

The "American dream" that turned into a nightmare. João went to study in the United States and ended up being exploited by his host family

Text: Carolina Jesus Graphics:

Rodrigo Mendes

Dane County Airport, in the state of Wisconsin, isn't very big. Not compared to Lisbon, where João (fictitious name) knows every corner. But when you fly more than six thousand kilometers with the expectation of living the "American dream" in your last year of high school, it's easy to feel small. The young man, however, barely had time to feel that way.

As soon as he faced the crowd standing in the arrivals area, he saw **the Portuguese flag and the** her name written on a colorful sign that read **"Welcome to the United States"**. Holding them up was a woman wearing a T-shirt that read "best host mom ever", and a man and two youngsters accompanying her - with the words "father", "brother" and "sister" printed on their *I-shirts*. The enthusiasm was such that, at that moment, no alarm bells went off in João's head. Not even with the sign his "new sister" was holding, next to the national flag: **"Welcome to** this crazy family".

When João expressed his desire to study in the United States at the age of 12, his mother, Filipa (not her real name), knew João would have to spend the next five years saving money. Last year, as soon as her son turned 17, she contacted **Multiway**, a company that promotes exchange programs and courses abroad.

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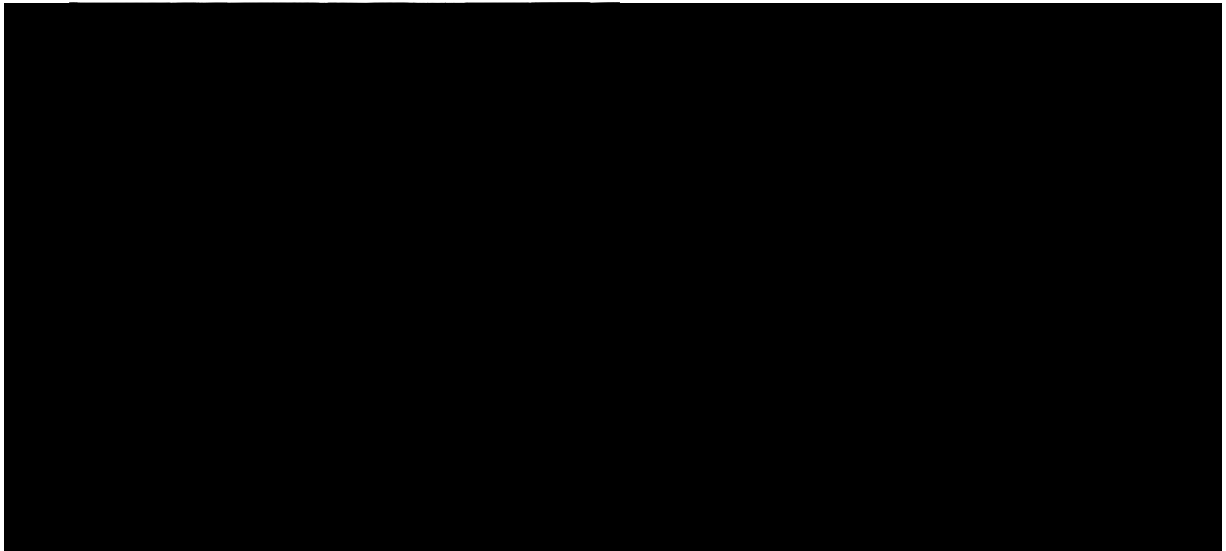
João (fictitious name), a Portuguese man who went to study in the United States

"In Portugal, there are two companies promoting these courses, with identical prices (around 11,765 euros): AFS and Multiway. Both work with ASSE [the US agency that liaises with international companies and takes responsibility for young people when they arrive in that country], but the first was based on young volunteers supporting the kids, so I opted for the second, because it was adults taking them in," she told Observador.

She then enrolled João in the exams needed to apply to 12th grade in the United States and they both attended the preparation meetings organized by the company - one of the aims was to understand the dynamics with the host families.

"They told logo that if anything didn't go well, namely if they didn't adapt to the families, they would remove them from the house within 30 minutes," she told Observador. "They said they would come to logo to pick them up in an emergency. They didn't guarantee to bring suitcases and clothes, but at least their passports."

With this information, Filipa and João were reassured. Despite the distance, they knew that if there were any problems, all they had to do was contact the local ASSE coordinator and everything would be resolved within half an hour.



