Raty's Great Britain Boom

The British and Expat Families Group of Katy offers general advice and support for non-natives, plus a bit of fun

Written by Julie Estep | Select Photography by Juliana Evans

Between the Royal Wedding and the London Summer Olympics, America has recently been hit with a British Invasion of pop culture. But to some Katyites, the UK represents far more than the land of Big Ben and Fish 'n' Chips; it's home. And when home feels far away, the British and Expat Families Group of Katy is there to help them adjust to life across the pond.

Oil Industry Boom Brings the Brits

The booming oil industry has brought an influx of British employees and their families to Houston. Vanessa Heintz moved to Katy in 2008 with her husband and children, and that October founded the British and Expat Families Group with friends Micky Jukes and Jane Barlow who have since returned overseas. The group was created as a means to help other transplants adjust to a relocated life far from friends and family. "When you first come over it's such a culture shock, you need a support group," says Amber Slaven, who moved from Scotland to Katy three years ago and now serves as organizer for the group. "Most people say it's been a lifeline."

News of the group quickly spread by word of mouth. Coorganizer of events, Sam Richards from the south coast of England, recalls tagging along to an event with Barlow before joining. The group, which consisted of only about 30 people last year, now has 94 members and is continuing to grow. Members range in age from four months old to 72 and hail from the UK, Australia, South Africa, Norway, and Singapore.

Royally Fun Outings

The group hosts regular activities such as play groups, coffee mornings, ladies' nights out, and family outings, as well as pub quizzes and garden parties—any excuse to come together and recreate British cuisine like bubble and squeak or bangers and mash. And when their native cuisine takes its toll, there is "Exfat," a group that weighs in together.

news, and more



As a group they watched the royal wedding in Richards' decorated backyard with about 100 guests. And this past June, they commemorated the Queen's Diamond Jubilee by hosting their first formally organized event at Willow Fork Country Club. In addition to celebrating traditional British holidays like the Grand National horse race and Pancake Day (Shrove Tuesday), they also organize holiday parties. "Holidays like Thanksgiving and 4th of July can be quite lonely," says Richards. "You really notice the lack of family during Christmas."

Acclimating to Katy

Fun and games aside, the group helps those who are new to the area get socially acclimated. For example, "understanding the health care system was a difficult part of the move," Richards, an ICU nurse who has been here for three years explains. "A few people have had babies over here," says Heintz. "And that can be hard because their families are far away, so we provide a pseudo-family."

Also in need of support are the expat children who didn't grow up being quite as involved with competitive school activities like football or cheerleading. "There's a more positive environment here as far as encouragement and trying your hardest," says Heintz, "but as an outsider, it can be frustrating when it's difficult to get in on the action." Also, teenagers who would be considered adults capable of making their own decisions in the UK at 18, have to rely on their parents for more things in suburban America, so it can be especially challenging for them to settle in.

As for the wives, "a lot of us can't actually work here because we came over for our husbands' jobs," says Slaven. "We do a lot of volunteer work, so that is how we bring our skills into the community." As far as philanthropic work goes, the group finances the schooling for a family in Zimbabwe and is looking for a local charity that is in need of support. Heintz, from northern Wales, adds "we want to demonstrate that we wish to make a difference in Katy."

The Best of Both Worlds

Though members of the group still miss British food, pubs, friends, and family, they love Katy's spacious homes, activities for children, and reasonably priced eateries. "The

zine.com KATY MAGAZINE • 93

KATY'S FAMILY LAW LEADERS



The attorneys and staff of Travers & Travers are Family Law Leaders offering clients a diversity of skills and utilizing an effective teamwork approach to every family law matter.

We understand the uniqueness of each client's family law situation and are experienced in all aspects of family law litigation from mediation to complex property issues and jury trials.

SHERRIE HAUSSNER TRAVERS Board Certified, Family Law Texas Board of Legal Specialization

> MACK J. TRAVERS Licensed in Texas and Missouri





©2010 Katy Magazine

local amenities and swimming pools are a real treat for a British person," says Heintz. "Texans are very friendly," she says. "We've really been welcomed into the community." So rather than just celebrating all things foreign, the British and Expat Families Group celebrates the best of both worlds. **KM**

JULIE ESTEP was born and raised in Katy, Texas.





HOW TO JOIN UP

This is a family-oriented group suited to parents (married or single) with children of all ages and empty nesters. The fees are \$10 per family. Visit meetup.com/British-and-Expat-Moms-of-Katy.

neetup