'Part of our family'

Rise in O.C. domestic workers becoming more than a luxury

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Summer Phillips' first word was "agua."

Which would've been a big, fat nonevent if, at the time she said it, either of Summer's parents spoke Spanish.

"Drove my husband crazy," says Susan Phillips, mother of Summer, 5, and Serenity, 6, and employer of Josefina, 48, the Spanish-speaking nanny who helps raise the girls in the Phillips' ocean-view, Corona del Mar home.

"He's OK with it now, of course. We love it that they speak Spanish. But at first ... "

As Phillips explains this, she turns and, in so-so Spanish, translates her conversation for Josefina. Like her daughters, Phillips has picked up Josefina's language over the past few years. Josefina, from Mexico, doesn't speak much English.

Josefina, who sleeps five nights a week at the Phillips' home, listens to Phillips and nods. The women share a quick grin. Then Phillips switches back to English.

"She's in my will," Phillips says, nodding toward Josefina.

"We're setting up something for her retirement. I mean, it's a long way out. But ... what happens to her matters to us. Josefina is part of our family.

"I cannot imagine life without her."

Her sentiment is hardly unique.

About 20,000 people in Orange County work full-time as nannies or housekeepers, according to Philip Cohen, an associate professor of sociology at UC Irvine who has tracked local domestic workers. Although nobody knows exact numbers from earlier eras, people who work in the industry believe the current army of workers in Orange County is a huge increase from the early 1980s, when Orange County had relatively few domestic workers for a place of its size and wealth.

The rise of domestics - people willing to scramble other people's eggs, scrub other people's toilets and hug other people's kids for rates starting at about $10 an hour - corresponds with waves of immigration to the county from Mexico and Central and South America. And, on one level, experts say the trend is a simple result of economic growth and our proximity to the border.

But the big driver in the shift is life, not wealth. For many, hiring a domestic isn't about being rich, it's about economic survival.

"That's been biggest change since I've been in this. There are so many people who aren't rich, who are middle class, who work ... who hire ladies," says Rocio Catano, owner of OC Nannies in Newport Beach and a 20-year veteran of matching up workers with employers.

"It's just a new way the world works," Catano adds.

"People need the help. It's not an option."

Still, in a county where egalitarian, middle-class norms once reigned supreme, the rise of hired nannies and housekeepers signals a shift in something deeper than money or immigration.

It's about new ideas of need vs. luxury.

Children, we seem to have collectively decided, need more supervision, more play dates, more adults in their lives. Jobs won't (or can't) be given up so one parent can stay home. Houses and gardens and meals - all must be perfect, not just sort of OK.

People who match up domestic workers with employers (a booming industry) report that in some pockets of Orange County, a competition of sorts has emerged, with wealthy homes hiring more than one worker specializing in everything from cooking to auto detailing.

"The busy people are even busier today than they were 20 years ago, their lives even more hectic. So they need more help," Catano said.

The rise of domestic help also represents a second cultural shift.

Most of the workers (89 percent, according to Cohen) are Spanish-speaking Latinas, women often born in another country who hold strong ties to their native culture. Many are undocumented. The nannies in this story spoke on the condition that their last names not be used because of their immigration status. In an effort to more completely cover the Orange County community, the Register granted their request.

The majority of employers are people who speak English at home and who don't necessarily look to other countries for ideas about everything from food to family life.
People from these worlds don't mix much, even in diverse Orange County.

But when one person agrees to work in another's home, and another seeks help with the most intimate duties of child rearing and housekeeping, there is at least the potential for cultural connection.

"Both sides probably learn something from the other," says Maggie Moe, owner of Oscar's Domestic, a Santa Ana-based agency that matches up domestic workers with employers.

"I have no idea what it might mean in the long run. But there's no relationship that's more powerful than when you bring someone into your home, especially when kids are involved," Moe adds.

"When it works, there's a real meeting of the minds," Moe says.

Twenty years into the county's domestic-hiring spree, there also are thousands of kids like Summer – children raised in English-speaking homes who learn to speak Spanish and who get some level of understanding about another culture.

"I hope the girls have comfort with all kinds of people. That's one of the reasons we're doing this. I mean, there's trust, and a lot of other things that go into this... but that (cultural) awareness, that's part of it. Sure," Phillips says.

"I think the girls will know so much they wouldn't know if we didn't have Josefina," she says.

Not all sides of the trend are so upbeat.

For the workers, the deal is simple. Pay starts at about $10 an hour and sometimes reaches $20. It's better money than most jobs available to non-English speakers, particularly for those who aren't fully documented to work legally in this country. Also, working conditions can be good.

"It's the best thing I can do – to come to this country and work for my kids," says Louisa, a Mexican national who earns about $450 a week working full-time as a nanny for a two-child home in Irvine. "I can't see my own babies," Louisa adds, referring to her three children, ages 9 to 20, who live in Mexico.