He talked to his family on the sly and cleaned up horse manure: the "adaptation" to "American culture"

At 9:30 p.m. on August 28th, João landed in the United States. It was still a week before the start of the school year - students have to leave early to adapt to their host family. The welcome he received at the airport made him believe that it wouldn't be long before he felt comfortable.

As soon as they arrived home, the "host parents" took him to see the room where he would be sleeping for the ten months of the program. It was in the basement, with a carpeted floor, a bed, a wooden desk, a window and a metal shelf used as a closet. So far, everything seemed fine. The real nightmare began the next day at five in the morning.

BEDROOM VIDEO: <https://youtube.com/shorts/UcGtzl9F1YU?feature--shared>

That's when João was woken up by his family. Despite the fatigue accumulated from the long hours of flying and the few hours of sleep, the young man didn't object. He obeyed and followed his "father", "mother" and "brother". They left the house, got into a van and drove off, without saying a word.

John wasn't sure what was waiting for him and, even if he wanted to memorize the route, it was impossible. Everything was new. The only thing he had memorized was the length of the route - 20 minutes
- and the destination: a ranch.

Then she remembered the sheet provided by ASSE describing the family, in which they said they had "horses" and liked to "spend a lot of time on the farm". "We love being outside and walking. We're always out walking the dogs," said the document to which Observador had access.

When she got there, however, she realized that the document omitted a large part of what the family did when they spent "time on the farm". "It wasn't their ranch, they worked for the owner," says Filipa. "They had four horses and, in exchange for their work, they didn't have to pay to have them there."

João never thought that to be part of the family he also had to take part in the ranch's activities. "He and his 'brother' had to take the horses out of the stalls - there were only four stalls, but dozens of horses - then they had to clean them and the horses and then remove the manure," describes his mother.

"This happened until lunchtime. Then they'd have lunch, one of those *barritas* American meat (*beefjerky*, which consists of dried meat sold in packages), and in the afternoon they would continue," Filipa explained to Observador, adding that there they had to clean and sweep a "shed" where the tools were stored.





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The "working" day ended at around 6pm, when they would return home and eat their lunch. This happened every day of the week. "There were no Saturdays, Sundays or holidays. It was every day," says Filipa.

For the first few days, João kept to himself what his family was forcing him to do during the time he was supposed to be getting to know the city, learning about "American culture" and meeting new people. However, by the end of the third day, his mother began to realize that something wasn't right.

"Because he talked like that," says Filipa, imitating a whisper. "I'd ask him why he spoke so quietly and he'd say, 'Because I can't be on the phone'." This is when her mother started asking more questions.

"They don't want me to talk to you. They say that if I want to adapt to the new culture, I have to completely disconnect from my family, friends and Portugal," João replied, according to his mother. "They won't even let me listen to Portuguese music."

If it had been for Filipa, João would have returned to Portugal that very day. But that wasn't the will of the young man, who hoped that once school started, everything would be fine.

In recent days, Observador was contacted by Multiwaç to ask for clarification on the John's case and about other possible complaints, but the company refused to respond to questions. Also, American ASSE was questioned about the case, but didn't elaborate any response by the time this article was published.

Caroline was "happy" until she got sick. And not even with her body covered in spots did they take her to the doctor

Although distressed and feeling helpless, Filipa let him stay. She too had hoped that everything would improve with the start of the school year. But nothing has changed. Only the time the "alarm clock" went off.

"When school started, they would get up at 4.30am to go to the ranch, so that they could be at school by 8am," assures her mother. "With the same clothes. There was no shower in between."

Even though there was no time for hygiene, they always stopped at the supermarket to get breakfast. But even then, according to the mother, there was negligence. "The lady bought for her two children and didn't buy for mine. He had to pay with his card," she says.

And it wasn't just for the first meal of the day that João had to use his money. Although Filipa guarantees that the contract states that the family has to provide "three meals a day", this was not the case.

"They even went to the supermarket to buy dinner - because they only ate frozen lasagna and other processed foods - and my son had to pay for his," she recalls.

Food and work weren't the only things on Filipa's mind: "Before he left for the US, **we had agreed that he would have online math tutoring**, as he had to take the exam in Portugal. We had discussed it with Multiway and they assured us that there would be no problem," she recalls.

