

### **Finding One's Tribe in the Wilderness**

Ranked third on the of stressing life events, moving comes in right after death and divorce. Like the latter, it has a component of loss and disequilibrium. Moving to São Paulo, compounds things for the international family—the loss of literacy and information gathering resources due to the fact that Portuguese is the native language and English is widely spoken; the difference in the social mores, which can be confounding to figure out as Brazil is a high-context society and the United States is not; plus all the environmental factors which come with living in a crowded, urban area such as erratic traffic, areas of blight and lack of green zones.

Some international companies have their own in-house relocation departments. Schlumberger, the company that we were with in the early 1990s did. These individuals were the interface for facilitating the move out, selling the house if the couple so wished, and finding a place to live for the relocating family in the next country. Other companies provide intercultural training before and after arrival. These kinds of services are outsourced here to relocation companies, that vary in quality of service and degree of English spoken. As a consequence, the major breadwinner is THE point person for the move even prior to the family coming over.

While mostly the fathers, there is an increasing amount of woman, who have male tag along spouses. According to Lisa Peixoto, the Director of Admissions, Graded is one of five international schools here in São Paulo and also the biggest. According to the by-laws of the school, Lisa has to maintain a sixty-forty split between the international population and the local Brazilians. The selection process is not as clear-cut however, as many of the student hold multiple passports. Admissions are competitive, with a long waiting list even though the tuition is high. As a private school, we offer only moderate special education services and ESL, which also winnows admissions and decreases the options available for families moving from the United States who have children with differing educational needs. The money demographic for international families has shifted. In the early years, it was high management which were offered overseas positions. Now it is often middle management, which means youngish families who are in the middle class range but are being sponsored by their companies to move overseas. This sponsorship involves a lucrative housing, medical, tuition, travel and cost of living benefits package beyond what they would be getting in their home country.

The school is secular, which two of the other schools are not, which makes a difference. It has an American curriculum, which is not the case for some of the other schools. The population who choose our school over the others, from the Brazilian side, tend to be new money or internationally travelled families who see the benefit of fluency in English for the future of their children. There is a strong international Korean population at the school—around 10 percent, a fairly large Latin American component, and the rest made up of North Americans and Europeans. Having the IB, an American and the Brazilian Diploma option is a draw for all the constituents.

About ten percent of the new international students come from families for whom this is their first time living overseas, the rest is made up of folks who have moved five or six times. This is due to the fact that once on this kind of career path, upward mobility often means a move to another country, with the average stay being two to three years per spot. If the family isn't happy, the employee will not be. Many times, the spouses have given up lucrative careers to come overseas. Due to work and visa laws, these individuals find it extremely difficult to pick up a job here. If the stay is to be a one shot deal, with a return to the States, the spouse will take a leave of absence from the job and consider this a form a sabbatical. However, for those whose stay is longer or they know they will be hopping place to place, there are other considerations.

According to Lisa, the number one question that the point parent has is not about the programming of the school, but about finding a community for the family with which to bond. Lisa spends much of her time serving as a matchmaker in a variety of ways. Finding a safe place to live is of major importance. While not quite the dire spot as the media likes to portray, folks do have to be mindful of safety when selecting a place to live because of the marked disparity in wealth in the city. Car jackings, burglaries and theft are common. Secondly,

finding a commodious and well-appointed spot also is a part of the selection process.. A great deal of people tend to live in apartments, but they are very nice ones, in the city. The houses tend to be very well appointed...and protected, with many staff. In fact, having staff is the norm— from having a *baba*, or nanny for the kids, to a *faxinera* who comes in once or twice a week to clean, to a full-scale live-in maids, cooks, drivers, and body guards.

People select where they are going to live based these items plus three more— the proximity to people of like ilk, distance from the school and distance from the breadwinner's place of work. The Japanese Brazilians tend to live in Liberdade, a section of central São Paulo famous for being the main location of Japanese immigrants to Brazil. The Koreans live in the Portal, a gated community near the school. The rest of the international set tend to live on either side of the Pineros River, which is about 5 kilometres away as this location is close to the place of work for the wage-earning adult but near to school as well. The chic Brazilians live around Alpaville, a series of gated communities about 20 kilometres out with rolling grounds, multi-roomed houses and clean air.

Finding a new rhythm for the students and the breadwinners is easier as there is defined structure already in place. The breadwinner goes off to the company to a job that has known parameters and expectations. The students come to school and start their lives with the routine of class and after school activities. It is the spouses who not only have to get the actuality of the home life started but also do not have a clear cut avenue of making contacts. Lisa sets up point contacts within the school— mothers who welcome to newcomers by showing them around but also in pointing them to various volunteer points within the school and in the PTA. Outside of the school, there are several clubs that provide a social context for these parents: the International Newcomer's Club, The American Club, The Latin American Club and others.

Having a happy family is what makes for a happy employee for the company. Having a happy family is also in the best interest of Graded, who relies on the international population as its main cash source. The school, defacto, becomes the main social focal point for the families and the students. This is a major role difference from the schools in the United States, wherein people have multiple avenues for connection outside the school confines. Being mindful of that is at the top of the list for incoming parents, as well as for the school, in finding the right fit when considering Graded as the school they want to come to.