

The year is 1986: Patrick Foley, counsellor at the American School of The Hague, meets with Roberta Enschede of the American Community Council (ACC). This meeting would eventually enrich and improve expat life in the Netherlands.

An institution is born

BY GARY FISHBEIN

Understanding the problem

Working at the American School and through meetings with school administrators, business people, and clergy, Patrick became aware of a problem. There was a preponderance of family conflicts, marital problems, substance abuse, anxiety, and depression in English-speaking households. English-speakers were reluctant to work with Dutch psychologists because of cultural and language differences. As a result, there was no organised response to mental health issues specific to the English-speaking community. Agreeing this needed to be addressed, Patrick and Roberta, through the ACC, and with “invaluable encouragement” from U.S. Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, ensured a *Community Mental Health Needs Assessment* was undertaken.

The assessment’s conclusions confirmed Foley’s and Enschede’s original concerns. It recommended the establishment of a network of “qualified and competent” English-speaking expatriate psychologists; developing educational and professional criteria for network membership; and creating easier access to the network via a “telephone contact point” with an on-call counsellor.

Establishing the solution

Next step: putting all this into place. First, to distinguish itself from the Council, a name was needed. *Administrative Committee to Co-ordinate English Speaking Services*, ACCESS, was chosen. With a clever moni-

ker and a \$10,000 grant from the Medical Division of the U.S. State Department, an institution was born.

Preparing for the needs assessment, a group of therapists with expat practices came together under one unified voice, eventually forming ACCESS’s *Counselling Services Network (CSN)*. Early CSN meetings focused on developing policies and procedures for selecting new members, plus a counsellor on-call system for referrals. This new organisation quickly reached out to expats so they knew that help was available. School counsellors, religious congregations, pastoral care departments, English-speaking consultates, international organisations, and multinational corporations—CSN members developed and presented workshops to them covering a wide spectrum of psychological issues. Then the work of treating expats began.

Here for the community

Twenty-five years later, ACCESS CSN continues to help expats adjusting to life here. Its membership, English-speaking expatriates themselves, claims six nationalities and speaks seven languages, with practices widely distributed geographically. Using a wide range of theoretical backgrounds, these licensed psychotherapists help expats cope with adjustment, isolation, anxiety, depression, trauma, workplace dilemmas, bereavement, marital and family issues, substance abuse, and more. The network has been an invaluable asset, helping expats lead happier, healthier, fulfilling lives. «

[Read more about how ACCESS supports you and your community...](#)



ACCESS - a quarter of a century 'being there'

In a report from the Executive Director in 2003 Barbara Ullman wrote, "...(One) thing I have learned in nearly four years at ACCESS is that the status quo usually lasts no longer than four weeks." Referring then to the frequent rotation of volunteers, this statement is equally applicable to the environment in which ACCESS has always functioned.

