup>58</sup> “Me daba miedo decir bingo. Ahora no. BINGO! Yo me sonrió mucho. Bailo. Voy a comer. Antes no.... No comer ante la gente... Ahora no. Porque? Soy igual de otros.”

<sup>59</sup> “Siento ahora como una mujer más - más importante. Tengo mi casa, mi negocio, y mucha gente me conoce.”

And with students I feel much more responsible/in charge...<sup>60</sup> The original term used “responsable” can be translated as responsible or in charge. Given her tone, I suspect she means both, particularly as her responsibilities now extend beyond her private home.

Alejandra shared about a particular student, Claire, whose questions and conversations prompted Alejandra to start her own business. Alejandra had hosted Claire, but when Claire was returning to visit again, Alejandra did not have enough space to host her. Claire asked, “Why don’t you rent out this house [across the driveway] and take in students?”<sup>61</sup> Alejandra continued:

“[Claire] is very kind to me, and I said, “Why not.” And I did it and it has been a lot better. Afterward, she says to me, “Why don’t you do something with this property [next door]?” Why not. She has given me ideas.”<sup>62</sup>

Alejandra explains that for the last two years she had been thinking about renting bicycles and Claire drew her attention to the possibility of doing that next to her property.

Alejandra opened her own bicycle rental store and repair shop at which she employs her husband and nephew.

I lived with Alejandra for six weeks in her additional rental house between her house and the bicycle shop. It was clear that she is the boss and because it is next to her house, she is able to also manage her home at the same time. For example, she can do laundry when there are no shop visitors, but keep an eye on the shop walking over if someone appears. She says, “I am the manager of my home. I am the manager of the shop. I have to be responsible for all of it.” Similar to the sentiment she previously

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<sup>60</sup> “De que cuando tuvo el pequeño, 16 años yo tuvo. Después [fue] bailando, todo. No sé. no sentía como muy responsable. Pero después de tener mi casa, mi segunda hija, me siento más responsable. Y con estudiantes más responsable me siento.”

<sup>61</sup> Alejandra quoting Claire: “¿Porque usted no renta esa casa y mete estudiantes?”

<sup>62</sup> Ella es muy amable conmigo. Y yo digo, “porque no.” Y lo hice y es mucho mejor. Y después, me dice, “¿Porque usted no hace algo en este local?” Porque no. Ella me dio ideas.

expressed with “responsable,” the term “pendiente” means “in charge of” or “responsible for.” This is reminiscent of the *Soyla* discussion from Chapter II, as Alejandra is in charge of it all and does it all, with some smaller house and bike shop tasks delegated from her to her children and family members, which allows her much deserved moments of rest in her hammock while watching over the shop and house.

Alejandra explains how the changes to her self-esteem also started to manifest:

I began to go out more. I had been reserved for so many years. I began to dress better, a little of the shyness went away. I began to receive students, and now – more money. I began to buy my clothes. While they had been a lower quality, I do not have a lot of money, I can’t buy really expensive clothes, but now when I am in the house I am like this.<sup>63</sup>

Alejandra motions to her clothes. She is in a tube top with a tank top over, a common style appropriate for the heat. She is able to buy new clothing in which she feels confident and comfortable.

Alejandra also describes that she and her family eat healthier now. She used to prepare a lot of the same fried foods. However, with students, she learned about eating healthier and her children saw the students eating vegetables. Now the whole family eats a lot more vegetables, salads, and fresh fruit. “It is something I learned from [the students] and they eat very healthy.”<sup>64</sup> In addition to eating healthier, her son has also learned English and developed an interest in teaching Spanish. He helps students with their homework, interprets when communication fails between the student and Alejandra,

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<sup>63</sup> Yo empecé a salir más. Yo he estado muy cerrada por muchos años. Empecé vestir mejor, fue un poco de la timidez. Ya recibe estudiantes, ya – mejor dinero. Empecé comprar mi ropa. Y era un poco más pinche, no tengo mucho dinero no puedo comprar esta ropa tan cara pero ahora cuando estoy en la casa estoy como así.

<sup>64</sup> “Es un aprende de ellos y ellos comen muy bien.”



spends social time going out with students, and is now studying at a university to become a Spanish instructor.

