



Patricia Allen, 49: fund raiser, cancer association volunteer

By Malcolm Curtis
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ESCA

Born and raised in Virginia, American expat Patsy Allen is a survivor. She has battled cancer and learned to cope with life in a foreign land. Now, the Geneva resident is using her experience to help others through an organization that provides aid in English to Anglophones who fall prey to the potentially fatal disease.

Patricia "Patsy" Allen has learned the hard way how difficult it can be for an expat suddenly stricken by life threatening disease in a foreign country. Allen, 49, moved to the Lake Geneva region from the United States with her banker husband 14 years ago. She was a stay-at-home mum looking after their son until six years ago when she was diagnosed in 2002 with breast cancer. That experience changed her life in more ways than one.

Not only was she confronted with a potentially fatal disease, but she was treated in a Geneva hospital where most of the nursing staff spoke only French. "It's quite frightening - it's a total loss of control," Allen told Swisster. As a former nurse, born and raised in Virginia, she knew the hospital routine, yet only the doctors treating her could communicate in her native language. So she was not always aware of what was going on during her care. She ultimately underwent successful surgery and treatment for the cancer, but her challenging experience left an indelible imprint.

During her treatment Allen benefited from services provided by the English Speaking Cancer Association (ESCA). She immediately decided to get involve with the group, then just getting off the ground, that offers help to Anglophones like herself in need of information and counselling in a language she could understand. She went on to serve as the association's president for four years. She stepped down but continues as vice-president and is the lead organizer of the group's major fund-raising event, the Paddle for Cancer Dragonboat Festival.

Held for the first time last fall on the Lac du Joux, the festival has attracted 44 teams, including more than 30 corporate sponsors from multinational companies with expat employees. Allen got directly involved in the competition as a rower for the "Breast Stokers," a team of women who have recovered from cancer.

ESCA aims to reduce the feeling of isolation that some Anglophones can feel when they fall victim to a life-threatening disease. Run by volunteers like Allen, it offers a drop-in centre and counselling services - in English - at the Geneva Ecumenical Centre in Le Grand-Saconnex. The association also has an informative website.

Allen, who lives in the Geneva community of Troinex, near Carouge, said over time she has

learned to speak " pas mal" in French. Her 19-year-old son spent most of his formative years in the Geneva public school system before transferring to the International School of Geneva at the 10th grade level. But like many Anglophone expats who first move here, she found making the adjustment difficult. " My husband spends his whole day working in English so he really struggles to learn French," she said in a decidedly American accent. (She jokes that she has lost the southern accent from her native Virginia, although she can voice a pretty good facsimile on cue).

" The language barrier does exist," she said of the situation for newly arrived Anglophones in the Lake Geneva region. " But over time I've found that more and more Swiss can speak English and I do speak enough French to get by." Allen said that expats who make an effort to speak the local language will usually get a warm response.

" We just love it here," she said, noting the high degree of safety on the streets compared to communities in the US. " We find the quality of life here very high . . . we wouldn't go back to the United States for anything." Indeed, Allen and her husband are applying for Swiss citizenship after their son recently received his certificate. (Expats have to wait 12 years to apply for citizenship but their children can seek it earlier because they are credited two years for every one year spent in Swiss schools). " We want to have the option to stay here when my husband retires."

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