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the best of both worlds!”

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MAKE THE MOST OF LIVING IN EINDHOVEN: THE **SPOUSES PROGRAM** OF THE HUB

Moving to a different country and giving up your old life is not an easy decision, especially if the choice was not entirely yours, but mostly a result of your partner's new job. But how helpful would it be to arrive in this new life and immediately be shown the ropes by people

with the same experience? The spouses program shows you how to get around, settle in and provides plenty of opportunities to make new friends!

Misha Benschop gave us the ins and outs of this new program at The Hub.

About Misha Benschop:

Misha Benschop is a professional trainer at *InSync* with first-hand experience as an expat; she lived in 5 different countries over a period of 12 years. Committed to facilitating personal growth of expats she is enthusiastic to share her broad experience and knowledge through her trainings in Cultural Awareness. She has worked with the Hub on a voluntary basis to set up the Spouses Program and run the Pilot.

First of all: can you explain why this spouses program was started? Why is it important that something like this exists?

Because moving to a different country is a major life event! Most people that come to live here from abroad have gone through a stressful process before their plane even touches the ground and that's only the beginning. Your spouse comes home one day and over dinner tells you they received an offer they can't refuse. It means moving to Eindhoven! It's exciting because it means a step up the career ladder. Your spouse assures you it will be great to live in the Netherlands, the kids can go to an international school and you'll find a job there in no time. So you sell or rent out your house, pack up your things, cancel insurances, sports club membership, resign from your job and so on. It is a huge step but a very exciting one nonetheless. Once in Eindhoven, it begins all over again. This time you're not 'breaking down' an entire life, you're 'setting one up'. Only now in Dutch, with little or no help. It can be exciting, but also stressful and frustrating at times.

Six months down the line almost everything is back on track: a new house, car, bank account, library card, school and finally a few new friends. It has not all gone smoothly but you managed! But often this whole process is taken for granted by spouse, kids

and employer because one rarely sees what it takes.

I think we should give these spouses more credit, because it is not called a 'major life event' without a reason! A few love it and become 'professional' expats who move every other year, others stay but will never

do it again and more than a few find it hard to find new fulfilment (unfortunately finding a job is for the select few) and some seriously risk becoming bitter or depressed. It is known that up to 30% of postings fail because the husband or wife of the foreign employee has a hard time settling in and they would rather go back home. One can only imagine how bad it gets before admitting failure and what a social, financial and personal upheaval it is to everyone involved. That is the reason we started with this spouses program: it shouldn't be necessary to re-invent the wheel over and over again and everyone should get the chance to settle in and feel welcome!

So now we know why the program was started.

But how did you go about actually setting it up?

TU/e saw the success of their own Get In Touch-program and we felt a program like this was a logical addition to the social activities at The Hub. In the autumn of 2011, Brainport initiated a first brainstorm session and in September 2012, roughly 40 very enthusiastic expat wives and professionals got together and shared their insights. As it turned out, this was a very practical session and in hindsight it was the birth of what now is 'The Spouses Program'.

Afterwards Joost van Dijk from the Hub went home with five flip-over sheets full of yellow post-it notes with ideas. He then

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gave me a call and since I have the necessary experience and knowledge I gladly jumped in.

We sat down and put all the information together into what eventually became the four-step program. The Hub facilitated the start-up and I managed the content, with the help of 12 volunteer expat women. We found eight ladies willing to test the program in a pilot. Even though it was a trial run, it became clear very quickly that the chosen path was a good one. For me, after 12 years as an expat wife it is heart-warming to be able to pass my experience on and really help eight women get on their feet again. Hopefully there will be many more in the future.

So the program consists of four steps?

Yes. The focus of the program is to 'help people help themselves'. It's a volunteer project 'by expats for expats' ideally run by a professional and has social, practical and psychological elements. A participant goes through the four steps during six morning sessions in varying forms:

1. Getting ready: pre-departure information to help make better-informed choices.
2. Touch down: social connection and practical information for the new arrivals.
3. Finding your feet: how to deal with cultural, psychological and career change.
4. Making new sense: bringing new plans for a fulfilling purpose to life; be it a job, volunteer work, a hobby or education.

The program is designed to give all non-working expat spouses

tools to make living here a more enjoyable, successful experience and decrease the return rate.

So those are the steps, but what does the process of going through them 'look like'?

Spouses follow the program in groups of 8-10. When they get to know each other they will form a new trusted network that makes them feel safe to share and help/support each other but also share good times and go out together.

A key element is to re-evaluate their situation and learn to see it as an opportunity rather than a threat and build a fulfilling life for themselves again. After settling successfully, some might also take

the opportunity to help new arrivals by becoming volunteers of the spouses program themselves. Even for people coming to live with a Dutch partner or for Dutch nationals returning from a long stay abroad this program may offer the necessary help when (re-)integrating.

How do you see the future of the program?

As said, the pilot was successful and the spouses program is now ready to start. We are waiting for participants to get things going. I hope it will finally become a priority for employers to give the spouses the support they so dearly need. No matter how great the job or pay, coming home to an unhappy spouse every night is of major influence. Our dream for the future is that every spouse arriving in the Eindhoven region gets access to the tools to make living here a success!

For more info, contact: spousesprogram@thehubeindhoven.nl

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