

MOBILITY

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THE WORKPLACE MOBILITY ASSOCIATION

IN IT TO
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UNDERSTANDING THE PROCUREMENT PROCESS

FROM EXPAT SPOUSE TO

**MOBILITY
CAREER**

TALENT SWAP

50 HIGH-POTENTIALS, 18 COUNTRIES

**CULTURAL
KNOWLEDGE**

A NEW IMMIGRATION REQUIREMENT?



From the
INSIDE
OUT

Expatriate Spouses Parlay
Experiences Into Global
Mobility Careers

By Michelle Sandlin, CRP, GMS-T

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*“I can really relate to the spouse and children
who may be moving unexpectedly.”*

— Mary Piper

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Mary Piper, originally from London, is director of operations and relocation for a real estate company in Houston.

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wo of the most fascinating things about the people who are involved in the mobility industry, are: 1) the fact that so many of us ended up here by default, and 2) how many people have turned their personal relocation experiences into thriving careers of their own.

I, too, found my way into this industry by default. True, I had a couple of relocation experiences of my own, but none were of epic proportions. By epic, I am referring to moving across countries, continents, and cultures. Some do that just as spouses or partners, and some do it with full-blown families in tow. The latter are the ones who impress me the most.

Some go willingly and with excitement, while others go kicking and screaming. They leave their comfort zones, knowing they will never be the same. Life as they know it is changing, and they will be forever changed.

I would like to introduce you to three remarkable women who parlayed their personal international relocation experiences into careers in global mobility.

Recently each of these women candidly shared their stories and insights of how their personal relocation experiences have given them an edge in being able to care for their clients and have a deeper understanding of their needs. Below are excerpts from each of our conversations.

‘I KNOW HOW DIFFICULT IT IS’

Leslie Sjurseth is an American who first left the country in 1982 as what, back then, was called a “trailing spouse.” Since that time, she has accompanied her husband on several international assignments. She has also made a career out of assisting international clients from all over the world with settling into life in the Houston area through her own destination services business.

MS: *So, Leslie, how did you go from being an expat spouse to being a relocation professional?*

LS: My husband is my biggest advocate, and when we moved back from Australia, his company was working with Prudential Relocation, and they were organizing meetings for him and talking to him about training and their new destination services program. He told them that his wife would be perfect for that. So, I went for an interview to be a trainer. When they met me, they told me about this new role, which

back then was called a cultural mentor. So I became a cultural mentor, and I loved it.

Did you have a career before that?

When we moved overseas I couldn’t work. In those days spouses couldn’t work, so I was a stay-at-home mom. I had a homesale company, and I had done really well with the company, but when we got transferred I had to give everything up. So when I came back, I was hoping to find something else.

What did it feel like to give everything up?

It was hard. I’ve done it three times now, and you lose your identity and you have to start all over again.

You are currently living in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, with your husband—again as an accompanying spouse. How are you able to keep your business going?

Between Skype and BroadVoice on my house phone and email, I can communicate pretty much anytime. I have people in Houston who I have connected with who I contract out to take clients to [the] Social Security [office] and to get their driver’s license, and I make connections with people while I am over there.

What do you find most rewarding about what you do?

I really enjoy helping people and nurturing them and giving them a good experience, because I know how difficult it is.

How has having a career in destination services helped you in your own relocation experiences?

I know what I’m supposed to do and that it takes a while to get settled. The phrase I say is “sink or swim.” You just know that you have to be very proactive, and when you’re in these locations you don’t always have people who are going to help you. So you have to figure out how to do it.

‘YOU REALIZE THAT WE’RE NO DIFFERENT’

Tashi Nibber moved to the U.S. from India and later relocated to Houston when her husband was transferred there. Having lived overseas herself, she understands how invaluable a personal connection to home can be for expats trying to be productive in their work while acclimatizing themselves and their families to a new environment. She is vice president,



Leslie Sjurseth, right, with Karen Womack at the Summer Palace in Beijing



Tashi Nibber at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris

marketing and business development, at US Global Mail, an expat mail forwarding service.

MS: Tashi, how did you get into the relocation business?