Alejandra helped build her home with her own two hands through a community project and left work at the restaurant. She has spent the last 10 years hosting students in her home. Students ask her for advice, ask for help with their homework, complement her cooking, and discuss the future with her. She navigates cultural differences, enforces rules of her home, and navigates her role as a host mother with ease. She was able to be in the home to raise her second child, rather than her mother, and has a very close relationship with this daughter. While hosting may not be the sole cause for her increased self-esteem, it absolutely contributed both directly and indirectly to positive long-term changes in her life. As she says, “I am a different person. I am not the same.” (“Soy otra persona. No soy la misma.”) I recall Alejandra describing her once shy self, afraid to speak in public as I sat with her playing Bingo at the local community center and church. I noticed Alejandra supervising the Bingo cards of everyone at the table, including her daughter, mother, and me. She watched my card and when I hesitated for a moment after a call, on my behalf, she boldly yelled out “BINGO!”

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

Women in Playa Olas, Costa Rica, first turned to hosting as a means to earn income. Hosting is paid care work that women find desirable and beneficial, particularly compared to other work options. Women find joy in being surrogate mothers to international students. They benefit from the flexible nature of hosting and find overall mental and physical health benefits associated with gaining confidence, having purpose, staying active, and being connected with students around the world. *Mamás ticas* handle uncomfortable situations with ease and it is only through their stories that they elucidate the challenges of hosting, including the high cost of living and students being delicate, messy, spoiled, and reserved. Lack of trust or communication can make situations go from harmless to bad to worse. Students may not directly teach hosts much about their culture, but moms do pick up on differences, such as food preferences, greater independence (though perhaps no more maturity), and that students at the Olas Language School both party and study a lot.

Through an International Studies perspective, I explored the subject of homestays drawing various relevant disciplines, I watched for power dynamics and prioritized the voice of hosts which is usually silent, and I bridged theory with the practice of international educators. I conclude here with recommendations homestay administrators and international educators from sending institutions, as well as implications for future research. The following recommendations are taken from what women expressed worked well in Olas, as well as their suggestions for improvements. Also taken into consideration are interviews with school staff and my research into homestays and related literature.

## **Recommendations Regarding Homestay Program Administration**

First and foremost, administrators should strive to fair, and perceived as such by hosts. Fairness and equity presents most clearly in the wage women receive, how disputes are resolved, and how students are allocated. Secondly, programs have a lot of potential for providing training, supporting the development of host mothers, and encouraging a strong social network of hosts.

Regarding a fair wage, programs should be transparent with students about exactly how much host mothers are paid. (This is also true of any program acting as a fiscal intermediary between locals and students/volunteers/tourists.) If programs need to assess administrative fees for the operating expenses, those could be assessed separately so it is clear what hosts receive. I suggest that 90% or more of the fee assessed by the program for homestays go directly to the hosts.<sup>65</sup> When students pay higher rates than what mothers make, it can lead to students having higher and unrealistic expectations of the food or accommodations, which is then a challenge for mothers to manage.

To consider what is a fair wage is for hosts, I encourage programs to engage in an honest and open discussion with hosts about whether the income is enough to cover expenses. I suggest that a fair wage is one that covers the cost of providing food and accommodations to the students' tastes and leaves some left over for helping with additional household expenses or if saved for a specific purpose (e.g. paying off a loan, constructing a new room of the house, or a child's education) could indeed help the family's living conditions improve over time.

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<sup>65</sup> From my work with United Way, a US based non-profit that fundraises and then allocates funds to other non-profits, 90% or more was the widely accepted target for the portion of donations actually given to the other non-profits. I think this structure is similar to and appropriate for homestay programs.

Homestay program administrators are often the middle party navigating difficulties between and among students and hosts, so they must be able to balance what they hear from both sides and make fair decisions. Listening to all the sides of the story and encouraging direct communication, prior to taking any action is highly recommended. Hosts need to be able to trust that they can come to the program staff with a problem and the staff will treat them fairly, as well as be treated fairly if a student brings a complaint directly to the school.