"But as long as I'm working, I can send money. That way they can concentrate on school, and not have to go to work like I did."

For the employers, the needs are similarly monetary, if not usually as life changing.

Huge mortgages, career ambition and the escalating cost of day care have combined to turn the $400-a-week, full-time domestic worker into a viable option for many local middle-class families. As a result, hiring out for domestic help has gone from being a perk of wealth to a far more mundane fact of middle-class life.

"Pull the nannies out of L.A., even for a day, and you'd watch the economy collapse," says Anayansi Prado, a filmmaker whose documentary "Maid in America" tracks the stories of three Latinas working in Los Angeles homes.

Substitute "Anaheim Hills" or "Irvine" or "Mission Viejo" for "L.A." in her statement, and it would be just as true.

And as domestics have become more common, the ground rules have evolved to more closely resemble terms of employment in other jobs. Forty-hour weeks and holidays off are supposed to be the norm. Health care and paid vacations are no longer unheard of.

"We get (work terms and conditions) in writing, so everybody understands what the job is and what it isn't," Catano said.

But as more middle-class people hire nannies and housekeepers, other details have become less professional.

Although numbers aren't tracked, anecdotal evidence suggests that only a sliver of people who have turned their homes into places of employment comply with legal requirements to pay Social Security and other payroll taxes. And, despite written agreements, Catano, Moe and others who deal with domestic workers say nannies and others still sometimes complain of bosses that pressure workers for everything from free labor to sex.

"It's important to remember that this is a real job," said Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo, a sociology professor at USC who studied dozens of domestic workers in Los Angeles for her 2001 book, "Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence."

"The problems we see in it are largely due to people's inability to recognize it as a legitimate source of employment ... one that should have the same boundaries and limitations and rights as other jobs."

But working as a domestic, or hiring a person to work in your home, isn't like other jobs.

Guilt can be part of the deal. So can fear, love, exploitation, charity and greed.

And, when small, needy children are mixed into the equation, any number of emotions can and do boil to the surface.

"I do love these kids, and I feel closer to them than other kids I have taken care of, if only because I've
been with them since they were just babies," said Josefina, who works for the Phillips family.

Josefina spent more than 20 years working for another family before accepting a job with the Phillipses five years ago.

Other workers, however, say their relationships with children simply cloud what should be a professional arrangement with their adult employers.

"I like the people I work for. They're nice. But if a better offer came along, I'd leave," Tanya says.

As she says this, Tanya, 54, is pushing a stroller filled with a baby (Chloe, 19 months) and walking a dog (Calvin, a terrier mix) near a park in the Northwood district of Irvine.

It's a few minutes before 9 a.m. and Tanya is about to start the third hour of her workday. When she gets back to the house, where she works and sleeps five nights a week, she'll face a full day of shopping, cleaning, cooking and at least one more dog walk. And, because she cares for Chloe, there will be plenty of diaper changing, chasing, and soothing.

"I feel like I work all the time," Tanya says, while walking. "I think, sometimes, it's not fair. But what can I do?"

She is paid $440 a week. And, in theory, her paid workweek should last only 40 hours. But Tanya says her employers often ask for help at night and on weekends. For example, her workday is supposed to end about 3:30 p.m., when Chloe's mother comes home from her job. Instead, Tanya will help with dinner, ending her day after 6 p.m. Her chances for overtime, she says, are about fifty-fifty.

Tanya, who spent part of her childhood in New York City before moving back to Mexico, says her employers are naive and more than a little strapped for cash, not despotic or cruel.

"I know, when I was a kid, there were families who had workers and stuff. It seems like (those families) knew how to do it. Around here ... I don't know. It seems like it's some kind of new thing."

As she hurries down the sidewalk, Tanya adds: "I don't mean to complain. These guys are really nice. "But ... I feel like I live in this house, but it's not really my home, you know. That's the only thing I guess I don't like. I'm never totally comfortable."

Susan Phillips says being the employer isn't comfortable, either.

She sits at a table near her living room, late afternoon sun and cool ocean air filling the room. She nods her chin toward the corners of the ceiling.

"There and there ... that's where the cameras were," she says, laughing.

"I told Josefina. She knew they were there. She was OK with it. But I just didn't have that... trust. Not for a long time. There was a stranger in my home, helping to watch my children... I couldn't relax," Phillips says.

She laughs again, a joke in there somewhere. A few feet behind her, in the kitchen, Josefina and Serenity play some kind of cooking game. The little girl laughs a few moments after her mother.

"Thing is, it turned out the cameras didn't work," Phillips says, explaining her joke.

"I didn't know that. I think Josefina knew after awhile. But I had these cameras up there, went through all this, to feel more secure, and they didn't even work.

"It's a good thing this has worked out (with Josefina) the way it has. Otherwise I'd be a wreck."