



Recent NAC board meeting with new friends Becky, myself, Heather, Abby, Catherine and Jennifer

JOINING AN EXPAT GROUP AFTER 35 YEARS

By Karen Storey

I was sitting on a plane that had just taken off from JFK, New York, back to my home in the UK and already that familiar feeling was starting within me. I could never have imagined this 30 odd years ago, when I first knew that I would be making the United Kingdom my permanent home. That this would still be happening to me after every visit to my family in America, a strange ambivalence in leaving my parents, brothers and countless cousins behind, and the home of my childhood and teenage memories. If anything, this feeling seemed to be getting stronger with the passing years. Perhaps it was the realisation that I really am not ever moving back, a thought that had lived somewhere in the recesses of my mind for so many years previously. I love my life in the UK, but on these return trips back to England it's like that whole feeling of being American had been crammed into two weeks and was now being lost to me again. However, I have been here on this plane journey many times before. I knew that after several days, I would soon settle back into my life in the UK, the adopted home that I have come to love. It helps to have a wonderful

husband who is British and a beautiful teenage daughter who is an American/British dual national. I also have a job I enjoy, (I'm a sign language interpreter) and I have very many, absolutely lovely British friends. So even as that ambivalent feeling on the flight began, I knew eventually all would be fine again, the post USA blues a distant memory. Until the following year and the next trip back home to the USA.

My British husband and I married in 2015. I had already been living here as a permanent resident for over 30 years. (I have been married before, well, more than once but that's another story that wouldn't possibly fit into this article!). Our trip to New York last June was the second time Richard had visited the USA with me. He was concerned after this last visit when I went into my usual maudlin few days of post USA depression. I knew it was temporary. My daughter knew too, so neither she nor I worried much about it. But it bothered Richard so he suggested I look for and join an expat group. I was incredulous at the suggestion! An expat group? I had lived in this

country for 35 years! How would someone like me benefit from joining an expat group? Wasn't that for people who were new to the country? Also, I had plenty of British friends and felt completely integrated into the British life style. Surely these clubs were for people who just wanted to confine themselves to American culture and American people? "Besides", I told him, "those groups are only in London. We live in Warwickshire. There won't be anything like that for me here anyway".

A few weeks later, I was getting past my post USA blues and my husband Richard came home with a glossy magazine that he had picked up in London, which just happened to be this one, 'American in Britain'. "Have a look", he said, "There are some American Women's groups listed in here." I left the magazine on the table for a few days before eventually picking it up out of curiosity. When I got to the women's clubs section, to my surprise I found that indeed the clubs listed weren't all in London. To appease my darling husband I googled American Expat groups in Warwickshire. And there it was, The North



Thanksgiving at home in Warwickshire with my daughter Sophie, myself, husband Richard and his sons Bruce and Sam with their partners, Rachel and Kate.



Staying American: Myself and daughter Sophie casting our postal votes in the recent election

American Connection. "A group for expats living in Birmingham, West Midlands, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and all points in between."

So I gave it a try. I remember attending that first coffee morning last September and feeling I was finally home. I was suddenly amongst people who were just like me, they had grown up some place else, had left most of their family behind and either for long or short-term, they were here. It hit me that although I thought I had been fully integrated into the British lifestyle and culture, this was the first time in 35 years I was amongst a group of people where I one hundred percent fit. Although I love my British friends it dawned on me that there would always be things that made me feel slightly apart, something I wasn't consciously aware of before. Was this feeling of being slightly different one of the reasons for my annual post USA blues? Very insignificant things started to come into my consciousness, like a mention from a dear British pal that they were popping over to visit their mother or brother at the weekend, something that cannot be part of my life experience in the UK without a lot of forward planning and expense. I learned that my fellow expats also shared the feeling that you didn't completely belong in America either. An expat's life experiences changes your perspective of the world and you can find yourself thinking and feeling very differently from old friends and family members in the USA.

After that first coffee morning with my new expat friends, I felt lighter, happy. These other

people 'got' me. Within weeks I found myself volunteering to become the NAC's marketing chairperson and joining the Board. I was hooked. Then just recently, I attended my first FAWCO conference in London and I was doubly hooked. Now I was meeting women like myself from all over the UK and the rest of the world too. I have happily just become the FAWCO rep for my club.

So there you have it, my husband was actually right. Joining an expat group after 35 years in the UK has added to my life in a way I could not have predicted. Experiences like for the first time in

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many years, my husband, daughter and I spent Thanksgiving with a group of Americans, about 80 in total! We still had our small British family Thanksgiving celebration at home which included my lovely stepsons and their partners, but sharing the holiday again the following week with a large group of Americans was very special for me. I'm looking forward to the 4th of July celebration my club is planning. Again, it's been many years since I've shared this day with lots of other Americans.

Another thing I was mistaken about - members of expat groups aren't people who just want to mix with other Americans. A lot of the members were just like me. 'Lifers', American ladies settled here permanently, some with British husbands. All had British friends and friendship groups. They also enjoy mixing the cultures and traditions of both countries.

I have only been a member of my expat group since last Autumn so I haven't been back to the USA again just yet. But I have a feeling that it may be slightly easier the next time I am sitting on that plane having just waved my family in America goodbye for another year. This time, I will be coming back home again to a little bit of America in Warwickshire and home to my new, other large American family who just happen to be living near to me right here in England.

For further information on The North American Connection visit www.naconnect.com. For information on various Expat Clubs please visit www.theamericanhour.com/?p=expatriate.clubs.

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