"Shortly after I got there, he asked me when the explanations would start. I thought that was strange. He's a good student, but nobody wants to be tutored," says his mother. "I asked him why he wanted to know and he said: 'Oh, because at least during that hour I can **sit down**'."

"A coordinator [redacted] of ASSE said that I [redacted] could do things [redacted] shoot [redacted] as long as I didn't post it on Instagram. But that [redacted] is absolutely illegal."

Caroline Plöeckl, a young German woman who went to study in the United States

"What do you mean? This boy looks like he's stuck in Russia or somewhere else," she thought. What Filipa didn't know was that she wasn't the only mother worried from afar about the conditions in which her son was living in the United States.

At the time, Sandra Plöeckl was already writing letters to the German ambassador in the United States and complaining to the German promoter who, like Multiway in Portugal, had taken her daughter from Germany to attend an exchange program in the United States. In the case of the young German woman, the experience was provided under a scholarship created by the agreement between the US Congress and the German Bundestag - the "Parliamentary Sponsorship Program" (PPP), which is called the "Congressional Bundestag Youth Exchange" (CBYX) in the US.

According to Caroline, the young German who flew to the country at just 17 years old, six days before João, the **problems with ASSE started "right at the beginning"**. "When I asked my local coordinator a question, she often didn't even answer," she told Observador.

"What's more, she said I could do things, like **shoot a gun, as long as I didn't post it on Instagram**. But that's absolutely illegal," Caroline recalls.

The young German woman's problems, however, had nothing to do with guns. Nor were they the ones that led her to change her host family just two months after arriving in the United States.

