

25 Years of ACCESS

Real People Helping Real People

From its humble beginnings in 1986, ACCESS has grown into a leading source of personalized information in the English language for the international expatriate community in the Netherlands.

ACCESS has over 160 enthusiastic volunteers who have experienced the expat relocation process and are able to provide comprehensive information, advice and support, as well as empathize with the experience of individuals on all aspects of living and working in the Netherlands, particularly in The Hague, Amsterdam and Rotterdam regions, also known as the Randstad area of Holland.

The XPat Journal spoke with four executive directors from ACCESS (past & present) and asked them about their experiences.

Beryl Pavey, (British), spent seven years with ACCESS, initially as a sponsor, then as a volunteer, Executive Director, Board Member and also Chairman of the Board.

“My involvement with ACCESS goes back to the mid '90s. I learned about it from Christine Garcia (US), Executive Director of ACCESS at the time, at a British Business Association dinner. She was looking for sponsors for their *De-coding the Netherlands*-lecture, and I was able to help in my PR-capacity with Heerema. I retired at the end of 1999 and joined ACCESS as a volunteer in January 2000.

“I soon realized the value of having volunteers who worked in a company rich in resources, with state-of-the-art equipment. Here was ACCESS, managing to do and produce so much, with so little. Working with cast-offs, old machines. I

was so taken by this. The volunteers all gave of themselves for no financial gain; their reward was helping to make life better for others.

“When Jane Ramshaw (British) left for Australia in early 2000, I took over from her as Executive Director before handing over this position to Barbara Ullman in the summer of 2001, when I joined the Board. When Johan Rautenbach moved to Vienna, I agreed to act as temporary Chairman. I remained on the Board and continued to work as a volunteer when Jan de Boo took over as Chairman, and only stopped towards the end of 2006 in order to spend more time with my family.

“During my seven years with ACCESS I loved meeting the many different nationalities. As a schoolgirl in India, growing up and studying alongside Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Hindus, and Muslims, cultural differences had never been an issue. My grandfather taught me to respect people, regardless of their background. It is always a privilege to meet so many wonderful people from so many parts of the world, all of whom bring along their cultures and enrich our lives. I have some very good memories, especially of the potluck (volunteer) lunches which highlighted such rich culinary traditions.

“The human element in ACCESS enriched me immensely. People need people. It was so good for expats to be able to talk to someone from ACCESS who understood, who could say ‘Yes, I’ve gone through that too’. Some people really struggle with adjusting to a life abroad, and ACCESS can truly help by helping them to cope. There is a tremendous sentiment of goodwill, while ACCESS’s greatest asset is its volunteers.

“The strength of ACCESS is in its ability to be personal in a very impersonal world.”

Barbara Ullman, (British) six years with ACCESS, firstly as volunteer and subsequently as Executive Director

“I think ACCESS is one of the most brilliant ideas of the century. People need help with so many different problems; being uprooted from one’s own country and leaving friends



Beryl, Barbara, Lucie and Gonda

volunteer lunches, the Christmas lunch party with everyone exchanging gifts, those weekly relaxing end-of-the day drinks under the trees on the Plein - a wonderful opportunity to establish friendships.

"I was also proud to be there for the 20-year jubilee, and was delighted that so many of the original ACCESS team members were able to attend the wonderful party hosted for us by the municipality of The Hague.

"I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to meet so many wonderful people that I otherwise would never have met, and exploring cultural differences around the world. I learned a great deal during my time with ACCESS.

"Volunteers are very special people, and working alongside all those enthusiastic, intelligent people was very inspiring. I feel privileged to have been given that opportunity."