BY DEBORAH VALENTINE

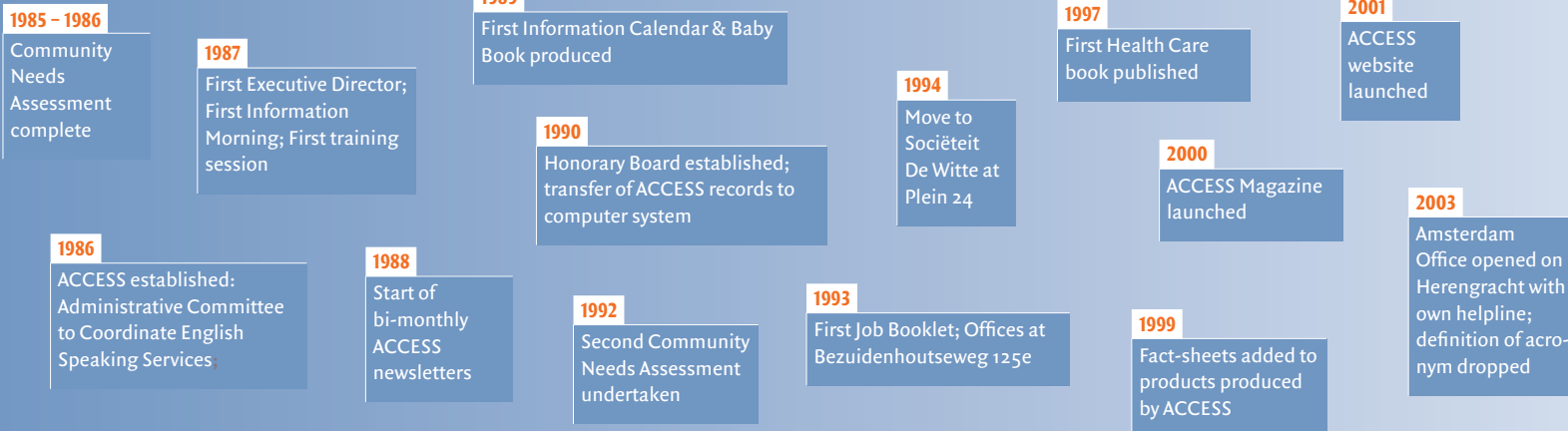
Relying on any sort of status quo is virtually impossible within an organisation that not only relies on expatriate, internationally mobile volunteers, but which is constantly updating its records with new information, supporting a consistent stream of new arrivals, and not be forgotten, continually looking for the financial support it needs to survive.

Building community through support

The origins of ACCESS are firmly rooted in concerns for the mental well-being of the international community of The Hague (see An Institution is Born). This term encompassed not simply the active needs at the time, but had a preventive component as well. ACCESS was also established to "...promote the emotional and social well-being for English-speaking people in the Netherlands."

The volunteer structure was in and of itself a step in this direction. Volunteers, today drawn from a wider pool of nationalities than the past, not only contributed their time and own personal expatriation experience, they also benefited from being a part of something. A community was created, for the individuals volunteering as well as those they assisted. This was built upon by providing courses and training opportunities, offering information and sessions, and creating products that made finding information quick and easy.

ACCESS timeline



The ACCESS Guides, for instance, serve many masters: those given the task to produce and maintain them as well as those who rely on them.

Growing with the times

There has rarely been a status quo. To start with, the ACCESS office has grown from a series of small, temporary offices equipped with a phone and typewriter to an organisation with a front office at The Hague International Centre and a back-office on the Zeestraat. From attending to inquiries from a Rolodex of info cards, to using an electronic database. From having only a newsletter to producing a quarterly magazine and maintaining a website, and more recently connecting via social media. The international community itself has also grown in leaps and bounds, as have the number of English language service providers. Throughout, ACCESS has continued to develop a community for internationals, expats who now rely on us as a place to help, find sound advice and accurate information.

2003 was a turning point for ACCESS. It dropped the definition of its acronym and expanded its services to Amsterdam. The tag line has been edited over time, its purpose not. The expatriate experience, as embodied by its volunteers, still serves the international community. It was therefore with regret that Amsterdam had to close in 2011. Far from reflecting a

lack of need, or availability of dedicated volunteers or trainers, this was a sign of the times. Like any other not-for-profit foundation the challenges of the economic climate have required a moment of refocus.

Since the original grant which got ACCESS going, it managed to find the financial support it needed from corporate and government sponsors, the sale of products, the contributions of the public as well as those from the courses it helped organise. The current economic climate and the reluctance of corporations to continue supporting its activities is requiring that ACCESS take a new strategic approach in order to continue serving the international community.

The challenges of doing what ACCESS does based on a volunteer model in an increasingly competitive market have led the Board to do some strategic thinking for the future. Through the 0900 number and a group of active trainers in the Amsterdam area ACCESS is still able to attend to inquiries from the greater Amsterdam area, as well as the greater The Hague area.