The allocation of students to hosts is a complicated and difficult task. This is made complex by the competing factors for allocation, which may include length the host had been in the program (valuing either longevity or wanting to share the opportunity with new participants), economic need, skill and aptitude for hosting, proximity of the home to the school, family dynamics, students' special requests, quality of the accommodations, history of conflicts, and any other number of factors. Exactly which are prioritized is less important than the transparency of the priorities and communication with host mothers. I recommend that programs gathering input directly from hosts regarding allocating students, assess factors that make for quality matches of students and families, try to come to a fair decision, share the decision with the hosts, welcome feedback, and be open to making adjustments. Establishing and communicating allocation of students is essential to establishing trust with hosts and to encouraging collaboration rather than competition among mothers.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> In my first interview I asked the host if she would recommend hosting to a friend. She replied no because she does not if it would be a good fit for them and more hosts means more competition over students. The school director suggested I change this question to ask if the mother would continue hosting if she won the lottery, which I believe more clearly addressed the topic in which I was interested.

Programs have a great opportunity to enhance the experience for mothers and students by providing orientation and training to hosts in the beginning stages of hosting, as well as on-going opportunities to exchange ideas and develop. Hosts should be asked directly what they would like learn and programs can organize workshops or meetings to share information and discuss topics. Student interest in volunteering could also be harnessed to address some topics such as hosts learning basic computer skills, how to post pictures on Facebook, or hosts learning basics of foreign languages as well. As hosts also resolve many disputes, between students staying in the home for example, training in conflict resolution could be useful, as well as drawing from the expertise within the group of more seasoned mothers teaching or mentoring younger mothers.

*Mamás ticas* are encouraged to negotiate with students so that hosting meets their needs as well. A focus in further empowerment of hosts could be helpful for those who are hesitant to assert their needs or have students who are unwilling to be flexible. Programs should consider programmatic structure that might contribute to women not feeling empowered to make hosting really work for them, such as students evaluating homestays. Host mothers may feel uncomfortable negotiating with students for fear of repercussion of students complaining and the host no longer receiving students. Power dynamics may shift if weekly check-ins encourage students to reflect on their own actions and focus students' attention on meeting their language or cultural learning goals, while still allowing space to reflect on any difficulties. Also, just as students are encouraged to self-reflect and communicate with the program, mothers could also be prompted to reflect on the experience and consider ways it could be enhanced.

To encourage students following guidelines, expectations for student behavior should be communicated in multiple ways beyond the initial orientation. Programs may benefit from a clear, succinct, multilingual (e.g. Spanish, English, German, and French) sign of the obligations of students to be placed in their room and leave space for individual mothers to write in additional house rules. Mothers only perceived signs as useful if kept brief, provided in students' native language, and placed where students have no choice but to read it.

### **Recommendations Regarding Sending Institutions**

Institutions sending their students to study abroad have the power to affect the local impact of their students in the host country through student screening and training, as well as selecting programs doing good work or encouraging an existing program to improve. I have observed national organizations and universities setting goals for the quantity of students to be sent abroad, but not the quality. Increasing the quantity students, without increasing staffing, can lead to less time spent on areas critical for development of prepared students, such as pre-departure orientation. Pressure to increase numbers of students studying abroad can also lead to lowering expectations of the quality of the students.

International educators play a crucial role in addressing the challenges mothers face, as discussed in Chapter III, regarding students' personality, expectations, and attitudes. Robust pre-departure training and on-going support for reflection throughout the experience can adjust students' expectations and attitudes such as preparing students for spiders and locals being late to meetings. Through training, students can also identify if they may have greater difficulties in certain areas due to their personality and learn

adapting and coping techniques, for example preparing introverts to structure some down time between classes and meals with their family. Recommending orientation, training, and on-going support to students is not new information for international educators. However, these recommendations come directly from the lived experiences and suggestions from host mothers who open their home to our students. See Appendix B for lived examples of the good, the bad, and the ugly of students' personalities, expectations, and attitudes.

In addition, as programming decisions are made, power inequality should be considered. Programs have the ability to shift the inequality typically present in sending relatively wealthy students to be cared for by women in the third world. Here are some questions for educators to ask themselves and the administrators of the programs:

Exactly what amount are hosts paid? Is this a fair rate locally? Are your fees charged separately?

What preparation, training, and support do hosts receive?

Are students screened? How?

For example: Are some students redirected out of the homestay program (or specifically trained) if they are really looking for hotel service?

What preparation, training, and support do students receive?

Are students prompted to reflect on their own actions and responsibilities?

