

**FAMILY & TECH: JULIE JARGON**

# When College Kids Struggle, Facebook Moms Come to the Rescue

Parents anxious to help their injured or homesick kids at faraway schools turn to moms they have met online; ‘No, she’s not coming home’

*By Julie Jargon*

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When Sofi Pelaez called her mom in tears to say that she was all alone on her college campus on weekends and in need of a hug, her mom’s first instinct was to bring her home. Sofi’s stepfather—who has two adult children from a previous marriage and already had gone through this himself—said no.

“I said, ‘But she needs me and I need her,’ ” said Lourdes Pelaez-Kingery, of Houston, a three-hour drive from her daughter in San Antonio. “He said, ‘No, she’s not coming home.’ So I said, ‘Let’s go to her,’ and he said, ‘We’re not doing that, either. She needs to learn to be on her own and she needs to figure this out.’ ”

So Lourdes turned to strangers for help. A Facebook parenting group called Grown & Flown has swelled to more than 130,000 members since its creation four years ago. Its main purpose is to provide support to parents of 15- to 25-year-olds and help prepare them for an empty nest. In recent months, people like Lourdes, desperate to comfort their far-flung college students in times of crisis or deep homesickness, have come looking for help from other moms. There’s even a hashtag: #MomItForward.

After Lourdes last month posted about how 20-year-old Sofi was feeling lonely at Texas A&M University-San Antonio, where her suitemates are all from the area and go home on weekends, two women offered to help. One of them introduced her to her own daughter who also is struggling with loneliness. Lourdes didn’t tell her husband about it until later.

Social media has enabled parents to stay more connected than ever to their college-age kids, and now it’s also allowing them to find surrogates when they can’t be there in person. But all this connectedness also can enable long-distance co-dependence and delay kids’ first big step toward adulthood. The moms I talked to say they are trying to find the right balance between



Kelly Rainey delivered a basket of baked goods—and a hug—to Sofi Pelaez. PHOTO: KELLY RAINEY

encouraging their children to go it alone and stepping in to help.

Homesickness is a growing feeling among college students. According to UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, 21% of first-year students

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*When the kids go off to college, is it hard for parents to decide when to step in and when to let them figure things out on their own? Do you have any stories of your own? Join the conversation below.*

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in a survey this year reported frequently feeling lonely or homesick, up from 14% in 2014.

One of the moms who responded to Lourdes's plea was Taj McNamara, a mom of two who recently moved to San Antonio from Virginia Beach, Va. Her younger daughter, Logan Spotanski, 18, is working and living at home until she goes to Texas A&M in Galveston next fall. She has struggled to make friends because her co-workers are all older. Taj took Logan and Sofi to dinner and they have gotten together a couple of times since.

Lisa Heffernan, co-founder of the Grown & Flown Facebook group and co-author of "Grown & Flown: How to Support Your Teen, Stay Close as a Family, and Raise Independent Adults," said that this period, as older teens and young adults transition out of the house, can be very hard on parents.

"It's the time when you feel most alone as a parent and the time you feel least supported," Ms. Heffernan said.

And so she was pleasantly surprised but not shocked when the MomItForward movement gained traction after an Oregon woman in July posted a message saying she could bring treats to nearby university students. Nearly 500 parents across the country have since added their names and numbers to a list parents can call if they have a child in need.



Taj McNamara also responded to Lourdes on Facebook and offered to introduce her daughter, Logan, to Sofi. PHOTO: TAJ MCNAMARA

While there are dads in the Grown & Flown Facebook group, it has been entirely moms who have delivered the long-distance assistance, says Ms. Heffernan. She does as much vetting as she can of prospective members to the private group. She looks at what they have posted on their personal Facebook pages and what other groups they belong to before admitting them. Moms, she said, usually talk to other moms before agreeing to accept help for their child from a member of the group.

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Some moms have turned to the group when their college-age children have been in car accidents or gotten

sick. Others have reached out to ask other moms to deliver balloons or flowers on their kids' birthdays.

“I don’t think this strays into the realm of not letting kids figure things out,” Ms. Heffernan said. “It’s modeling kindness and offering teens and young adults a hand if they are in need.”

When Kelly Rainey’s 18-year-old son was stranded on the Lamar University campus after a tropical storm flooded Beaumont, Texas, last month, she posted a note on another Facebook group. She was grateful for the offers of help from other moms, including Lourdes. She didn’t take up any parents on their offers, but she was struck by their generosity, so she reached out to some Grown & Flown moms with college students in San Antonio and offered to help. Lourdes told her about Sofi’s struggles and how, without a car, she was confined to campus and was out of mayonnaise. Kelly filled a basket with baked goods and delivered it to Sofi, along with some mayo and a hug.

Lourdes then sent a care package containing snacks and gift cards to Kelly’s son in Beaumont.

Sofi said she appreciated Kelly’s visit. “She gave me what I wanted most—a mom hug,” she said.

Not all kids would welcome such involvement by their moms. “My sons would be horrified if I had another mom go and give them a hug,” said Benita Washburn, an Alaska mom who helped the son of another Grown & Flown mom when he injured his back. When one of her sons went to a community college in Oregon, Benita tried to put him in touch with the son of a family friend at the same school. “He said, ‘Mom, don’t make any playdates for me,’ ” Benita said.



Logan and Sofi have gotten together a few times and text each other. ‘We talked about moving, making friends and having someone to talk to other than your mom,’ Sofi said. PHOTO: SOFI PELAEZ

Sofi is grateful that she met Taj and Logan. She said she could relate to Logan feeling out of place in a new city, because that’s how she felt when she moved to the U.S. from Honduras three years ago. “We talked about moving, making friends and having someone to talk to other than your mom,” Sofi said.

Logan, too, is glad her mom intervened. “I like being around my mom. She’s my best friend,” Logan said. “But I know having a balance is necessary.”

As for Taj, she’s looking forward to letting go. “I am reaching a point I don’t want to take care of anyone going forward. I’ve raised two kids solo, and I’m tired,” she said. “I want her to find her independence and her life.”

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