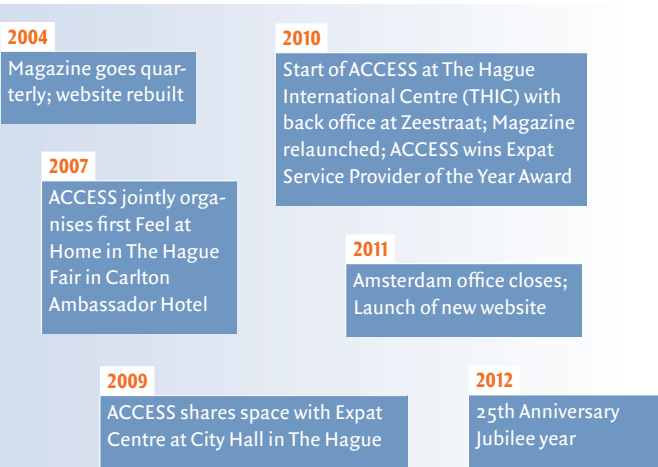
What lies ahead?

A tally of the volunteers who come to the information mornings, those answering phones, emails and on the help desks plus the number of inquiries received are sufficient evidence of the continued need for ACCESS.

In consideration of the changed status quo, a new strategy has been sketched to ensure that ACCESS continues to meet this need. Among the plans:

- Encouraging feedback through a revamped, modern website.
- Awarding of the “ACCESS Approved” label to service providers who truly meet the needs of the international community.
- Revival of the Honorary Board to serve as advocates for ACCESS.
- Renewed marketing of Counsellor services, among others, including its fundraising approach.

ACCESS has ‘been there’ caring for the mental and social well-being of the international community for the past 25 years, and is taking steps to ensure that is the case for years to come. «



Letter from the Board

As the article on twenty-five years of ACCESS describes, many things have changed.

Internationals coming to the Netherlands have changed in their experience, outlook and expectations. Information has changed: much more English-language information is available via (local) government and service providers and in modern ways. Almost half the thousands of the hits on our website are from outside the Netherlands. There is healthy competition for provision of expat services, commercial information and paid assistance.

But some important aspects remain unchanged.

Counselling remains deeply part of ACCESS's DNA. The thirst for free, accurate and impartial information remains high, be it via the website, helpline, courses, email or walk-ins. Our volunteers remain the bedrock of the organisation, which allows us to be truly expats for expats. ACCESS is recognised as a professional organisation which has not only a social value but also an economic value to organisations employing internationals.

ACCESS has supported the international community in the Netherlands for the last quarter of a century. The need for ACCESS is unabated and the Board will continue to strive to ensure that it can continue to do this in the coming years within a rapidly changing world, not only in the greater The Hague area but nationally throughout the Netherlands. «



Gary Hays
Chair ACCESS Board

Call to action

ACCESS is a not-for profit organisation which relies on the expertise, commitment and dedication of countless volunteers. Without their time, effort and own expatriate experience ACCESS would not be able to answer your questions, nor those of your employees – and their families. In many regards ACCESS is providing support to the relocation experience of many – in the answers provided, and the volunteer opportunities created.

ACCESS is grateful for the support of its ongoing Sponsors, Partners and Associates. However in view of decreasing donations from larger corporations, and in order to do more and sustain the benefits extended to the ever changing international community ACCESS does need continued financial support.

- €50 allows ACCESS to recognise the efforts of its Volunteer of the Month
- €100 allows ACCESS to subsidise a monthly gathering of its more than 100 volunteers
- €250 ensures ACCESS has the equipment to meet the community's search for answers
- €500 assists in covering the monthly operating costs of running ACCESS

Donations can be made to:

Stichting ACCESS
ABN-AMRO, Den Haag
Account: 519366972
SWIFT: ABNANL2A

Inquiries about supporting the work of ACCESS can be directed to fnd@access-nl.org

Thank you.

ACCESS

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