

It's been said that change is inevitable but growth is optional. I knew making the choice to come to the United States as a young Mexican woman at this particular time wouldn't be easy. But I also knew it would be worth it. I let growth naturally follow change, and immersed myself in the most amazing journey of my life.

I could go on and on about my host boys, Kenji and Akira – the singing, the painting, the games, the hugs ... most importantly the hugs. They say everyone needs four hugs a day for survival, eight for maintenance, and twelve for growth. I feel like we have all grown together.

My life changed when I met my Japanese-American host family. Though eager to share my culture, language and customs, I was unsure how to introduce change without coming on too strong. I soon discovered that being my truest self was the best path. The more I spoke, acted, and reacted naturally, the stronger our bond became. We started organically sharing ourselves with each other and the cultural distance began to shrink. When I saw a handmade Christmas stocking with my name hanging from the mantel I knew that I was part of the family and they were also a part of me.

When Mexico suffered a catastrophic earthquake, I realized I could turn a tragedy into something positive by using my artistic skills – not only as a creative outlet to help me heal, but as a fundraising tool. Through social media and local news stations, I offered an original drawing to each person who contributed to my cause. The \$5,000 raised exceeded my expectations. Not only was I able to help my home country while in America – I was able to teach Akira and Kenji a valuable lesson: When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.

All in all, being an au pair made me even more appreciative of the beautiful culture I come from. My Japanese-American family is now proudly part Mexican as I am proudly part Japanese, partly American and a 100% world citizen. Barriers became bridges, fear became fuel and change helped a dream not only come true, but grow. I can remember an 18-year-old girl with huge dreams but a mind full of fear. Now, I am a 20-year-old woman – more mature, with a lot of love to offer, and completely sure that everything is possible.