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LIVING LOCAL: ON HOME EXCHANGES AND FRIENDSHIPS

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By **Stephanie Schroeder**

I arranged my first home exchange in 2006. The deal was that my partner at the time and I would give up our Jersey City, NJ, apartment for a couple who had a house in Alkmaar, North Holland in The Netherlands. It was all very new to me, this home exchange adventure, but it was the only way I could afford to travel. I had only five days vacation from my job at a corporate PR firm, plus two bookended weekends. The dates on the ad that read "Historical Dutch Town for NYC" perfectly matched the dates I had off from my office job.

The writer of the ad was Ken, a 70-year-old [editorial illustrator](#) originally from New York who drew only for progressive publications. His companion, Dawn, a 65-year-old hospital administrator originally from South Africa, was the one who owned the home up for exchange. They had, Ken wrote to me, been together a very long time.

The swap came and I, who had never been overseas, was in awe of The Netherlands, the enormous swoosh of the toilet flushes, the beautiful canals, the incredible architecture, and the cheese. Alkmaar is known as the cheese capital of The Netherlands, and I am from America's Dairyland - Wisconsin.

After the home exchange, I made friends, online, with Ken. We shared a passion for art, writing (he had published several books as both writer and illustrator and I was working on my first manuscript), progressive politics, and the urgent need to continually discuss our outrage at the massive inequalities among people and the many and varied injustices in the world.

We were great online pals, but we didn't meet in person until three years later when Ken and Dawn were staying in Queens, NY. We met at Madison Square Park in Manhattan after my day job. Both Ken and Dawn were heavy smokers and I watched in awe as they both rolled their own cigarettes. And Ken with his one arm, the one that wasn't severed during a car accident during his early days in The Netherlands, did it just as well as Dawn.

The next year, my solo home exchange adventure took me to Bologna. I had a 12-hour layover at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport. I took the train to Alkmaar Station, where Ken picked me up and drove us both to Dawn's place. We spent 10 hours talking and eating and hugging and reminiscing about Jersey City and the exchange that brought us together.

The next year an email came from Dawn in May saying Ken had died in April. It wasn't totally unexpected, but I was deeply saddened. I hadn't heard from Ken in awhile, which was highly unusual. And the last time I had corresponded with him, he had mentioned something about cancer. I had suspected he was dying. I later received one of 20 numbered folios Ken had prepared for close friends. It is a greatly cherished memory that has all of his best illustrations collected in colorful poster-sized sheets.

Ken had such a profound effect on me I decided to [write an appreciation](#) of him, a slim volume that I wanted to celebrate his life. So, I set out, in 2014, to research his life in Bergen aan Zee, where he lived in an artists' community, in Alkmaar, where he spent time with Dawn, and in New York, where he was from.



Since I was now working as a freelancer, I could take as much time as I wanted to travel. With my partner Lisa, I decided to spend a month in Amsterdam before heading to Alkmaar for an additional month of research. I had found most of my previous nine home exchanges on Craigslist, just as I found Ken and Dawn. But, I was now also on a gay friendly home exchange site called [Home Around The World](#).

I scoured the ads for listings in Amsterdam wanting to exchange with New York City. At that time I lived in Brooklyn with Lisa, in the newly trendy neighborhood of Bushwick. We had an exchange set for Alkmaar with a good friend of Ken's, his former attorney. She and her husband lived in a large house just outside of the city center while her daughter had an apartment overlooking the main canal running through Alkmaar. That apartment was to be our home base while the entire family stayed at our place in Bushwick, one of three families who would occupy our apartment on Starr Street that spring.

I found Koos and Cees on Home Around The World and proposed a swap for our humble Brooklyn pad with their [two-story townhouse in De Pijp](#). They could do only two weeks in the U.S. and we needed four weeks in Amsterdam. They graciously proposed that we stay in their guest room after they returned.

We barely knew these guys, and they were making this amazing invitation. Soon after that we met Koos, who stopped by our apartment on a layover from a KLM flight he was working.

