

Immersing Into The Local Culture

Bursting the (Expat) Bubble: How American Teens in London Engage with the Local Culture

Over many years I have worked with expatriate families looking for schools in London, I have met many parents who ponder whether a *disadvantage* of enrolling their children in the American international schools is that it prevents their children from engaging in the local community and the English culture. Particularly in Britain where the host country language is not a barrier for Americans (not the case in many other countries), the local school seems an attractive option. Parents perceive, sometimes



Sophia Zorek (centre) with her fellow percussionists on break during a LSSO rehearsal

justifiably-so, that international schools may be insular and isolated institutions with few host country families represented.

Families nonetheless choose international schools because they more effectively address their school criteria: a better match for educational continuity, a more inclusive or relevant curriculum, instructional differentiation that accommodates the learning styles and aptitudes of diverse students, and shared understanding of standardised testing, accreditations, or university counselling for students destined to enter universities outside of Britain. Lastly, these schools know how to welcome newly-arrived families at short notice year-round. Some international schools in Greater London have evolved into convenient 'one-stop shops' that, in addition to the educational services they offer, become the hub for all extra-curricular activities as well as out-of-school-hours social life. Yet how often one has heard an expat parent lament, 'We would have liked to have gone to an English school so that our child could have made British friends and experienced more of the British culture...' So, must families who opt for these schools forfeit the opportunity for their children to get to know the locals?

I was recently invited to a delightful dinner with an old college friend whose family had just relocated with his company from Japan where his children all went to American schools. His youngest son, William, a freshman at the American School in London (ASL) was an aspiring basketball player who worried he was not quite going to make the cut for ASL's competitive varsity teams. Determined to find a way to continue honing his skills, he used the internet, maps and friends' suggestions to explore ways of playing with local basketball teams. William explains, 'I rarely met any other Americans, but I made friends with British, Filipino, Indian and Korean kids who I would not have met otherwise. After a year, I actually feel like a part of their basketball community.' He eventually did qualify for the ASL junior varsity team, but William chose to continue playing at nearby St. Georges High School, a local comprehensive, with the Westside Ballers who compete nationally. 'The team members come from all over London, representing various backgrounds, and I am



Sophia Zorek with Gill Tarlton, Head of Strings at CYM, at LSSO's recent Birmingham concert.

the only American. All of this practice, the new experiences, and the new competition, not only developed me as a basketball player, but made me more comfortable and more aware of London and what the city has to offer. I made the varsity team at ASL, but I will continue to play basketball at Westside, and meet up with old friends at Ravenscourt Park'. William has always been very happy at ASL with his new friends and classmates, and his parents feel he's adapted easily, but he observed that the kids 'mostly spend time with each other' and that his school is in many respects 'a sort of bubble'. William's initiative impressed me, and inspired me to explore how other expat American teens find ways to integrate with local peers.

I was reminded of a US embassy family, newly-transferred from an African posting, whose daughter, Katie, a middle-schooler at Southbank International School, wanted to develop her singing voice beyond what was available at school. She joined the Finchley Children's Choir, a 50-year-old choir that has performed at the Royal Albert Hall, Royal Opera House, National Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company, at Notre Dame in Paris, and for HM The Queen, singing with world-class orchestras such as the LSO, BBC Symphony, and Royal Philharmonic. Through the Choir, Katie auditioned and got a part in an ENO production of Hansel and Gretel at

the Coliseum. It was a thrilling experience for her classmates and teachers to see her on the London stage. For Katie, this was not merely a musical enrichment activity, but also a new network of friends with birthday parties and sleepovers, and an opportunity to get to know her British peers on a much deeper level.

Fourteen-year-old Dwight School student Amelia arrived with her sister and brother in August when her father's company transferred them at relatively short notice. Back in Kentucky, and Idaho before that, Amelia had been a keen soccer player since elementary school and had played in state-wide tournaments. Amelia's mother learned about the Islington Borough Ladies Football Club and within two months of joining, Amelia was made girls' team captain 'because my coach said I'd be a good role model'. She was also selected by the London FA Player Development Centre-North London team, one of 27 teams nationwide. She plays on Dwight's girls football team, but with the Islington and London PDC leagues she plays to a higher standard, while at the same time interacting with local girls with whom she shares a love of 'the beautiful game'. 'There are often no subs for the IBLFC team, so the whole team is on the field for the duration, which allows me plenty of time on the pitch. The PDC is a level up from local teams in the FA Girls England Talent Pathway, giving me more opportunities to practice and develop skills and technique. We have matches in cities all over the UK'. Amelia was happy to move to London; she knew a bit about Britain's football heritage but has learned a lot more in her first months here. 'Most of the girls have been playing together for several years, and I am the new one. The way they approach the sport is different because they start developing skills at a younger age and they are football-mad! It's definitely been a positive experience; it's given me a sense of purpose. Being the only American has not made me different to them – After all, people are people!'

