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Trailing spouse Annette Lang started Expat Kitchen after friends requested that she teach their maids how to cook Western dishes, as she had with her own helper, Josa. The business has now expanded to offer day cooking courses in gluten-free or healthy hawker food and catering for functions.

Expat spouses earning their keep

Dwindling expat packages and desire for own career push some to set up businesses

Lydia Vasko

It used to be a first-class ticket to easy street – expat wife or hubby lands a flash job in Singapore with lavish benefits and the trailing spouse trots along to swig gin and tonics at the tennis club. But with dwindling expat packages these days, the reality is quite different for many trailing spouses, who often have to find something paying to do. As a result, spouses who were former Wall Street bankers become fashion designers, insurers turn to hairdressing, IT experts find new lives as photographers, and others shape-shift into swim instructors or caterers here.

Many of them find themselves using the Singapore stint as a golden opportunity to ditch their old day jobs, re-invent themselves, go it alone and create their own jobs – as local bosses are wary of trailing spouses, seeing them as temporary and lacking commitment.

Dr Kerr Inkson, adjunct professor in human resource management at New Zealand's Waikato University, who is here working on a book on trailing spouses, notes: "Most of them are aware that they could start off a career here, but then, in a few years' time, they will go back (home) or go somewhere else and the whole process will be repeated and the career may have to be abandoned." The need to forge something of their own is essential for those suddenly uprooted from their jobs, friends and comfort zones back home, notes Dr Yvonne McNulty, assistant professor at the Singapore campus of James Cook University, who specialises in career and mobility issues of trailing spouses.

When leaving everything behind in favour of your spouse's career, "your self-esteem definitely takes a hit and your confidence level vanishes", she says.

Her research found that 79 per cent of trailing spouses worked before going overseas, but once they arrive here as an expat, the number drops to 36 per cent. This is despite Singapore not having work visa restrictions for trailing spouses.

She notes that many spouses are keenly aware of their tenuous position and lack of finan-

cial security. "There's this overriding perception that you have no control over your life, you're at the whim of your working partner, and that you don't need the money," she says.

"But sometimes families just can't afford one person to give up his or her career," says Dr McNulty, an Australian who has been a trailing spouse to a software executive for the past 11 years. When a trailing spouse does find a job, she notes, it is usually on a contract basis at pay far below what the spouse earned at home. It is no wonder many people write off corporate work and begin anew, forging a new identity and gaining some financial independence to boot.

"Singapore is an easy place to come and start a business. And there's this in-built expat community of women who've been there and done it, which helps enormously with identity, self-esteem and confidence," notes Dr McNulty.

Take Ms Karen Lucas, who left her position as an IT support manager in London when she moved here with her then fiancé, now husband, in 2006.

The 40-year-old South African says: "I needed a Plan B. Becoming financially dependent is a very hard thing for people who are independent."

Plan B came in the form of a long-time love – photography. "It finally dawned on me that I could take that passion and turn it into a career."

The business degree holder started Baobab Photography from her Chancery Lane house, picking up freelance assignments and developing a client base by word of mouth.

Four years on, she splits her time between studio work and teaching photography four times a week, out of her home in Ming Teck Park that she shares with her husband, David, 40, a purchasing manager for Procter & Gamble.

Jumping in at the deep end also worked for Briton Kim Banus, 46, a former banker who became a swimming instructor after moving here in 2005 with her husband, a senior adviser at the Singapore Exchange.

The competitive swimmer, who helped teach her three children to swim back in England,

was offered a teaching position at a local swim club. Her part-time job became full-time and eventually led to her going it alone as a private coach in April last year.

"Starting a new career for me was easy as I already had a passion for what I was doing," she says. "My first clients were introduced to me by friends."

She now teaches six days a week and has around 70 students, ranging from six months to 50 years old.

Word-of-mouth also worked for caterer Annette Lang, 43.

When the Australian moved here in 2002 with her husband, Simon, 45, an IT business relations manager, she was disappointed by the quality of affordable Western food options. The "serious foodie" and former head of product development for an Australian food gift manufacturer started teaching her maid to whip up Western dishes. Soon, friends began raving about the food.

"I'd say: 'I haven't done a thing! Josa, my helper, has done all of it.' So they were like, 'Can you teach mine?'" she recounts. Mrs Lang's friends began sending their maids to her Newton apartment to learn the same skills, including food presentation and hygiene.

Two years later, in 2009, teaching 12 maids at a time in her living room became a crush, so she opened a kitchen in Little India, where she regularly holds two classes a day. Her firm Expat Kitchen also offers day cooking courses in gluten-free or healthy hawker food and caters for functions.

She now plans on franchising Expat Kitchen in cities around Asia and is in talks to open branches in Jakarta and Shanghai. "I've created my own little cooking world," she says.

Another act of creation was pulled off by former Wall Street broker Holly Tupper Beinhorn, in her 50s, who moved here in 1987. It wasn't so easy for a trailing spouse to work or start her own company while on a dependant's visa back then. So she decided to take a leave of absence from broking and took classes in jewellery-making, and even trained in traditional goldsmith shops here in Singapore.

"I was the crazy housewife, at least twice as old as anyone else. But it was a lot of fun," she says. She soon found her own style – designing jewellery with Greco-Roman and early Indonesian influences – which she describes as "the East meets the American fine arts and crafts movement".

She now designs her own fashion label Holly Tupper, with a boutique in Palais Renaissance. "I make what I want to buy, very small production runs of stylish women's clothes... I have the best job in the world: I am an artist and every day I get to express my creativity through my work," she enthuses.

Spouse Vanessa Sandham, 32, a former financial adviser, saw moving overseas as a chance to pursue her dream of being a hairdresser. Before leaving England for Malaysia, where her husband took up a bank assurance job in 2003, she went back to school to pick up vocational hairdressing qualifications. She kept at it through moves to Taiwan and then Singapore in 2009, where the mother of two now works out of her Upper Thomson home.

Men, of course, can be in the same boat as wives. A 2009 survey by the Permits Foundation found that about 14 per cent of trailing spouses are male, although they often experience less of an identity crisis than their female counterparts.

Dr McNulty believes this is because men have more of a say in whether the move is made. "The wife doesn't go unless the husband is 100 per cent on board, which makes them less insecure."

Most men use the expat assignment as an opportunity to be a full-time father.

Like Mr Brian Krall, 31, who moved here from Atlanta just two weeks ago, after wife Kristen, 31, an interior designer, took up a job with architect firm M. Moser.

As a BMW mechanic, he was unable to spend much time with his two-year-old son Julian, back home. "I didn't see any reason moving over here and both of us going to work and leaving him at home or in daycare," he said. "This has given me a chance to be with him a bit more."

lvlydia@sph.com.sg



Former financial adviser Vanessa Sandham saw moving overseas as a chance to pursue her hairdressing dreams. She took vocational qualifications before leaving and now works out of her home here.