Whose input is valued assessing the quality of a program? (e.g. students, hosts, instructors, administrators)

If students are only being asked to evaluate their study abroad experience in terms of academics, extracurricular activities, and homestays, then an opportunity is missed to shift students' thinking beyond being consumers. Sending institutions have the power and ability to adapt training to students' needs, increase transparency in program costs,

and through program evaluation highlight the responsibility of the student in creating a positive experience. These shifts can help rectify the power imbalance by placing responsibility for creating a reciprocal exchange on the institution, program, and students. Starting with simply asking questions, international educators and administrators can play a role in improving the experience for students and local hosts, which in a larger context improve relations between individuals, communities, and nations. Often academic research and theory is held separate from the practice of administering programs; however, the two can inform each other and I hope this thesis is a tool for bridging the two in this narrow context of homestay programs.

### **Implications for Future Research**

I propose a specific area for future research based on women's recommendation that students be open. The concept expressed by mothers seems to be "Openness," one of the "Big Five" personality dimensions (the other four being Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism). The Big Five personality dimensions and related questionnaires are widely accepted and used in the field of personality psychology (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Openness is:

Conceptual definition: Describes the breadth, depth, originality, and complexity of an individual's *mental and experiential life*.

Behavioral examples include: Take the time to learn something simply for the joy of learning; Watch documentaries or educational TV; Come up with novel set-ups for my living space; Look for stimulating activities that break up my routine.

Examples of external criteria predicted: *High pole*: Years of education completed; better performance on creativity tests; success in artistic jobs; create distinctive-looking work and home environments. *Low pole*: Conservative attitudes and political party preferences.

(John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008, p. 120)



The hypothesis I draw directly from host mother's comments is that individuals who are high on openness are more likely to thrive in a study abroad experience, from the perspective of the host. As such, students low on openness could be identified to provide extra training, support, or redirect them from staying with a host family specifically as they may do better living in an apartment with other foreign students. See Appendix C for sample items and references related to Big Five Personality Assessments. This is an area that would benefit from exploration by both study abroad programs and researchers.

Another area for further research is the replication and expansion of this research with hosts. I find the impetus for this line of research to be particularly timely in the context of the current Institute for International Education "Generation Study Abroad" campaign aimed at double the total number of US students abroad within the next five years. There remains very little empirical understanding of the views and experiences of host communities, generally, or of host mothers, specifically. One way to address this gap is by reaching out to homestay program administrators to share their own internal assessments in order to find commonalities and widely share knowledge that typically is held by the practitioners coordinating their programs.

Additionally, the research gap can be addressed by going directly to the host families and communities, in other locations beyond Olas. As discussed, the *pura vida* attitude may have influenced women's responses. Conducting similar research in an area that is not a small, relaxed beach town is important for establishing commonality in the hosting experience. Research may start with current host mothers and be enriched by expanding to relevant family, friends, neighbors, and former hosts. At a time of study abroad expansion, particularly within Latin America, research that includes the voices of

hosts is critical. This research can support international educators in ensuring that study abroad is a reciprocal relationship that increases mutual understanding and benefits between the people of the United States and the people of other countries.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR HOST MOTHERS

Note: Spanish is in black text, English translation in red text. I used two translators recommended to me by the Olas Language School. One translated from English to Spanish, the second translated the Spanish back into English. Questions marked out were excluded from the interviews due to feedback received after the first interview. Locally, host mothers were referred to as “Mamás Ticas” – Tico/Tica is a term use for Costa Rican.

- 1. ¿De dónde es Usted? 1b. ¿Su madre? 1c. ¿Su padre?  
Where are you from? Your mother? Your father?
- 2. ~~¿Hay alguien en su familia que tenga rasgos culturales indígenas?~~  
~~Is there anyone in your family with indigenous heritage?~~
- 3. ¿Cuántos años tiene usted? How old are you?
- 4. ¿Cuál es su grado académico? What is your academic degree?
- 5. ¿Cuál es su estado civil? What is your civil status?
- 6. ¿De qué otros recursos su hogar recibe ingresos?  
From what other resources does your household receive income?
- 7. ~~¿Aproximadamente cuál es el ingreso mensual?~~ Approximately what is the monthly income?
- 8. ~~¿Cuánto dinero le queda aproximadamente, después de comprar la comida y suministros?~~ Approximately how much money do you have left after buying food and supplies?
- 9. ¿Usted ha contratado alguna empleada doméstica? Si sí, ¿de dónde es o son?  
Have you ever hired a maid/domestic help? If yes, where is she or they from?
- 10. ¿A parte de los estudiantes, quién vive en su casa? Apart from students, who else lives in your home?