Despite not knowing each other previously, we became very, very close during our stay - often sharing dinner, walking around Amsterdam together and the four of us having a midnight coffee. We met their local friends and they met our ex-pat pals, we went to LGBT bars, and they attended a film screening of one of Lisa's movies we arranged at a local bookstore. We share a love of great coffee and good food, 80s music, queer culture, ribald comedy, architecture, biking, traveling, urban adventures, and so much more.

They took us to the beach in Bloemendaal, Lisa visited Cees' school where he is principal, and Koos rented a car and drove us to Alkmaar when it came time to leave. I stayed with Koos and Cees the next year for two weeks and went to their wedding in Amsterdam before heading for three weeks in Alkmaar to visit and research with Dawn!

Russell and Meike entered our life when we invited them to sleep on our sofa bed in Brooklyn when they couldn't find a place to stay in NYC over Memorial Day weekend and had business in the city. Meike and I had previously corresponded about a home swap, but nothing ever materialized until I extended the invitation to Meike to stay with Lisa and me for five days. I barely knew about her husband Russell and I certainly didn't know about their two-year-old daughter Charlie.

They showed up around midnight and we conversed, spilling out our life stories to each other. And then, they exhausted from the flight and us from the workday, we settled them all on our full size pullout mattress in our living room and we set off to our bedroom. The next morning Russell, in his German nightgown, was already up making crepes when we walked into the kitchen. The same pattern followed each morning they stayed. Russell was at the stove when we woke and passed through the kitchen to the bathroom and we were invited to partake of his latest breakfast creation. We all got to know and admire each other. It also turned out that we had some six degrees of separation contacts based on Russell's art gallery connections, his reason for needing to be in New York City in the first place.

Two years later, Lisa and I spent a month in Berlin at a place Russell and Meike had secured for us. Russell arranged for a casual artists residency for Lisa and me. His gallery, founded on principles of the exchange of cultural dialog, would host us for readings of my manuscript-in-progress and screenings of two films in which Lisa starred. We would be available for Q&As and become a part of the gallery community for 30 days. This would cement our friendship. Russell and Charlie came back to Brooklyn the next year and I am planning another visit to Berlin next spring, one leg of a multi-city visit that already includes plans for London and, perhaps, Amsterdam.

These are all very special friendships. Like my close connection with Ken, my friendships with Dawn, Koos, Cees, Russell, and Meike flourish across continents and none of them are ever far from my mind.

But, while all of these individuals are quite special to me, it doesn't seem that there is anything rare or extraordinary about our connections. There is a vast world of both places and people to be explored. What is necessary is being open to the intimacy of special long-distance friendships - an open heart, yes, but also an open hand, head, and house.

Stephanie Schroeder is a [freelance writer](#) based in New York City. She has written for The Guardian, The Brooklyn Paper, Curve Magazine, Lambda Literary Review, and other outlets. Her work has been anthologized in various nonfiction collections and she is the author of the memoir *Beautiful Wreck: Sex, Lies & Suicide*. Schroeder is half the PR team for [Local Expeditions](#) and also keeps a [personal travelogue](#) of her adventures.

If you would like to read more of our pieces in the "HOME" theme, try [The Best of Times](#).

If you want more pieces about New York, read [A Sleeved Heart's Approach](#).

If home swaps are not your thing, but you would like to stay in someone's home abroad, [TrustedHousesitters](#) may be an option for you. Being the no.1 house and pet sitting website, [TrustedHousesitters](#) helps connect home and pet owners with trustworthy, verified sitters who won't charge to look after your pets, all in exchange for a unique place to stay in 130 countries across the globe.

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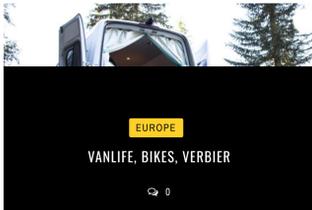
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