

Returning 'Home' for College / Neither Refugees Nor Immigrants

Some 'Third-Culture Kids' Uncertain Which World Is Really Theirs

By Stephen Buckley
Washington Post Service

RIO DE JANEIRO — Kristin Finley, 17, is poised. She is frighteningly articulate. And she is bright enough to have won acceptance into the Class of 2004 at Georgetown University in Washington.

Yet, having spent most of her youth outside the United States, she is also deeply insecure about her place in her homeland.

"Will I fit in?" asked Miss Finley, a senior at the American School of Rio de Janeiro. "I'll get put in with all the other Americans, but I know I'll probably hang out with the international students. But I'm not an international student. I have an idea of what it's like to live in the States. English is my first language." With a pause, she added, "I don't know what group I'll be a part of."

For more than a decade, Miss Finley, whose Baptist missionary parents have taken her to such places as Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Britain and Brazil, has lived as what counselors and researchers years ago dubbed a "third-culture kid," and more recently, a "global nomad."

Unlike refugees, they do not leap from country to country under duress — unless you count parental pressure. And unlike immigrants, they never fully assimilate into their new culture. They are children who have grown up overseas, typically because of their parents' work, and who have had to stitch together their own culture from their international experiences.

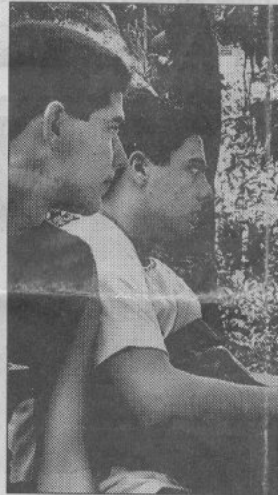
Today, researchers and counselors say, there are more third-culture kids than ever, traveling to more countries than ever. While decades ago most youngsters overseas generally spent most of their time in one or two countries, experts say that today they are more likely to hopscotch as many as a half-dozen before returning to the United States for college. A recent study found that third-culture kids make an average of eight major moves before graduating from high school.

These days, children who grow up abroad increasingly are being considered a community of their own, with experiences that hold both benefits and challenges. They typically speak two or three languages, often adapt well to new situations and usually move from one culture to another with ease. But the challenges are just as sharp, as they sometimes battle anger and a sense of loneliness and isolation into their adult years.

"There's this myth of resiliency," said Norma McCaig, a cross-cultural trainer who coined the term "global nomads." In fact, she added, "The sense of loss is pretty profound. Sometimes these children have real problems feeling connected."

These new insights have brought third-culture kids un-

Kristin Finley, sitting, center, and chatting with Brazilian students at the American School of Rio de Janeiro. Miss Finley, an American who has spent much of her childhood abroad with her Baptist missionary parents, worries about how well she will adjust to life in the United States when she enrolls as an undergraduate at Georgetown University in Washington in a few months.



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usual attention. Relocation firms routinely provide counseling to families on how to raise children abroad, a practice almost unheard of a decade ago. Many universities have started "global nomad" clubs to help students readjust to American life and culture. Third-culture kids also have become the focus of a growing number of books and academic studies aimed at understanding them and their experiences.

Researchers say the rise of the third-culture kid is hardly a uniquely American phenomenon. The United States in general and the Washington region in particular have become home to thousands of such children. "It's Koreans, Dutch, Swedes, Japanese," said David Pollock, co-author of a book titled "The Third Culture Kid Experience."

"The experience of being a third-culture kid is much more common today," he said.

MR. POLLOCK, director of a missionary preparatory program at Houghton College in western New York, and other experts say that even with the Internet and the pervasive reach of American culture, the stressful nature of the many, and sometimes sudden, moves has meant that these youngsters

still confront the questions that have always gnawed at such children: Who am I? Where is home?

"When people ask me where I'm from, I tell them I was born in Pennsylvania," said Miss Finley, who has embraced Brazil as home since her family moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1995. Yet even that sense of security has frayed as she accepts that "it's possible that I'll never come back here again."

Miss Finley, who speaks three languages, often takes two or three showers a day, as Brazilians do, and sometimes speaks a humorous blend of English and Portuguese. Emily Frost, the 13-year-old daughter of the consul general at the U.S. Embassy in Brasilia, has friends from South Africa, Israel, Nigeria, South Korea, England and Brazil. And Gustavo Agostini, a Rio de Janeiro native who spent seven years in Miami, loves the Florida Panthers of the National Hockey League as much as any Brazilian soccer club.

"You take a little bit from everywhere you go," said Almir de Paula Tavares, 18, a Rio native who has lived in Australia and Indonesia and who last month graduated from the Washington International School. "Then you end up with something that's basically your own culture."

No one knows precisely how many Americans grow up

overseas because the U.S. Census Bureau does not attempt to count citizens living abroad. But the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs estimates that 3.8 million U.S. citizens — not including government workers or their families — made their homes out of the country last year, compared with 2.2 million a decade ago and 1.5 million in 1980. About 925,000 American diplomats, military service members and other government workers and their families live abroad. Brazil, with about 40,500 American expatriates in residence, ranks second only to Mexico, which has just over one million.

HISTORICALLY, the majority of Americans living abroad were diplomats, military service members and missionaries. Today, however, the rise of multinational corporations and international nongovernmental organizations has drawn hundreds of thousands overseas. And with lightning-quick corporate mergers and political crises, organizations often are compelled to move staff members from country to country with little notice.

Counselors and parents recognize that children, especially teenagers, often experience profound stress with such constant movement. Miss Finley said that when her family moved to Kyrgyzstan, "I said, I'm not going to make friends because I'll just have to say good-bye again. I'd already sold everything I own — twice."

E-mail, MTV and better phone links all over the world have eased the sense of isolation from friends, but "it's not the same as talking to them," said Paul Heerwagen, whose father's work with an American company that manufactures oil-pumping systems has taken him to Venezuela twice and now to Rio de Janeiro. "There's a certain connection you have when you hear someone's voice."

Perhaps no experience is as difficult, however, as coming home. It is not unusual, researchers and counselors say, for youngsters to fight loneliness, anger, anxiety and a general sense of not belonging that can last into adult years.

Mr. Agostini, 17, said that when he returned to Brazil last year after seven years in Miami, "I felt goofy. I was out of place." Peers mocked his rusty Portuguese. They did not understand his obsession with ice hockey. He struggled to make friends.

American children grapple with similar issues when they return to the United States. Sometimes, Miss Finley said, when she tells people she lives overseas, "they just don't want to talk to me after that," perhaps thinking her experience is too alien for them.

She said that while she was eager to attend Georgetown she dreaded the thought of moving again. The other day, she said, "I realized that I have exactly three months before I leave Brazil, and I was, like, 'Oh no.'"