Relación	Sexo	Edad	Ocupación; Si estudiante, ¿cuál grado académico?	Notas
Relation	Sex	Age	Occupation; If student, what academic level?	Notes
_____	M / F	_____	_____	_____
_____	M / F	_____	_____	_____
_____	M / F	_____	_____	_____
_____	M / F	_____	_____	_____
_____	M / F	_____	_____	_____

- 11. ¿Usted tiene hijos que viven fuera de la casa? Do you have any children living away from home?

Sexo    Edad    ¿Dónde vive?    Ocupación    Si estudiante, ¿cuál grado académico?    Notas

Sex    Age    Where do they live?    Occupation; If student, what academic level?

Notes

M / F \_\_\_\_\_

M / F \_\_\_\_\_

M / F \_\_\_\_\_

Si alguien vive fuera del país, pregunta: En el último año, ¿alguna persona de este hogar recibió o envió remesas de o a otro país? **If someone lives abroad, ask: In the last year, did anyone in this household receive or sent money from or to another country?**

12. ~~¿El padre de sus hijos vive con Usted? Si No Otro:~~

~~Does the father of her children live with you? Yes No Other:~~

13. ¿Cuándo empezó a dar hospedaje a estudiantes? **When did you start hosting/lodging students?**

14. ¿Usted hospeda solamente estudiantes o también voluntarios? **Do you host students only or also volunteers?**

15. ¿Alguna vez ha hospedado a algún no asociado con la escuela? **Have you ever hosted anyone not associated with the school?**

16. ¿Cuántos estudiantes puede recibir al mismo tiempo? **How many students can you receive at the same time?**

17. ¿Cuántos estudiantes recibe regularmente? **How many students do you receive regularly?**

18. ¿Cuánto ha sido el tiempo más corto que un estudiante se ha hospedado en su casa? **What's the least amount of time a student has stayed in your home?**

19. ¿Y la estadía más larga? **And the longest stay?**

20. ¿Por cuánto tiempo se quedan regularmente los estudiantes con usted? **For how long do students regularly stay with you?**

21. ¿Cuántos estudiantes ha hospedado aproximadamente? **Approximately how many students have you hosted?**

22. ¿Tiene algún estudiante en este momento? **Do you have a student at the moment?**

b. Si la respuesta es negativa, ¿Cuándo fue la última vez que recibió un estudiante? **If the answer is no, when was the last time you received a student?**

23. ¿Aproximadamente, cuantas semanas o meses al año recibe huéspedes?

**Approximately, how many weeks or months a year do you receive guests?**

24. ¿De qué países vienen comúnmente los estudiantes que ha hospedado?

**From which countries do the students you host usually come from?**

25. ¿Por qué Usted da hospedaje a los estudiantes? **Why do you host students?**

PILE SORT: I had the response options written on index cards and each item in the list below on an index card. Participants sorted the items into the response categories.

A continuación se presentan algunas fichas con aspectos referentes al hospedaje de estudiantes.

Podría usted ordenarlas, de manera que muestre cuales le gustan y cuáles no le gustan.

Además hay fichas en blanco, si desea agregar otro aspecto.

Next, I will present you with some index cards with aspects related to hosting students. Could you arrange them to demonstrate the ones you like and which ones you dislike?

There are also blank cards if you want to add another aspect.

[Response options]

No me gusta del todo I don't like this at all.

No me gusta I don't like this.

Me da igual It doesn't matter either way.

Me gusta I like this.

Me gusta mucho I like this a lot.

[Items sorted]

Aprender sobre otras culturas. Learn about other cultures.

Hacer amigos de todas partes del mundo. Make friends from all over the world.

Practicar otro idioma. Practice another language.

Mostrar su cultura a los estudiantes, Show students your culture.

Tener huéspedes. Have house guests.

Ser una mamá sustituta. Be a substitute/surrogate mother

Dar consejo a estudiantes. Give advice to students.

Recibir ingresos adicionales. Receive additional income.

Comunicarse en español con los estudiantes. Communicate in Spanish with students.

Decidir que comidas cocinar. Decide what meals to cook

Incluir a los estudiantes en mis actividades diarias. Include students in my daily activities.