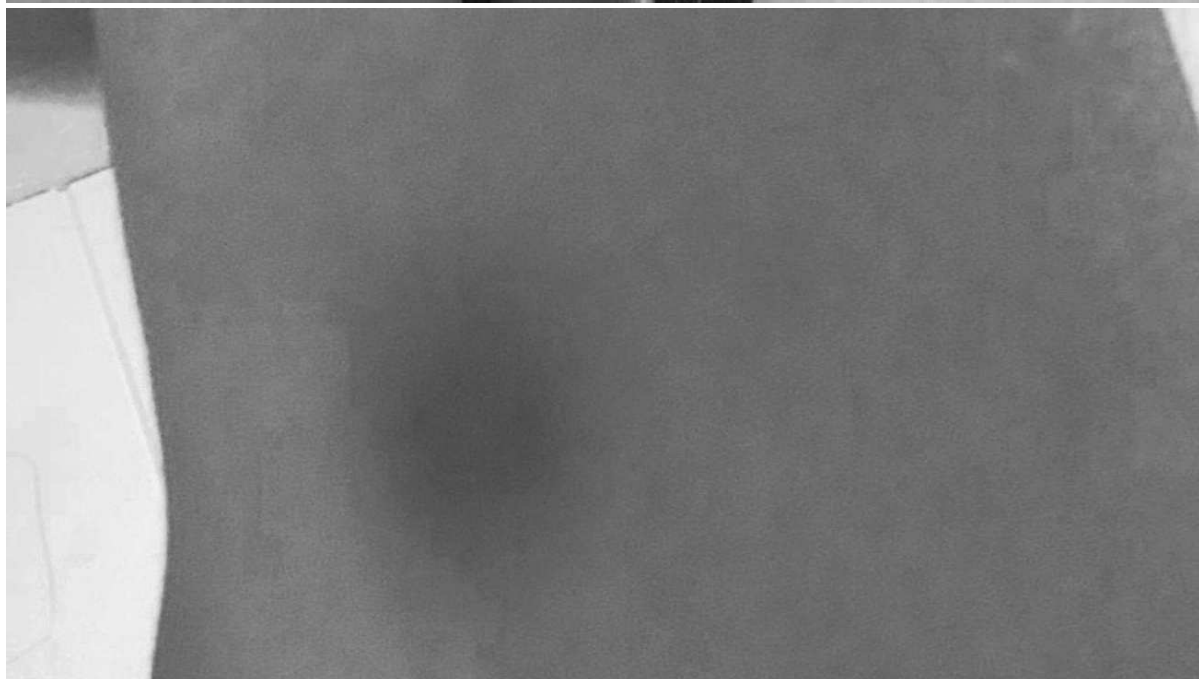
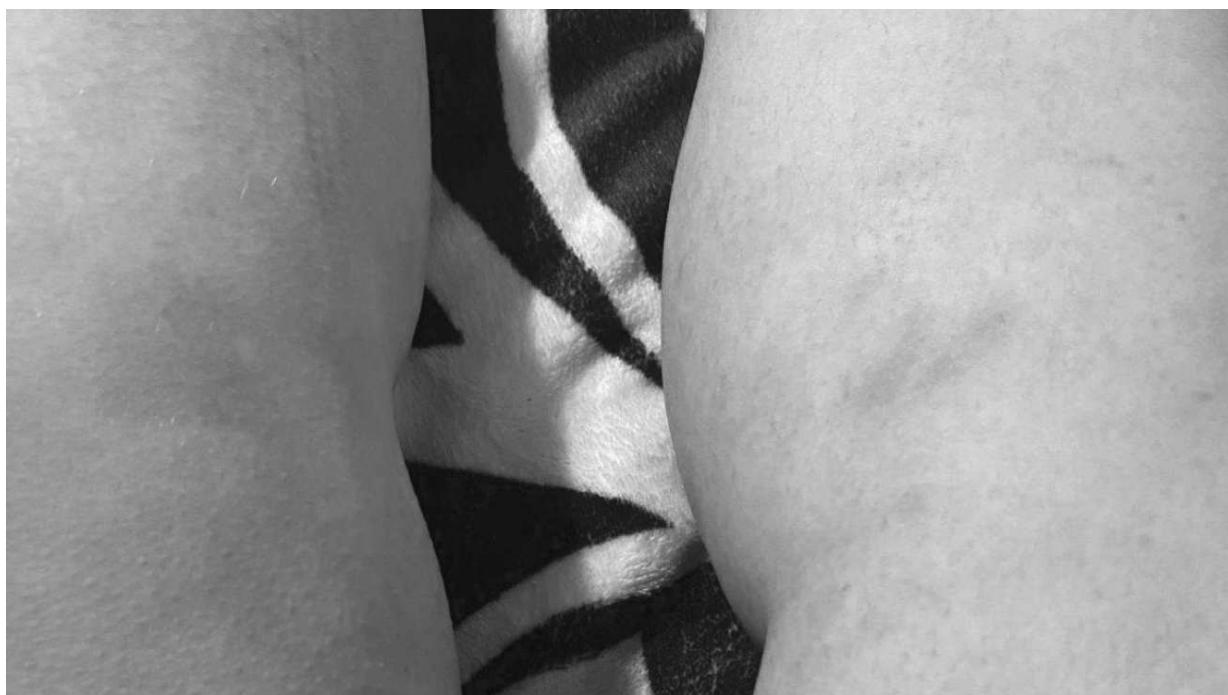
"My first **host family wanted to get rid of me** because my presence in the house allegedly caused anxiety. I was also supposedly causing problems in my 'parents' marriage", explains Caroline, according to what she was told by ASSE. The young woman, on the other hand, thinks that the real reason for her "expulsion" from the house had to do with a change in her "father's" job and problems with her "brother".

Caroline ended up finding temporary refuge at the home of a friend of her tennis coach, where she moved a month later. "I had to find a family myself because **the ASSE representative couldn't,**" she explains.

Apart from the fact that she was on her own looking for a place to stay, Caroline was "very happy" with her life in the United States, as her mother described it in her letter to the ambassador, which was also addressed to President Joe Biden, the First Lady and Vice President Kamala Harris.

"She was involved in high school. She was a merit student, she was on the school newspaper, she was part of the tennis and *wrestling* teams and she was also in the reading and French clubs. She made lots of American friends," says her mother.

Everything got worse when she found her second foster family in November. "I started having a lot of migraines and dizziness. I didn't do anything because I assumed I had the flu," she told Observador. "However, at the end of December, my **skin** started getting **red and itchy**. I decided to go to the emergency room and was prescribed medication."





"I started taking them, but I got sicker and sicker. At the beginning of January, I started getting red spots all over my body." Worried about what her host family's reaction might be if she told them - since they had already downplayed her symptoms - Caroline preferred to talk to her coach.