TN: Moving here was just a part of my husband's job. He was in oil and gas, so we moved to Houston from San Francisco, but originally we were both in India. Because he was working with expats firsthand, he kind of understood the expat world, and I kind of understood it from the spouse perspective. We did have an opportunity to move to Norway, and I actually refused. He decided to do something else and move on from the corporate world and decided to become an entrepreneur. He wanted to do something that was still expat-related because that's what his experience had been.

How have your relocation experiences helped you in serving your customers?

I think it makes me a little more empathetic, because I can understand what they're going through.

What do you find most rewarding about what you do?

One is being able to take care of this aspect that we do as a business in making sure their mail doesn't get lost. It makes me feel good that we're able to do

that. The other aspect is also because I travel a lot and I have a kid with allergies, so I understand what it's like for other people when they are going overseas to travel with kids or to relocate to another country. So I feel good about being able to ship them gluten-free cookies or dairy-free bread or stuff like that.

What do you find most exciting about the relocation industry?

Personally, for me, it's meeting people who are living in different parts of the world. I think also when you travel you meet people and you realize that we're no different. Everybody is essentially the same. The only differences we have are cultural.

What do you see as the changing role of the expat spouse?

The stories I hear from people are that it's still hard for them to find work as an expat spouse. Unfortunately we're still in that era where you kind of have to give up your career if you want to be a full-time expat spouse where you're moving from one country to the next every two to three years. You can't have a full-time career. And I think that's what companies are struggling with as well. You have a

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— Leslie Sjurseth

high-potential person that you want to send overseas for an assignment, but the spouse may also have a high-potential job and not want to move.

‘THIS IS WHERE I SHOULD BE’

Last, but not least, is Mary Piper, who hails from London. She is director of operations and relocation for Bernstein Realty in Houston. Piper works firsthand with corporations and relocation management companies to assist with the homefinding and home marketing needs of relocating individuals and families. She knows what it’s like to be a stranger in a strange land and how difficult it can be to manage the language barriers—even when the language is still English.

MS: How did you get into the relocation game, Mary?

MP: I entered relocation by default. When we first moved here, I had a lot of interest in real estate because I’d been looking at homes for us. But my first taste of this being a really cool job was during my first relocation, when a woman picked us up from our hotel and showed us houses. I didn’t even know that was a job, and I thought that was really cool. It was the ‘80s in Holland. Then, many years later, I found myself in a position where I realized I had come full circle and that I was actually doing the job that I thought was so cool. Our company had a vacancy in the relocation department, and everybody knew, apart from me, that this is where I should be. Ultimately it made perfect sense, because I was going to be talking to people about moving to Houston and actually knew what it was like to be taken out of your safe place, your family and friends, and be moved to a strange city.

What do you find most rewarding about it?

It’s always exciting, because I don’t know whom I’m going to talk to from one day to the next and what their needs will be. It’s very exciting to be able to talk to them and listen to their needs.

How have your personal relocation experiences helped you in your career?

A lot of times when I am speaking to the transferee, my question will be, “How does your partner feel about the move, and how are the children dealing with this?” Knowing that when I moved here I was

the reluctant spouse and I had reluctant children, I can really relate to the spouse and children who may be moving unexpectedly.

How does it feel having come full circle from expat spouse to relocation director?

I can’t believe how lucky I am to end up in a career in relocation. When coming to Houston I didn’t even know that this was a career choice. So, I feel very lucky that I ended up where I should be, and sometimes it’s still amazing to me.

Do you ever see yourself doing anything else?

No! Every day is different. Every phone call is going to be different, and everyone’s experiences are going to be different. It’s so rewarding when people contact you from different cultures at the end of each move to tell you how great that was and they appreciate how easy you, and the team, and the agent, and the relocation company, made their whole transition for them.

A PASSION TO ASSIST OTHERS

While their stories might be quite different from one another, each of these women has experienced relocation from the inside out, and all have a passion for being able to assist their clients and customers from a place of thoughtful compassion.

They are all mothers who moved with their husbands and children. They, too, were homesick and missed their families and friends, but they learned to be the cheerleaders, while shielding their children from seeing that they might also be scared, or stressed, or lonely.

They go to work every day with the memory of what it was like to be new and awkward and have a hundred questions.

They know what others are going through as they move to foreign locations, and they enjoy being able to ease some of the stresses and concerns and make people feel a little more comfortable about these life-changing moments. *M*

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