

**AFS-USA Hosting Conference 2019
Dallas, TX**

Opening Remarks

**Tara Hofmann
AFS-USA President and CEO**

Good morning everyone.

I want to thank each and every one of you for being here this weekend and welcome you to the AFS- USA Hosting conference.

I look out into this audience and I see so many familiar faces and a number of new ones. This is the first event for me in my role as President, and I'm pleased to be here with you to address hosting at AFS-USA. At this time of year, hosting is always on my mind and of course given this audience I'm confident it's been on all of your minds. This weekend we will focus on the opportunities and challenges that are in front of us, and when I look out into this room I can sense and feel the commitment we share to our organizational mission, I am filled with inspiration and positivity.

There are things about the hosting season that awaits us that we don't know. However, we do know the importance of our work with AFS and how critical it is to shaping the global citizens of tomorrow. We also know that the experiences we facilitate are pivotal moments in the lives of our students and our host families. I hope and want that we will expand this concept to prioritize AFS' impact in communities and to ensure more diverse communities are engaged with AFS.

Just last week, I received an email from the Ambassador of the Brazilian Mission to the United Nations. It was completely unsolicited, and in a nutshell, he wanted to tell me how his AFS experience in the 70's had influenced his life and career choices and how he wants to invite AFSers from the New York area to the United Nations. Like the majority of AFS experiences, his resulted

in the customary memories and stories. But more importantly, he chose to dedicate his career to building bridges of understanding, much like what his AFS experience did for him.

As the new president of AFS-USA, I want to ensure that we continue to shape the global citizens AND global leaders of tomorrow. Having been an AFS staff member for more than 30 years, I've experienced the many facets of our dynamic organization, from my work in the Development Department to my tenure as the Partner Director of AFS Hong Kong, to my most recent role as the Chief Operating Officer for AFS-USA. I've worked with AFS staff and volunteers around the world and this has given me a very thorough understanding of our strengths and our challenges and, above all, a very profound level of respect for the work of our global network of AFS Volunteers.

Hosting is at the heart of our flagship programs and its importance to our organization is why we are gathered here this weekend. You all know that any one of us could stand at this podium and recount endless stories that illustrate the impact of the AFS hosting experience, and I certainly have my own stories – stories that give me inspiration when I need it most – like when we're all working so hard on those final ten placements!

Just like the placement for Youssef from Egypt - the very last student lingering without a placement in the Ohio River Valley Area Team. He was constantly overlooked as he just didn't seem to be the type of student any family would enjoy hosting. Just in the nick of time, a family said yes, but only after saying "no" several times. During Youssef's year, he learned to play the violin and joined the orchestra. He played football and was featured on a TV program with his coach and the other two players selected to appear. He was active in so many different activities, from pep rally star to skiing. His host family adored him as did the entire school. As the host mom wrote, "this amazing kid promotes world peace without even trying."

Hosting is the catalyst for so many activities that draw from and engage the skills of AFS Volunteers. Some of you play a critical role in guiding our students and host families through the ups and downs of their time in this country, and AFS benefits immensely from your patience and your ability to guide, troubleshoot, problem-solve, and resolve conflicts, to name only a few. Your work facilitates the life lessons of our program and helps AFS maintain our reputation as the very best at providing support to participants and host families.

Some of you are amazingly skilled at engaging your community members in the AFS hosting experience. You never meet a stranger, you corner people to tell them about hosting, you entrap them in elevators, you post about this amazing opportunity on social networking sites - and on the message boards at Walmart. You are unstoppable in your pursuit of new host families! And when it feels impossible, you keep working to place those remaining students when the deadline is just days away.

Of course, there are other roles involved in the hosting process, from providing orientations to managing the team's finances, and all of these efforts help to make our hosting program the very best. I thank you for your commitment to the mission.

This weekend is centered around how Volunteer Teams can improve our hosting performance, and that encompasses a variety of improvements, some related to numbers of students, others related to themes such as diversification of host families and our relationships with schools. I'd like to offer some of my thoughts around these topics that we'll be exploring in more detail during the sessions.

Let's first talk about the numbers. We can, if you'd like, refer to "the numbers" as the business side of things. And any of you who've been involved in running a business, whether large or small, for-profit or not-for-profit, can surely relate to the importance of planning, especially as it relates to budgets and targets. Of course, we need to be able to budget in advance, based on the numbers of

hosted (and sent) students, so that we can carry out the important aspects of our organization, from the services that we facilitate to the training events (such as this one). These are the critical and fundamental basics of running a quality program.

But what is equally important to meeting our budgetary needs is meeting our commitments to our global partners and the students who have been selected to come to the United States on AFS. AFS-USA is the largest member of the AFS network and, as such, our success has a significant impact on all partners, and at a larger scale than the successes of smaller members. In turn, when we are unable to meet our hosting obligations, it can have a devastating effect on our partners, from a public/customer relations perspective and, in some cases, on the livelihood of their office staff. Their volunteers are also tasked with very challenging interactions with angry and frustrated parents.