"He told me to go to the doctor and I asked him to talk to my foster mother. I was really afraid that she would forbid me to continue *wrestling*," she continues. "There was one day, however, when I had to leave training because I was feeling very unwell and I told my foster family to take me to the doctor. They refused."

Her mother, Sandra, even spoke to ASSE and the local coordinator to put pressure on the family to take her to the doctor, but they said they couldn't do that. She then contacted CBYX to have her removed from the family. "The nightmare was about to begin," her mother recalled in the letter.

"Roberta's behavior left us no choice"

The complaints from European students don't just come from Portugal and Germany. Roberta Fariello didn't leave the United States by choice. She was forced to.

The young woman flew to Ontario, California, on August 4 and returned "forcibly" to Rome on November 5, two days after receiving the letter expelling her from the exchange program. And, as in the two previous cases, the problems started right at the beginning. Here, the alleged bad experience was not with ASSE, but with the Terra Lingua agency.

"Although Roberta was supposed to be housed in a room on her own, the first host family decided to take in another student. They were both housed in a small room measuring seven square meters," revealed the father, Salvatore, in a complaint made to the Committee for the Safety of Foreign Exchange Students (CSFES), set up in 2004 to defend exchange students neglected by their families or the agencies that manage their experience.

In the document he sent to Observador, Salvatore Fariello also explained that the family dynamic in which they lived was "problematic". "They had cameras pointed at their bedroom. They often went to bed without dinner and were scolded if they went to the kitchen to look for food. The bedroom lights were turned off at 10pm. Roberta was threatened not to tell anyone about the problems she was having at home, or she would be disciplined," she continued.

Roberta, however, didn't follow the advice. She informed her parents early on. "As we were very worried, my wife and I contacted the Italian agency that liaises with the American Terra Lingua, in order to find a solution. The response was terrible. They told us we had no valid reason to worry."

The fact that her parents weren't the only ones to complain played into the young woman's hands. Her housemate's parents had also contacted the agency in their country, at which point the Terra Lingua coordinator realized "that there were serious security reasons" for changing the family students.

Families were informed by Multiwaç
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removed from the house within 30 minutes.

The agency ended up moving them to a family that lived a long way from the school they were attending. And with that came another obstacle. "They had to wake up at 5:30 every day to go to school, because 'mom' had to get to work at 7. They would wait alone for the doors to open for almost two hours. It was certainly dangerous and uncomfortable," said the father.

After school, the situation wasn't much different. "They had to wait between three and four hours in the street for 'mom' to **pick them up** so they could go home," Salvatore added.

To solve the problem, the girls' parents spoke to each other and suggested that Terra Lingua pay for a cab to take them to and pick them up from school. "The result was: a day later, Roberta received a letter saying she had to leave the program immediately and go back to Italy."

"The justification for the decision was the incredible lies that the US agency gave about Roberta. They said she was dangerous and that she *bullied* Carla [her roommate], who was a problematic girl," added her father.

Observador had access to the document written by Terra Lingua, which mentions some of the behaviors that the young Italian girl allegedly engaged in during her stay in the United States. "Despite being repeatedly asked not to do so, when she was angry, Roberta would hit a tennis ball against the wall shared with the family in the neighboring condominium. The neighbors, concerned about the screaming and hitting, contacted the host family several times," wrote the representative.

"Roberta would slam the bedroom and bathroom doors when she didn't get her way; Roberta would repeatedly hold phone conversations in which she would continuously shout in a worrying high-pitched tone, causing tension and fear in the house and leading the neighbors to consider calling the police; Roberta would repeatedly call the host parents and sister "stupid"; Carla asked several times to change schools,

because Roberta was talking about her to other pupils and her mental health was getting worse", the agency added, adding that "the list goes on".

Terra Lingua stressed that it "understands the disappointment with the situation", but that "sometimes teenagers behave differently when they are under the care of others". **"Roberta's behavior left us with no alternative," she** said, explaining the reason for the expulsion.

Following this response, Roberta's parents tried to expose what had happened to their daughter by any means possible. In addition to CSFES, they spoke to the US Attorney's Office and other Italian organizations. It was then that they discovered the forum: **"Don't send your children to America"**.

With hundreds of publications, several Italian parents and children complain about the way they were received in the United States. Some just use words to explain the "nightmare" they went through with their host families. Others share photos to show the "garbage" they lived in.





