By Annette Lattermann, German Expat

From the very first moment my husband mentioned the idea of applying for a job that included moving to the US for three years, I was thrilled. As a student, I had chosen ‘(Romance) Languages’ at graduate school for a reason: Getting to know other people in different countries, and learning about their way of living, their different habits and opinions had always been a goal in my life, and learning and practicing different languages has always seemed to me the best way to realize it. So far, I had been able to gain that kind of experiences in Europe, maintaining a close relationship to a French family for years, traveling with InterRail as a student, or being granted a semester at a Spanish University. Now, this job offer was now a very different ‘cup of tea’: three years, the whole family together, my husband in an exciting and demanding job, our children in the American school system, me being responsible for their adjustment at school and in daily life – now, there was the chance to really get to know another country with its people and their way of living first hand and from the very inside for quite a period of time. That sounded so much like excitement and adventure, and I very much hoped the job would come true.

And it came true! We arrived here 15 month ago, my husband, our three sons, and myself. Ever since we have been enjoying this experience, and this challenge, every day. Because, a challenge it is. The decision to accept an expat possibility does indeed mean joy and excitement and the chance of satisfying your curiosity for the live conditions in other parts of the world, but you also leave dear people and a home behind. Our children felt that strongly when, from their very first day at school, the only language used in their surroundings was no longer German, but English. The two younger ones didn`t speak a word of it before we came here, which meant from one day to another, they were not able to communicate anymore the way they had been used to all their live. A huge challenge! Our middle son started in 3rd grade, the youngest in first grade, and it was only then that we discovered that children in the US enter school differently prepared from German kids: most US children learn how to read, write and deal with numbers in kindergarden or preschool, definitely before first grade, which is not the case in Germany. That was a surprise, and, yet another challenge! (And for us parents a source of concern, to be honest.) But -and here comes the good part-: might the spoken language and the requirements at school be hugely different from our school system, still, all the teachers we met perfectly managed the language of overwhelming kindness, encouragement and motivation. This has been one of the most dear and decisive experiences ever since we arrived: despite of all the differences in language, habits, requirements and perception, we are all human beings with basically the same needs and hopes, and we all need other people to recognize that and respond to it. The teachers at our Elementary school have been doing a fantastic job there.

So, slowly and gradually, our younger children opened up, became more and more confident, and by now enjoy being well integrated parts of their respective classes. I am especially amazed how easily they were able to pick up the American accent. They might still be challenged by the grammar, but to me they sound American in a way my husband and I will never be able to manage.

And here kicks in another very dear experience: so far, I had always been very ambitious to blend in quickly and lose my German accent in a foreign country. Which has not been the case so far in American English, and this made me even a bit mad at the beginning. Until I discovered the huge advantage: I am offered one of the best opportunities to get involved in precious conversations. It might happen in the line at the grocery shop, at the gas station, or when asking somebody for the right direction: I am instantly asked where ‘my strong lovely accent’ was from. In 99 percent, this remark is followed by a very nice and long exchange. I am still overwhelmed by how many people in Alabama have first hand knowledge about Germany, having lived there or entertaining some kind of personal or business relationship. I feel very honored, and sometimes a little bit ashamed, as in my country it would probably be much harder to find so much knowledge about Alabama.

Apart from the blessings of personal relation- and dear friendships we have been able and blessed to build so far, we appreciate Birmingham as a very interesting mixture of, on the one hand, a growing and awakening modern and ‘young’ city, and on the other hand, the old and dignified parts. I always enjoy avoiding 280 in order to make detours through Mountainbrook or old Vestavia… We love the green and the nearby parks and nature trails, and last but not least the Alabama weather, which allows us nearly year-round, easy trips to the sea.

Sharing every-day-life for the last 15 months with neighbors, collegues, teachers, friends, aquaintances, or strangers in Birmingham has been a great mix of new perspectives, challenges, tries and errors, and highly joyful encounters, but most of all it has been an especially enriching and blessing personal experience. It has broadened our horizon in the most exciting way.

Therefore, I would now like to make it my new goal to act as an ambassador between our two cultures, and introduce and share all our blessings and experiences with as many people in Germany as possible, and let them be part of our expat adventure.