

Feel at home *in The Hague*

The International Community Fair 2008

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International community fair: creating a sense of belonging

By Diane Lemieux

On 21 September the Atrium of the Stadhuis (City Hall) in the centre of The Hague will be the centre of a whirlwind of activity for international residents of the city. The **Feel at Home in The Hague Fair** is as much intended for newly arrived 'expats' as it is for longer term international residents of The Hague and surrounding areas. Furthermore, this year the organisers hope to also attract the Dutch who have been expats themselves and who also feel that they are a part of the international community of The Hague.

Deborah Valentine is the Project Manager organising the fair on behalf of TheHagueOnline.

"The fair is growing by leaps and bounds", says Deborah. "This year, we aim to have 200 stands and hope to count on 4 to 6,000 visitors. This is substantially more than the 70 stands we had two years ago."

Deborah is Director of 'a hand in The Hague' through which she designs, manages and implements projects which draw the international and local communities of The Hague together. She is a Canadian resident 'expat' and speaks fluent Dutch as well as English, Spanish, Portuguese and French. She has lived, studied and worked in 11 countries and knows first-hand what it is like to re-establish a life and network in a new location.

"I love organising the **Feel at Home in The Hague Fair** because it is the first time that I can welcome people to a place where I am 'at home'."

Deborah also has the skills required to put such a large fair together. "It is a massive undertaking but which is made easier by the fact that we have two years of experience now. Last year we went through the teething stage in the Atrium. This year we can capitalise on that experience and make the Fair bigger, more professional."

In the past the Fair was organised in conjunction with ACCESS. It is now just too much work to ask of volunteers. But the close relationship between TheHagueOnline and ACCESS continues. ACCESS may no longer be involved in the organisation of the Fair but remains an important part of the day. In acknowledgement of their contribution to the Fair in the past, and their role in the community, TheHagueOnline will this year support them as a sponsor.

A day of fun

As in previous years, the 2008 Fair gives priority to providing space to the non-commercial groups of The Hague and surrounding areas which open their doors to the international community. These groups are the backbone of community activities that are not related to peoples jobs. In 2008, a total of 80 tables/stands will be allotted to them. Small commercial enterprises from within the international and local community will also have space to present their activities and services. An example of these is the businesses established by the members of the Womens Business Initiative International.

The Fair is becoming far more than just an opportunity to gather information - it is also a day out, an event in itself. This year, stand-holders will be encouraged to provide activities for the public and not simply hand out information. Also, an area will be set aside in which families can gather information about activities for their children while the children themselves will be actively occupied.

Another new attraction this year is an International Food Court along the lines of the eateries in North American shopping malls. The stalls will represent a sample of the huge variety of international and local restaurants which are available in The Hague. In this area, near the Xpat Desk, there will be screens on which a film will be run throughout the day promoting the cultural events and activities in The Hague.

Finally, this year the Fair will have a theme in acknowledgement of International Peace Day. This will be reflected in many ways. "For example, the stands will be grouped in islands with the names of Nobel Peace Prize winners", Deborah explains. "We will also encourage acts on the podium which reflect the theme of peace."

For those involved in organising the fair the theme goes beyond the ideology of a peaceful world it embraces the practical application of peace and understanding among citizens in this city.

Deborah explains: "This **Feel at Home in The Hague Fair** is really about creating a community spirit in The Hague which means that people know each other, help each other and interact with one another. It's about creating a sense of active citizenship in this city which extends beyond the boundaries of nationality. That's why we say that this isn't an expat fair, but an event which targets The Hague's citizens, particularly those recent arrivals, foreign and Dutch, who need to be welcomed to the community."

The Fair's website was launched on 25 April at the Carlton Ambassador Hotel. At www.feelathomeinthehague.com, updated information about the day, including pre-registration for stand-holders, the pre-purchasing of tickets for attendees and pictures from last year's Fair can be found. Sponsors for the event so far include the Municipality of The Hague, the Carlton Ambassador Hotel, Octagon, BlueLynx, BMW, UniqueMLS, and HTM, the Dutch public transport organisation. Media partners are the Expat Journal, DutchNews and the International Herald Tribune.

The schedule of podium presentations and other activities will be posted in the coming weeks. For young and less-young, new arrivals and old hands, it promises to be an event which should not be missed.