When it was Filipa's turn to discover this forum - which also had complaints about the US company ASSE and not just Terra Lingua - she was shocked. "Compared to others, what happened to João was nothing".

From the argument with the "mother" to the silent treatment: the latest

John's days at the host family's house

On one occasion, after João suddenly disconnected the call with Filipa - something that happened frequently - her mother immediately called the director of Multiway, Rosa Marques, to discuss the problem of food and working hours at the ranch.

"She told me we were absolutely right," he recalls. "In fact, she even said that the insurance they take out (for health, risks and accidents) wouldn't even cover any of these activities, because he wasn't supposed to be carrying out these functions."

Filipa claims that Rosa Marques advised her son to talk to his foster mother, as the contacts made with the local coordinator had no effect. "She never got back to him and even kicked him out of a WhatsApp group they had. He went into paranoia when that happened."

João ended up following her advice and spoke to his "mother". "The lady freaked out," says Filipa. "She started screaming, saying she couldn't put up with him. In the middle of the argument, she went out into the yard. Then he called Rosa, who spoke to the lady on speakerphone and said that things couldn't go on like this."

The "mother" is said to have been intransigent and refused to follow the orders of Multiway's director, who, faced with this response, advised the young man to lock himself in his room because "they were going to try to find him a new family", as had been promised at the meetings.

"We thought it would only take between 30 minutes and two hours. But being reasonable, it could have taken a day or two," Filipa points out. "But they didn't come up with anything. Instead, a new local coordinator showed up, who my son realized was working with the foster father."

Troy's closeness - the name of the local coordinator - to the family was not, however, the only suspicious thing about his attitude. "On the first day, he showed up at his house and took my son to the middle of the field to talk to him," says the mother. "He had the ASSE rule book and told him that he (João) was the one who wasn't complying."

"Then she gave him a bunch of papers to sign." At that moment, João followed the advice his mother had given him when the problems began: "Obey until we find a solution". And he signed those papers.

"He's a minor. What exactly did he sign?" asks Filipa. "I contacted Troy several times and he never replied."

"The family had [redacted] pointed at [redacted] students' rooms. They often went to bed without dinner and were scolded if they went to the kitchen [redacted] light [redacted] prosecut food. The [redacted] of room were [redacted] or [redacted] disconnected at ten o'clock. They were threatened with [redacted] should tell ninguém the problems that [redacted] were [redacted] have a home, or were [redacted] of a [redacted] oção disciplinary"

Salvatore Fariello, father of Italian girl who studied in the United States

Around the same time that Troy appeared, the family also stopped talking to the young man. "They lived in silence. Neither the kids nor the mother spoke to him. Only the father said anything to him."

John then saw school as the only place where he could talk. And it was with a question that many of the conversations began: "Can I sleep at your house?".

"You were unlucky with the family. They're known for being strange"

It's not entirely true that João's foster family stopped talking to him altogether. According to his mother, apart from the times when they took the opportunity to insult his haircut - even saying that they had already booked a hairdresser for a "zero comb" - there were others when they openly said that they "didn't want him at home any more".

"It was at school that he found his salvation," Filipa now reveals. "I began to relate to some kids, who told him that he had been unlucky with his family. Because back home they were known for being strange."

In fact, João even heard from a class director that the family had once taken in another exchange student and that "it had also gone badly and he had left". Now all that was needed was for the young man to do the same.

Having been in the United States for just over a week and with his host family wanting him out on the street, João was forced to ask the friends he had just made for a favor: a place to sleep. One said yes. And his mother was also willing to take João in until the situation was resolved.

"This friend went home with him to collect some things. I told João not to worry about the rest of the things, to just take his passport and computer," Filipa recalls. "And he replied: 'Mom, my passport, computer and chargers are always in my backpack. And as for the clothes, I didn't even take them out of the suitcase.'"

"My son was there for a week and two days and never took his clothes out of his suitcase, because there was no closet in the room. I didn't realize until that day," says Filipa, pointing out that she also didn't know until then that there were rabbits and chickens in the rooms to the side of the bedroom.

The young man then headed to his new home, where for five days he was used to real food and household chores that only involved dirty dishes or dust in his room. However, at the same time that the family was trying to arrange a permanent place for him to stay with ASSE, another obstacle arose.