Dar tutorías a estudiantes help students with homework

Limpiar Clean

Cocinar Cook

Lavar Do laundry

26. Después - ¿Hay algo que le gustaría agregar en las fichas en blanco?

After sorting them: Is there anything you would like to add with the blank cards?

27. ¿Hubo alguna ficha que le resulto difícil de ordenar? Was there any index card that turned out hard to arrange?

b. Si sí, ¿Considera usted que hay alguna ficha que debería estar en las dos categorías, como le gusta y no le gusta? If yes, do you think that there is any index card that should be in two categories, such as like and dislike?

[SECOND PILE SORT]

En estas fichas hay quehaceres cotidianos y aspectos de la vida. Piense en su vida antes de hospedar estudiantes y en su vida ahora que hospeda estudiantes, por favor ordénelas para indicar si ha habido cambio:

On these index cards are daily chores and aspects of life. Think about your life before hosting students and your life now that you host students, please order them to indicate whether there has been a change:

Usted haga este actividad...

Mucho menos, un poco menos, lo mismo/ningun cambio, un poco más, mucho más... por la causa de dar hospedaje a estudiantes.

You do this activity...

Much less, a little less, no change/the same, a little more, a lot more... because of hosting students.

Aprender acerca de diferentes culturas **Learn about other cultures**  
Mi autoestima **My self-esteem**  
Cocinar **Cooking**  
Comer con la familia **Dining with the family**  
Comer mas saludable **eat healthier**  
Comprar cosas que quiero **Buy things I want**  
Control de ingresos **Control of income**  
Crear amistades con otras mamás Ticas **Create friendships with other Tica moms**  
Deseo de viajar **Desire to travel**  
El sentido de ser consejera o maestra **The sense of being a counselor or teacher**  
Sentido de ser empleada domestica **Sense of being a maid**  
Sentido de ser la cabeza del hogar **Sense of being the head of the household**  
El sentido de ser madre **The sense of being a mother**  
Emprender otras actividades o negocios **Undertake other activities or business**  
Habilidad de mis hijos para hablar idiomas extranjeros. **Abillity of my children to speak foreign languages.**  
Habilidad de viajar **Ability to travel**  
Habilidad para hablar idiomas extranjeros **Ability to speak foreign languages**  
Hacer otro trabajo **Do other work**  
Ingresos **Income**  
Lavar ropa **Doing laundry**  
Limpiar la casa **Cleaning the house**

Mejorar mi casa **Improve my home**

Participar en grupos o actividades comunitarias o sociales **Participate in groups or community or social activities**

Socializar con amigos y familiares **Socializing with friends and family**

Tiempo con mis hijos **Time with my kids**

Tiempo que invierto en mi casa **Time I spend in my home**

28. Después - ¿Hay algo que le gustaría agregar en las fichas en blanco? **After sorting them: Is there anything you would like to add to the blank cards?**
29. ¿Puede usted decirme más acerca del porque puso esta ficha ahí? **Could you tell me a little more about why you put this card here?**
30. ¿Hay algo que quiere añadir de como era su vida antes de dar hospedaje, en comparación de su vida en este momento? **Is there anything you would like to add about how your life was before hosting students, compared to your life right now?**
31. Acerca de los otros que viven en su hogar, ¿Qué cambios ha visto en ellos y en sus vidas, desde que inicio hospedando estudiantes? **Regarding the others who live in your home, What changes have you seen in them and in their lives, since you started hosting students?**
32. ¿Si usted ganare la lotería y no necesitare el ingreso de hospedaje, seguiría con el programa? **If you won the lottery and didn't need the income from hosting, would you continue with the program?**

Muy en desacuerdo    No estoy de acuerdo    Indecisa    De acuerdo  
Muy de acuerdo  
**Completely disagree    Disagree    Undecided    Agree**  
**Completely agree**

33. ¿Usted piensa que alojar estudiantes internacionales es una experiencia que cambia la vida?

**Do you think that hosting international students is a life changing experience?**

Muy en desacuerdo    No estoy de acuerdo    Indecisa    De acuerdo  
Muy de acuerdo  
**Completely disagree    Disagree    Undecided    Agree**  
**Completely agree**

34. [Space left for school to add in a question of their own, but they never supplied this, so it was not included.]