Sophia, a senior at ASL, is a percussionist whose passion for music has meant a significant time commitment throughout her secondary education. Following in her singer-mother's path, she has pursued her own musical interests as a member of the London Schools Symphony Orchestra (LSSO), and the Centre for Young Musicians (CYM). She auditioned with CYM as a cellist in 7th grade when she moved back to London from New York; this led to another audition, this time as a percussionist, for the LSSO. The LSSO, founded over 60 years ago, is sponsored by the City of London Corporation and is managed by the Centre for Young Musicians, a Division of the Guildhall School. Under the artistic direction of conductor Peter Ash (also American), the LSSO consists

of about 100 students, some of whom later become professionals. They have worked under such world class conductors as Sir Colin Davis and Sir Simon Rattle. This rehearsal schedule has meant that Sophia has visited the US only twice during her secondary school years, unlike her twin brother who goes annually. When we met she was steeped in the college application process, and she hopes music will feature in her university studies. She was immediately recognisable to me when I interviewed her as she made such a lasting impression at the LSSO's September Barbican concert where she featured in Strauss's *Don Quixote* playing many of the percussion instruments she has mastered over the past six years (they include timpani, snare drums, chimes, xylophone, marimba, vibraphone, glockenspiel, cymbals, clappers, gongs, tamtam, wind machine, bass drum, maracas, wood block, castanets, and triangle). 'I feel very British; both my parents are American, but my mother lived here and attended ASL as a teen. The CYM and LSSO have taken me out of the bubble and I feel I have adapted to the culture here, more than my brother has. Some of it may just be personality, but I know I am more reserved, a bit 'more British' especially living and travelling in the summer with the Orchestra, we share much more than just the music. Although I hope to go to an American university, it may feel very foreign to me.' She and her brother may end up at the same place which she acknowledges might be helpful for re-adjusting. Sophia has not regretted the heavy commitment and feels she has gained so much through her musical activity.

'Bubbles' are a feature of many expatriate family experiences, but in Britain at least it seems that many young Americans have made it a point of 'bursting the bubble' to enrich their lives here as they develop their Third Culture Kid traits as open-minded bridge-builders. William, Katie, Amelia and Sophia are wonderful examples of how Third Culture Kids can be exemplary young American ambassadors.

The LSSO's next Barbican performance is on 7 January 2015.

*Mary Langford is a London-based international educationalist with more than 30 years' experience specialising in the area of international school placements and supporting families, TCKs, and schools with the transition process. She is currently Director of Admissions at Dwight School London. Her Master's research at University of Bath centred on how international schools respond to internationally-mobile pupils. Mary will be speaking on **Raising Internationally Mobile Children: Understanding and Nurturing the Third Culture Kid Experience** at the 2015 Expat Conference and Exhibition on Monday 2nd February 215 at Hotel Russell, London.*

FREE SEMINAR

Monday 2nd February
2015 at 10.30am

Raising Internationally Mobile Children: Understanding and Nurturing the Third Culture Kid Experience

A significant reason for failure of international assignments revolves around the 'soft' issues - the adaptability of families and children.

For the majority, when properly understood and managed, the benefits of growing up abroad can far outweigh the challenges. This session for parents and professionals who are working with internationally-mobile families will share research-based insights into how a global experience can enhance future educational and career opportunities for children, and how to manage the stumbling blocks encountered along the way. While parents naturally worry about how moving away from the home culture and language will impact their children, when approached with knowledge and optimism, it can be an enriching life-changing experience.

Presented by Mary Langford whose own international journey began at the age of two, and who has worked with international schools and families as an educator, researcher, writer, speaker, independent consultant and trainer for over 34 years. She is currently Director of Admissions for Dwight London School.

This free seminar is taking place at The Corporate Relocation Conference & Exhibition on Monday 2nd February 2015, at 11.30am.

To register your free place in this seminar please email helen@theamericanhour.com

The Conference is taking place at Hotel Russell, Russell Square, Bloomsbury, London.