"This colleague's family was going on vacation that Sunday. They were going to stay in Chicago for 15 days." Although Filipa was grateful for the hospitality of João's colleague and his mother, there was one rule. "Just as he didn't go there to work, he didn't go on vacation. He went to **study**."

It was then that João gave in. "Mom, maybe it's time to go back. I have nowhere to sleep," he confessed. Months later, it was Caroline who said those words. Not to her mother, but to the police.

A 911 call that led to Caroline's expulsion

After the host family failed to take the young German to the doctor, the local ASSE coordinator paid a visit to the house where they lived, claiming that she had complained of "urine and cat feces all over the house". "I never said that," she told Observador.

After the representative turned her back, her family immediately kicked her out of the house. "I wanted to stay with a friend, but the coordinator wouldn't let me," she recalls. "So on the night of the 19th

On January 20, I **called 911** (the American emergency line), but the police didn't give me any protection."

Caroline says she tried to explain that she was being treated badly by ASSE and that she was "afraid" of the local coordinator, but the authorities did nothing. "They just took me to four different places until the agency came to pick me up."

That night, she ended up staying with the coordinator in a hotel. The next day, when she was getting ready to go to school, she noticed that her cell phone card wasn't working. "We had a contract with the first host family and we were still paying for the tariff. They simply canceled the card and said that ASSE had ordered it."

The spots disappeared as soon as she left her foster family's home and she still doesn't know where they came from.

As if being left without a cell phone wasn't enough, that wasn't the only cancellation to be made by ASSE. **"The agency told me that I had been expelled from school.** I asked the principal and he said he didn't know anything. Then ASSE sent me home [to Germany] for no reason," she says.

the day he left the family, he said
don't worry about the rest of COISCIS. I
take only your passport and a computer
He replied: 'Give me your passport, 0
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Filipa (fictitious name), mother of João (fictitious name), a Portuguese student who went to study in the United States

"The people in charge of the German program accused her of saying bad things about the family without proof, just based on what she had heard. But we brought evidence of what we were saying," explained the mother.

Like Roberta's parents, Sandra wrote several letters explaining her daughter's situation and demanding justice. And the advice they both received from Danielle Grijalva, director and founder of CSFE, was to take the case to the media in their respective countries.

That's when the Whatsapp group "Nightmare in the USA" was born. Filipa joined the group shortly afterwards.

"I'm not a victim. I'm a survivor"

All it took was for João's mother to hear the words "I want to go home" for logo to find a way to bring the flights forward. The Portuguese student was only supposed to return on June 3rd of this year, but mishaps in the United States brought Filipa's embrace forward by nine months. He arrived at 1:30 p.m. on September 11, wearing a national team jersey, with calluses on his fingers and sores on his hands. And seven kilos lighter.

"For the first few days, she ate and slept like crazy. She had lots of nightmares in which she would wake up in the middle of the night and ask me where I was," says Filipa, saying that it was also a time of distress for her.

João was still in the United States when Filipa decided that she wasn't going to let what had happened to her go unanswered. She didn't want money, just justice.

João's family (fictitious name) complained to the Public Prosecutor's Office and the situation was the subject of an investigation, which was shelved.

In addition to the various complaints he made to Multiway and ASSE, he decided to report the case to the authorities. "I exposed the situation to the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the US embassy in Lisbon, the Portuguese embassy there...", he explains.

The Attorney General's Office confirmed to Observador that the complaint ended up being the subject of an investigation, which took place at the Department of Investigation and Penal Action (DIAP) in Lisbon and was eventually closed.

Filipa has also written to the President of the United States, Joe Biden, the Kennedy Foundation, the Department of State, the US Local Police and, finally, the CSFES and is still waiting for a reply.

While he was in Wisconsin, João convinced himself that everything that had happened to him was his fault -- just like Roberta, who thought she had caused the family's distress, and just like Caroline, who thought she shouldn't have made that 911 call. When she arrived in Portugal, it took some time to get that idea out of her head.

"One day, my sister-in-law came in and said: 'João, don't be sad. It was bad luck, it's not your fault. You're just a victim,'" Filipa recalls. On hearing the last word, the young man interrupted her: "No, aunt. I'm not a victim. I'm a survivor."

Observador contacted Multiway to ask for clarification on João's case and other possible complaints, but the company refused to answer the questions. ASSE was also asked about João's case, but had not sent a reply by the time this article was published.