**Gonda Labruyere (Dutch),
Executive Director for two years**

"My best memories are of meeting the volunteers and learning about the different cultures and ways of looking at things. What really stood out were the volunteer lunches, seeing how cultures translate into food, in particular using the ingredients available in the Netherlands, and how climate affects the way of cooking. In Holland we need the bacon and potatoes to keep warm. Food also provided a link when talking with people; about a particular

and family often gives rise to strong emotional issues; children find it difficult to settle and just finding your way around a new city can be a problem. Becoming an ACCESS volunteer allows you to help a great many people; while, in taking the time to help others, you also help yourself. Being in a non-commercial environment without any pressure definitely enables many people to regain their confidence. I've seen so many transformations, where volunteers have just blossomed.

"Making friends has also been an important factor and I have very good memories of the social bonding: the monthly

dish they chose, what it represents, how this reminds them of home, remembering food from home - it invites people talk on a very personal level.

"My mother is English, my father is Dutch, I was born here, and I grew up bilingually. My input was to explain to the directors and staff the 'why and how' of the way things are done here in the Netherlands. The Hague office is a distinctive one, as are the volunteers. This is a city of diplomats, NGOs, and international organizations. Amsterdam is where the money is earned. It is like the difference between Barcelona and Madrid. Amsterdam has many volunteers who are trailing

spouses. It has always been such an asset for ACCESS that highly-educated and skilled people find the time to volunteer, and use their very particular specialties. People are very motivated to help other expats, to make coming here easier.

“My credo has always been ‘expats for expats’. Working at ACCESS makes you realize that good people leave, but that new people join, so that there is always enthusiasm and something new. It is interesting from a planning perspective though; it may take 15 volunteers to do 10 hours of work. Some will come in for an hour or two, some for a half day, some a whole day, so you need more than you may think necessary to get things accomplished. I have great respect for Carol Wooley and Anna Lysenko - our office directors at the time - who really managed all of the day-to-day business and dealt with all the frustrations of people leaving, but always managed to do this with gratitude. They celebrated their time of being together and helping at ACCESS.”

**Lucie Scott (British-Australian) *one year, current*
Executive Director**

ACCESS is a not-for-profit organization committed to supporting the international expatriate community in the Netherlands.

It is actively supported by local authorities and government ministries, and provides regular feedback to these institutions on the experiences and expectations of the international expatriate community moving to or already living in the Netherlands.

ACCESS

- has a body of volunteers that are the heart and soul of the organization
- is widely recognized as the primary source of information, advice and support in English in the Netherlands
- was established in 1986, and will be celebrating 25 years of providing service to the expatriate international community in the Netherlands
- has over 160 expatriate international volunteers all of who have experienced the relocation process at least once
- has a ‘Help desk’ that deals with 20,000 queries each year from the expatriate international community - by phone, email, ‘drop-in’ and personal consultation
- has a network of over 40 English-speaking counselors
- has an English-speaking cancer support network - Cancer Link
- has over 30 trainers that offer courses from childbirth in the Netherlands to learning the Dutch language to parenting skills
- offers an extensive database with over 5,000 records and relevant comments and feedback
- has a website, www.access-nl.org, that welcomes over 59,000 visitors who download 25,000 ACCESS information booklets a year from the database - this website will be re-launched in early 2011
- publishes ACCESS magazine - 4 times a year, with a circulation of 15,000, and 60,000 readers

“There is a real buzz in the ACCESS office, and sometimes there aren’t even enough seats for all the volunteers. We have a really good team spirit, and the volunteers’ commitment constantly astounds me; days, evenings, weekends - people with busy lives, some with full-time jobs as well. On a grey day (of which there are many in the Netherlands!) my inspiration and motivation comes from the volunteers, most of whom have been helped by ACCESS themselves, often before they even arrived. They want to return that support by giving it to other people from the expatriate international community.

“The diversity among the volunteers is amazing; people from all four corners of the world - men and women, students to retirees, while 10% of our volunteers are Dutch. One thing they all have in common is that have moved countries at least once, often many times. You may find someone from Uganda sitting next to someone from Switzerland, Taiwan, the US, India... and everyone gets along really well. There’s lots of good-natured humor. It is also interesting to learn not just about the Dutch culture, but about multiple cultures, to experience the diversity, and to see how different people cope with change in their own way.

