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Ann Marie McQueen, seen here in 2016, has lived in the Middle East for the past 18 years. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF ANN MARIE MCQUEEN

CANADIANS ABROAD

ANN MARIE ... McQueen of the desert

Former Ottawa Sun writer discovers a new home in Abu Dhabi

LINDA BARNARD

When Ottawa journalist Ann Marie McQueen moved to Abu Dhabi in 2008, she figured she'd stay for a year.

Eighteen years later, she's still enjoying life in the capital of the United Arab Emirates.

"I love it here. I felt like I found myself here," said McQueen, 55.

Since about 89 per cent of the 4.1 million people in Abu Dhabi are expatriates, her friends come from around the world. That sense of belonging hasn't changed for her, despite the proximity of the Iran War. The on-again, off-again ceasefire hasn't always held.

McQueen recalled the first "terrifying" explosions she heard from her apartment as UAE air defences intercepted missiles. Some of her friends have developed physical stress symptoms. She has tinnitus.

"I really crashed when the ceasefire was called, because I realized how very scared I've been," said McQueen.

Friends and family have asked if she plans to return to Canada. She's staying.

"I just kept doing my own personal risk assessment and I think this is my home," she said via a virtual chat. "And I just kept thinking of all the women who've been in war and the women inside of Iran ... I'm going to be stoic for them."

McQueen made the move to the UAE for an irresistibly rare thing in the newspaper industry: the startup of a new publication. She was one of several Canadians hired for the state-owned English daily newspaper The National.

She quit her job after eight years at the Ottawa Sun as a columnist and feature writer



McQueen at the Dubai Active Future Wellness Summit in 2023.

and sold her Ottawa condo. There was a farewell party. She boarded the plane to the UAE with all her belongings in five suitcases. And then she landed and the culture shock hit hard.

"I was so freaked out, and I had this immediate regret that I had this great life, and I had just chucked it. It was the weirdest thing. It was like that. It was like, happy, happy, happy; oh, my God. What have I done?" said McQueen.

When she accepted she couldn't go back right away, she knew she had to go forward.

She figured she would return to Toronto with some international experience on her resumé.

"I was going to come back and fire up my journalism career again. That was abso-

lutely my plan," McQueen said.

A year passed at The National and then another. She was promoted several times, including to Arts and Life editor.

"I like to say that my personality fractured that first five, six months. I disintegrated and then became like the person that I am here, which is a different person than I was in Canada," she said.

Abu Dhabi felt like home. Her apartment, where she lives with her black rescue cat, Ninja Jr., is on the northern edge of Abu Dhabi and close to a park where she loves to take barefoot walks. The oceanfront Corniche is a favourite spot, or she'll visit the white-sand Mamsha Beach on Al Saadiyat Island. She's also into Canadian pursuits including kayaking

in the mangroves and skating at Zayed Sports City.

In 2017, McQueen had a forced career change when new owners of The National let staff go as part of a takeover.

"I think everyone should lose their job, because it's very character building," she said.

She freelanced for a while and focused on her interest in health writing in her next job as the editorial director at Livehealthy, the first Middle East-wide wellness platform for men and women.

"I learned so much. We had a podcast, we had the website, I didn't know how to do any of this stuff," said McQueen.

It's a good thing she's adaptable, has a reporter's nose for breaking news and trends and thrives on a challenge. While she was at Livehealthy, McQueen saw that mid-life women were being vocal about perimenopause and menopause, demanding answers and education about treatment. She started Hotflash Inc. in 2020, a platform where she uses her journalism skills to explore the "mind, body, soul and community transition" of mid-life.

Hotflash has impressive global reach, with more than 70,000 women following the newsletter, podcast and social media channels.

McQueen's family is still in her hometown of London, Ont. She's looking forward to an upcoming three-week visit which includes her nephew's Grade 8 graduation.

And while she misses the Ontario seasons and lake swims and hasn't ruled out moving back to Canada, for now home is Abu Dhabi. And that's where her heart is.

For Postmedia News

NOTABLE CANADIANS

Master of puppets

CRAIG GILBERT

Bob Stutt has had a hand in some of the most memorable moments in Canadian kids' memories — they just don't know it.

Born in 1953, the Hamilton, Ont., native now living in Fredericton, N.B. has worked on all sides of the camera, including underneath as a puppeteer, writer and performer on iconic children's series with foundations in The Great White North including, but not limited to, Fraggle Rock, Sesame Park, Under the Umbrella Tree and The Big Comfy Couch.

He started with a yearslong apprenticeship with guru Nikki Tilroe of Toronto's Frog Print Theatre, according to his website, and went through "a master class in TV puppetry" during six seasons with Jim Henson's Muppets.

On Fraggle Rock, he gave life to any number of background characters as a principal background puppeteer, according to the Muppet Wiki.

He earned a Gemini nod in 1999 for his portrayal of Basil the polar bear on Sesame Park, the Canadian co-production of Sesame Street.

In addition to handling feisty characters on classics of the small screen in Canada such as The Friendly Giant and Today's Special, Stutt was instrumental to The Big Comfy Couch, which initially ran for seven seasons on the CBC before attaining the immortality of syndication on the Disney Channel and PBS (watch for his work with Molly, Snicklefritz and Wuzzy the Dustbunny).

And of course, who could forget Iggy Iguana from Under the Umbrella Tree? All Stutt.

Stutt appeared, as it were, on more than 300 Umbrella Tree episodes and wrote 80 of the scripts. It's a talent he's taken to yet another frontier with his debut mystery/whodunit novel Puppet, available on the Merlin Star Press online store (and before you ask, yes, the words "who is pulling the strings" appear on the dust cover). Sticking to what he knows, Stutt creates a world where a mild-mannered puppeteer with a colourful career history is drawn into a cesspool of blackmail and murder.

These days, he also finds time to teach puppetry and video production at the East Coast Leadership Academy, an independent K-7 school in Fredericton, according to its website.

If there's a more Canadian way to learn about television than from a Gemini-nominated polar bear, it remains a mystery.



Bob Stutt and Iggy Iguana. The Fredericton entertainer brought life to puppets and shows like The Friendly Giant, Fraggle Rock, Sesame Park and Big Comfy Couch.