35. En el manual, también tiene una lista de cómo puede manejar situaciones incómodas:

**The manual also has a list of how to handle uncomfortable situations:**

- Nuevo novio a escondidas en su habitación (o la intención)
- **New boyfriend sneaking into the room (or trying to sneak in)**

- Come la comida del desayuno durante la noche
  - **Eating food at night that is intended for breakfast**
  - Espera que usted le sirva desayuno a las 10am cuando se levanta
  - **(Student) Expects you to serve him breakfast at 10am when he gets up**
  - Una amiga de la estudiante se quiere mover a su casa.
  - **A friend of the student wants to move into your home**
  - Sale de viaje y trae un montón de ropa sucia
  - **Leaves for a trip and brings back a lot of dirty laundry**
  - Le ha robado dinero
  - **Has stolen money**
  - Tiene preferencias sexuales o religiosas distintas a las suyas
  - **Has sexual preferences or religious beliefs different than yours**
  - Le falta el respeto, por ejemplo: camina descalza por la casa, deja las luces prendidas aún cuando no está en su cuarto, invita a su hija menor a salir
  - **Is disrespectful, for example: walks barefoot in the house, leaves the lights on even when not in his room, invites your younger daughter out at night**
- a. ¿Ha encontrado estas situaciones? **Have you encountered these situations?**
  - ¿Cuáles son las más frecuentes? **What are the most common?**
  - b. ¿Se ha encontrado en alguna situación incómoda diferente a estas? **Have you found yourself in an uncomfortable situation different than these?**
  - c. ¿Ha oído de otra mamá con una situación como así? **Have you heard of another host mother being in a situation like these?**
36. ¿Ud. se siente cómoda al llamar a la escuela con quejas sobre el estudiante o si el estudiante rompió una regla? **Do you feel comfortable calling the school with complaints about the student or if the student broke a rule?**
    - b. Y, ya llamó a la escuela acerca de algún estudiante? **And, have you called the school about any student before?**
  37. ¿Usted tiene un rotulo de las obligaciones para los estudiantes en su casa, o en el cuarto de los estudiantes?  
**Do you have a sign with the rules for the students in your house, or in the student's room?**
  38. ¿Podría decirme algunas cosas que ha aprendido de la cultura de los estudiantes?  
**Could you tell me some things you've learned from the student's culture?**
  - 38b. ¿Qué conoce/sabe ahora acerca de la gente de los Estados Unidos que no sabía antes? **What do you know about people from the United States that you didn't know before?**
  39. ¿Qué le ha sorprendido acerca de diferencias o similitudes entre la cultura de los estudiantes y la cultura tica? **What has surprised you about differences or similarities between the culture of the students and the Costa Rican culture?**
  40. ¿Cómo se invierte el dinero recibido por concepto de hospedaje?  
**How do you invest money received from hosting?**



41. ¿Quién decide cómo gastar el dinero sobrante? *Who decides how to spend the extra money?*
42. ¿Usted habla con otras mamás ticas acerca del alojamiento?  
*Do you talk to other (Costa Rican) host moms about hosting?*
43. ¿Usted permanece en contacto con algunos estudiantes?  
*Do you stay in touch with some students?*
44. ¿Sus hijos u otros miembros de la familia permanecen en contacto con algunos estudiantes?  
*Do your kids or other members of the family remain in contact with some students?*
45. ¿Alguna otra cosa que le gustaría compartir, acerca de alojando estudiantes?  
*Is there anything else you would like to share, about hosting students?*

----Extras si haya tiempo en la entrevista:

*Extra questions if there is time in the interview:-----*

46. ¿Por qué permanece en contacto con algunos estudiantes y no otros?  
*Why do you stay in contact with some students and not others?*
47. ¿Qué recomendaciones tiene usted para otras mamás ticas o nuevas mamás ticas?  
*What recommendations do you have for other host moms or new host moms?*
48. ¿Puede usted dar alguna recomendación a los estudiantes que se quedan con familias?  
*Can you give some advice to students who stay with families?*
49. ¿Puede dar alguna recomendación a los estudiantes para que sean buenos visitantes en Sámara?  
*Can you give any recommendations to students so they can be good visitors in Samara?*
50. ¿Qué le gusta más acerca de hospedaje?  
*What do you like most about hosting?*
51. Tengo la oportunidad para preparar estudiantes antes de vienen aquí. ¿Usted tiene alguna sugerencia para esta preparación?  
*I have the opportunity to prepare students before they come here. Do you have any suggestions for this preparation?*
52. *Toma notas de la casa y ambiente: Take a few notes about the house and environment:*

