

FAMILIES IN GLOBAL TRANSITION: THE 2016 CONFERENCE

THE NETHERLANDS

BY MOLLY QUELL

Nearly 20 years ago, Ruth Van Reken gathered a few friends around her kitchen table to discuss a book she was about to publish. From out of that grew the Families in Global Transition (FIGT) conference, which just wrapped up its 15th edition in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Any parent raising a child abroad has probably heard of the book Ruth was set to publish, *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*, the seminal work on children who spend their developing years living in a culture other than that of their parents. The organization, FIGT, and its annual conference, seek to support families who are globally mobile.

The theme of the 2016 edition of the conference was “Moving Across Cultures,” which aimed to “bring empathy and expertise to the evolving global family,” according to their website. It was held over three days, from March 10 through March 12 in the historic De Bazel in the city center of Amsterdam. The conference held 200 attendees. Around a quarter of the group lived in the Netherlands, while the rest traveled from 36 countries (on six continents.) Though half were registered members, two-thirds of the attendees were at the FIGT conference for the first time.

The conference opened with an Early Bird Research Forum to highlight the activities of the FIGT Research Network, and also offered attendees a tour of the building. The event formally kicked off with a welcome speech by FIGT Board President, Kilian Kröll, who encouraged the audience to ask, “Where are you from?” and see where it leads. Kilian was followed by international speaker, author and globetrotting adventurer Christopher O’Shaughnessy, who had the audience laughing and crying as he discussed the marginalization of expats.

The first block allowed attendees to pick between four concurrent sessions that focused on exploring global identities. Topics ranged from managing coaches to challenges faced by Third Culture Kids.

Ellen Mahoney, co-organizer with Amanda Bate of the bi-weekly chat for Third Culture Kids on Twitter (#TCKChat) and co-host of TCKs who Tweet, said, “We wanted to give space to TCKs who might not fit the traditional model.”

The first session was followed by lunch and a panel discussion called “Insiders and Outsiders” and focused on fitting in and belonging. The conference then moved on to Kitchen Table Conversations, which gave presenters an intimate setting to discuss topics, from sadness to finding work abroad. The first day wrapped up with a book signing by various expat authors, and a reception.

Friday opened with another Early Bird Forum on writing and digital living, and the keynote address was made by Ruth van Reken, who discussed how to move beyond the historical definition of expat and use lessons from the past to help. The concurrent sessions highlighted solutions to problems from a grassroots level, using everything from mindfulness to stories. In one of the sessions, Michael Pollock, son of David C. Pollock, the co-author of *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*, presented his methods of encouraging expats to share their stories.

Friday afternoon brought lunch and a presentation by Jo Parfitt on the Parfitt Pascoe Writing Residents. The program selects four writers in the early stages of their careers to attend the conference and to write about the events.

“I had been attending the FIGT conference for years and I wanted to find a way to help new writers and help promote the event,” said Parfitt. One previous Parfitt Pascoe Writing Resident, Taylor Joy Murray, was on hand autographing her book, *Hidden In My Heart*.

Afterwards, there was a panel discussion on “When Home Spans A Globe,” moderated by author Marilyn Gardner. After a break, attendees found themselves listening to seven presenters who only had exactly six minutes and 40 seconds to

speak in a session called Ignite. Presenter Emmy McCarthy, founder and managing director of Amsterdam Mamas, talked about creating a global village. “The speaking process was very enjoyable and very supportive,” she said.

Friday finished with a speed-networking event. “I found that the connections and networking were really fantastic at the event,” said Tracey Ellis, who traveled from the U.S. to attend on behalf of her company, International Diagnostic Solutions.

On Saturday, the keynote was given by expat author and blogger Melissa Dalton-Bradford on finding community when you suffer a loss. Melissa spoke from experience about her 18-year-old son’s death in 2007. The morning wrapped up with another block of concurrent sessions, this time focusing on interactions. After an interlude to recognize the volunteers who made the conference possible, there was a final block of concurrent sessions in the afternoon, which looked at the real world applications of many of the theories discussed during the past few days. In the afternoon, Julia Simens, the Program Director of FIGT, moderated a panel on telling stories. She was joined by several of the David C. Pollock Scholarship recipients. The program pays tribute to Pollock by giving scholarships to attend the conference to people studying or researching global mobility. The conference closed with the opportunity for attendees to say goodbye.

All prior editions of the conference were held in the United States. The organization moved the conference to Amsterdam in 2016, in part to take advantage of its network of affiliate organizations.

“The FIGT board always had the vision to become a truly international conference so we could reach a larger audience, and the Amsterdam affiliates were willing to work with us,” said Julia Simens. Affiliate groups are organized around a geographical location or topic of interest and must “adhere to the common mission, vision, and core beliefs of FIGT,” according to the website. In the Netherlands, Kristine Racina, the Director of the Expatriate Archive Center, and Kate Berger, founder of the Expat Kids Club, organize the local affiliate group. FIGT plans to return to the Netherlands in 2017. ■

For more information, visit www.figt.org.