I know that most of this isn't new to you, but, as you can imagine, it's of critical importance to me as I seek to ensure that AFS-USA contributes responsibly to the overall health and success of our AFS global network. Your teams play a significant role in this global partnership and I am grateful for all of your work towards meeting placement deadlines and, in many cases, taking on additional students when other areas have met unexpected obstacles.

There's one group of host families that is very valuable to you and to all of AFS - repeat host families, as we call them. Some of them have hosted five, ten, or more times, and their value to us is immeasurable. That being said, I think that it's important that we also focus on attracting new people to the AFS family. Are we reaching out to nearby or adjacent communities - communities that are vastly different from our own and thereby require stepping outside of our comfort zones? Are we involving community organizations that serve communities that aren't represented in our AFS Area Teams, such as LGBTQ groups, groups that serve different faiths, ethnicities, education levels, economic status, abilities (hearing impaired, blind, limited mobility,

etc.)? As AFS Volunteer Mary Ann Offer has frequently noted, the AFS ambulance drivers challenged us to reach more people, not just those outside of our own country, but right here, in our own cities and towns. By involving more diverse communities, whether through hosting or volunteering, we make AFS a bigger, better, and stronger organization.

On a slightly different topic, but also related to the theme of diversity, is the scenario that I've seen almost every year that I've been at AFS-USA. In the final weeks of the hosting season, you can look at the data and a couple of things will always reflect the same story:

In the early months, the A+ students, with perfect English scores, from countries that are seemingly viewed as "more popular" were all placed very quickly – snatched right up, if you will. And the majority of them were girls.

In the final weeks, it's surprising that the remaining unplaced students are almost always those whose applications came to us the earliest. They're always boys. They have good grades. And they're from Asian countries or, sometimes, from Latin American countries.

Over the course of this weekend, I would like for us to work together to address this and commit to reversing the trend. I'm sure you can imagine that for me, as our representative to the AFS network, it's difficult to face the partners whose applicants were among the first to arrive yet are the last to be placed. I would like to be able to tell them a new story this fall!

I suspect that some of the thoughts that come into play when selecting students is the desire to find those who'll have the least problems, the fewest support challenges, the easiest adaptation. We also take a similar approach, albeit to a lesser extent, when we're selecting host families. On the surface, some might say that this illustrates a departure from our mantra from about 20 or 30 years ago – that we should not shy away from but, rather, we

should seek the opportunity to take an “unfinished product” – both students and host families - and produce active and productive global citizens. After all, this is what we do best, even when it challenges our patience.

A colleague of mine has often told the story of how AFS didn't want to accept his application back in the 70's because his grades didn't meet the mark, he wasn't involved in any school clubs or activities, he was a loner, very shy, and was, in the words of AFS, “not AFS material.” But, an AFS Volunteer went to bat for him, he went on the program (and yes, he had a few support cases), and since then has worked in this field for more than 30 years. AFS Volunteers took a chance on him and he was transformed.

I hope that we can explore this topic while we're here, as I think it's an important conversation. Sometimes, those students whose applications present the notion that she or he “isn't AFS material” are the students whose lives stand to benefit the most from what we provide. There is an AFS philosophy which I find very useful to keep in the forefront of my mind, especially for those of us who have “been around the block” – and that's the concept of the unfinished product. Students and host families don't come to us perfectly prepared and suited to become global citizens or the perfect participants – it's going through the program and participating in orientations and discussions with liaisons and reflecting on their experiences that makes them AFSers.

Now I want to turn our attention to one of the most important stakeholders in the AFS experience – our schools. In spite of intense competition and new forms of student exchange, you have helped to ensure that AFS is viewed by schools as an organization that takes care of its students. In other words, we don't expect the school to manage problems that arise during the year. This is an important and very valuable achievement and the credit for this sits with you and your teams. I applaud you for the relationships you've maintained with your schools.

On the flip side, some schools are telling us that while AFS does take care of its students, we are limited to a very transactional relationship, offering little else to the school. What do I mean by transactional? Basically, we arrive at the school when we need something – the signature on the school form – and otherwise we’re offering nothing of value to the school. In some schools, they’re already quite diverse and they see the presence of an AFS student as something of minimal value.

We must make it a priority to engage more with our schools in ways that benefit them. Are we making sure that they’re aware of scholarships on offer to their students? Can we provide guidance on how to blend our students into their social studies, languages, and global competence curricula? Over the coming year, we’ll be working on this at the national level, seeking to strengthen our contributions to school and providing you with the tools you need to enrich, recognize, and give back to your schools, without whose support we couldn’t do what we do – or at least we’d have to do it in a very different format.