“We run information mornings, inviting potential volunteers in so we can explain what ACCESS does. Usually 15 or 20 people attend. The information mornings can be found on our website; we’re always looking for volunteers. Right now we are looking for people with event management and fundraising experience to help us with our upcoming 25-year anniversary celebrations.

“In the Netherlands, a position as a volunteer is an excellent addition to a CV. Furthermore, for those who want to develop other skills a volunteer position is an excellent opportunity to give something new a try. Relocation can often be a catalyst for career change. Due to the economic decline and resulting redundancies, many of those who are retrenched decide to stay in the Netherlands - and volunteering can be an important boost to their confidence.

“ACCESS is all about ‘real people helping real people’. It came about in the pre-Internet/Google days, and the ‘old-fashioned’ personal touch is what still makes us unique today. There is a real sense of community, as our volunteers and clients have all been through similar situations. We help with real crises, as well as the important elements for a successful and happy life in the Netherlands - such as housing, education, health care, or the lighter stuff like where to get your legs waxed!

“ACCESS has a well-respected position in the international expat community and has worked together with the Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency and the West Holland Foreign Investment Agency, who while attracting foreign investment into the Netherlands are able to promote the ACCESS service to companies relocating here. As 20% of expatriate

international assignments fail due to the fact that the family (usually the traveling partner) is unhappy, these organizations and many others see the value that ACCESS delivers in helping families settle in the Netherlands. When the relocation service company clock stops, ACCESS is still there throughout the life of an expat assignment, not just at the start of it. "The ACCESS website is being re-launched shortly and will be more community-based while continuing to provide all the information an expatriate will need during their life in the Netherlands.

"To continue the work we do, we need corporate support, and rely on their funding. As companies continue to cut back on the services provided to the expatriate international community, it is imperative that ACCESS continue its work."

So what's the status at present? "We've revamped the ACCESS magazine, produced USB sticks with need-to-know information for newcomers, and our new website will be launched by the summer. We want to expand upon the organization, so that we can help expats in Rotterdam, Maastricht, Eindhoven, and beyond. And of course we want to make our 25th year a fantastic celebration of the service that the ACCESS volunteers have been providing to the international expatriate community.

Contact

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The Expat Awards

Celebrating Exceptional Expats, Employers and Service Providers

The Expat Awards have been created to recognize the efforts and successes of the international and expat community in the Netherlands. Last year, the award for Expat Service Provider of the Year went to ACCESS (see the previous article).

The Expat Awards are divided into three categories:

- **Expat of the Year** for the person they feel sets the best example of what an expat should be and who can be considered an ambassador for the international community in the Netherlands
- **Expat Employer of the Year** for the organization that has shown exceptional dedication to the well-being of its international employees through support, service and opportunities
- **Expat Service Provider of the Year** for the organization (either commercial or non-profit), club or individual that provides superior service to the expat and international community in the Netherlands.

How to Vote for 2011

Until March 20, you can submit your vote for the year 2011, by visiting www.expatofttheyear.nl. The five finalists, which include *XPat Media*, publisher of *The XPat Journal* introduce themselves through a selection of videos posted on the site.



The finalists have been selected by a professional jury, consisting of: Maarten Bremer - Director of Intercultural Management & Communication at the Royal Tropical Institute; Julie E. Ruterbories - U.S. Consul-General; Piet Creemers - Senior Vice President Corporate Personnel & Organization at Océ NV; Lucie. J. Scott - Executive Director of ACCESS; and Rick Scholten - Director of the Non-Residents Department of the ABN AMRO Bank.

The Expat Awards is an initiative of the international recruitment agency Undutchables, news site and service provider Expatica, and Nyenrode Business University.

The winners will be decided through a combination of public voting and jury assessment and will receive their awards during a ceremony at Nyenrode Business University on March 29th.

More information can be found on: www.expatofttheyear.nl