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLES OF THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY OF STUDENTS’

PERSONALITIES, EXPECTATIONS, AND ATTITUDES

	The Good	The Bad	The Ugly
Personality	Open to new experiences, reflective, curious;	Not interested in being uncomfortable or learning new things	Reactive, aggressive, closed off to new things, highly anxious, depressed
Expectation	Expects bugs, cold water, and to engage in conversation in Spanish	Expects the house to be like their house at home	Expects to be completely physically comfortable and for others to meet their needs
Attitude	Wants to reciprocate kindness of the family	Wants to eat and sleep, but not be friends with hosts	Wants host to wait on their every desire since the student is paying to stay in the home
Example from Emilia’s Experiences*	Student says ‘yes’ to host’s offers to attend family events, befriends host, still sends presents at holidays	Student shows up late for meals, ignores host’s child, asks to have a ‘friend’ over then closes door to room not asking ‘friend’ to leave until hosts requests guest leave at 10pm.	Young, mentally-unstable student picks physical fight with host father; host has to call the police. Parents had hoped a vacation would help his mood.
Impact	Host enjoys their company and is happier with higher self-esteem; student learns about host culture and language; friendship continues for years	Host does not enjoy the experience, but no major damage is done; student misses opportunity to grow; reflects poorly on student and potentially student’s culture	Hosts are demeaned and hurt; negative experience hosts will always remember; cautious hosting in future
Action for Educators	Educators should send these students and elicit their stories to inspire others	Educators should screen for students like these and provide additional training to these students	Educators should screen for these students and NOT send them, they do more harm than good

\*Emilia is 31, married with a child, and has been hosting for five years.

## APPENDIX C

### BIG FIVE AND OPENNESS SAMPLE SURVEY ITEMS

To provide a general sense of the Big 5 as a whole, below is the Ten-Item Personality Inventory-(TIPI) taken directly from Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann Jr (2003, p. 525).

Here are a number of personality traits that may or may not apply to you. Please write a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement. You should rate the extent to which the pair of traits applies to you, even if one characteristic applies more strongly than the other.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>1 = Disagree strongly<br/>                 2 = Disagree moderately<br/>                 3 = Disagree a little<br/>                 4 = Neither agree nor disagree<br/>                 5 = Agree a little<br/>                 6 = Agree moderately<br/>                 7 = Agree strongly</p> | <p>I see myself as:</p> <p>1. ____ Extraverted, enthusiastic.<br/>                 2. ____ Critical, quarrelsome.<br/>                 3. ____ Dependable, self-disciplined.<br/>                 4. ____ Anxious, easily upset.<br/>                 5. ____ Open to new experiences, complex.<br/>                 6. ____ Reserved, quiet.<br/>                 7. ____ Sympathetic, warm.<br/>                 8. ____ Disorganized, careless.<br/>                 9. ____ Calm, emotionally stable.<br/>                 10. ____ Conventional, uncreative.</p> |
|--|---|

TIPI scale scoring (“R” denotes reverse-scored items): Extraversion: 1, 6R; Agreeableness: 2R, 7; Conscientiousness; 3, 8R; Emotional Stability: 4R, 9; **Openness to Experiences: 5, 10R.** [emphasis added]

Directions for the instrument and specifically the items relating to Openness provided below from John, Donahue, & Kentle (1991) and John, Naumann, & Soto (2008).

Here are a number of characteristics that may or may not apply to you. For example, do you agree that you are someone who *likes to spend time with others*? Please write a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which **you agree or disagree with that statement.**

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Disagree Strongly	Disagree a little	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree a little	Agree strongly

#### **I am someone who...**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>_____ Is original, comes up with new ideas<br/>                 _____ Is curious about many different things<br/>                 _____ Is ingenious, a deep thinker<br/>                 _____ Has an active imagination<br/>                 _____ Is inventive<br/>                 _____ Values artistic, aesthetic experiences</p> | <p>_____ Prefers work that is routine<br/>                 [reverse-scored]<br/>                 _____ Likes to reflect, play with ideas<br/>                 _____ Has few artistic interests<br/>                 [reverse-scored]<br/>                 _____ Is sophisticated in art, music, or literature</p> |
|--|---|

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