I know that all of these topics will benefit from your ideas and experiences and I look forward to taking part in some of the related conversations planned for our time together here in Dallas. I know that I can count on everyone here to contribute to these important discussions and I am also confident that we will find solutions!

Now, let’s shift our attention to my priorities for AFS-USA. As the new President, only in this role for just over a month now, I’ve been largely focused on setting my priorities and my agenda for AFS-USA.

As such, I want to share a little bit of insight with you about the priorities I’ve established for my presidency.

1) Inspirational leadership is something that I will strive to provide to all our volunteers and staff.

2) Consistent and transparent communication – upping the outreach of the president to the various stakeholders is a needed; with volunteers, with team chairs, with staff, with the National Council and with Board members. I have started a regular communication with volunteers in MyAFS and hope that you'll look for news from me there.

3) Honesty and integrity. A key goal that has been established for me is to work with the Board to create a new strategic plan, by June 2019.

The last strategic plan, which officially ended at the end of 2018, SP1.0, focused on building back infrastructure and strengthening AFS-USA. Some of the outcomes of that strategic plan include: enhanced focus on customer service with the sending portal, creating business analytic tools which we've developed in Power BI, the organizational development effort for which we now have a dedicated staffing unit, new program development with specific regard to Global Prep and AFSNext, enhancing the volunteer experience with particular focus on creating tools for volunteers – MyAFS and Help and Learning are the best examples of that. We have also worked to re-align the focus and purpose of the National Council, and created a competency-based approach to leadership for both the board and the National Council. We also launched our Diversity and Inclusion efforts and established an alumni relations function at AFS USA.

SP2.0 will now build on these strong foundational initiatives. We are currently working to articulate the CALL TO ACTION/ OR THE CASE FOR CHANGE.

SOME OF THE Key questions we are starting to grapple with are:
What pressing, relevant social problem are we trying to solve?
How much do we know about the problem? Who else is working on this problem and where are the gaps? What internal or external factors are driving change in our organization?

There are a number of Mission related and external factors compelling us to change:

- ✓ The world has never needed globally aware citizens more than now, everywhere
- ✓ Increased political “tribalism”/anti-global worldview
- ✓ Need to break down barriers between peoples, cultures
- ✓ Demand in the future for informed citizens with relevant 21st and 22nd century skills
- ✓ AFS mission is not to run exchange programs but to have impact in the world

Before I wrap up, I did want to mention that we have a representative with us here today from Intercultura Italy, Paolo Murru. Paolo is a member of the staff of Intercultura and is responsible for participant support. I’d like to extend a warm welcome to him and, speaking of Italy, I would also like to mention that we have a new scholarship this year called the “Coast to Coast Italia” scholarship. Last year, former AFS International President Vincenzo Morlini, along with several longtime friends and fellow AFS returnees, biked across the United States to raise money for this scholarship. It’s a full scholarship to spend one year in the hometown of Vincenzo and several of his cyclists. So, make sure to check it out and encourage students in your community to consider applying! The deadline is March 14th. I am also working with the Partner Director of Italy to launch a volunteer exchange with Intercultura – so you will be hearing about that this spring.

In closing, I want to leave you with a story from my time as the Partner Director of AFS Hong Kong. Compared to AFS-USA’s hosting, we were a drop in the bucket when it came to our hosting capacity. But the challenges were similar when it came to host family recruitment and placement. I remember receiving a student application from AFS-USA – Filip – a boy with a sensitive stomach, painfully shy and withdrawn, interested in computers, and I’m telling you the truth when I say that he had every allergy imaginable! We of course felt we had to reject him as our host

families were very finicky and we were certain we'd never find a host family for him. But, AFS-USA protested our questioning of the applicant and after a back-and-forth of demands and sweet-talking, we heaved a collective sigh and said "ok, we'll accept him." You can surely understand what a challenge we faced in placing him. Eventually, we somehow convinced a very reluctant family to give it a try. And with every bit of confidence I can tell you that he was the very best student we hosted in Hong Kong during my time as Partner Director! A few years later, Filip returned to visit Hong Kong and walked into the office while I was meeting with an important and very generous donor. I was so thrilled to see him that I invited him to join me and the donor. We learned that he had become a successful Nano-scientist after graduating from Yale. Not only did I get the donation from the donor, but, inspired by Filip, he gave a second donation to sponsor the shyest kid I could select out of all Hong Kong applicants. I still get tears in my eyes when I talk about this young man, the perfect example of an unfinished product.

So, my friends, I want to reiterate how pleased I am to be here and that I wish you much success this weekend, and by success I mean that I hope you leave the conference inspired, confident, armed with a plan of action to address and strengthen your hosting recruitment plans - and I look forward to hearing about all your achievements as we work through this hosting season together. And never forget the importance of the work that you do in changing the lives of young people like Filip!

Thank you.