

Author and mum Toni Summers Hargis has penned two books on navigating cultural pitfalls in the UK and the USA. JOANNE BUTCHER talks to her about life on both sides of the Pond

HOME TURF – Chicago-based writer Toni Hargis, who is originally from Gateshead, with daughter Sydney



Bridging the culture gap

WHEN she left her home in Gateshead for America, Toni Summers was in for a culture shock.

The human resources and training manager upped sticks and headed for the States in 1990 after wedding her Arkansas-born fiance Mark Hargis.

She found herself plunged into life in Dallas, Texas – which was far from home in more ways than one.

“The south of America has a very weird culture,” explained the mum-of-three, who now lives in downtown Chicago.

“It is incredibly polite, but much of it is a veneer, so you’re not quite sure what is really going on. I was constantly putting my foot in it.”

Something was clearly lost in translation with the leap across the Atlantic. But the potential for blunders worked both ways.

“As soon as I moved out to America, people who were travelling to England started asking about British culture and customs,” said Toni, 47.

“A friend was moving to the UK for a few years, so I wrote down as much advice as I could think of. When I handed her the 40 pages of notes, she turned to me and said, ‘Toni, this is a book.’”

The comment set Toni’s creative juices flowing, and she decided to give writing a go.

While juggling the demands of kids Sydney, 16, Aidan, 13, and Calvin, six, Toni began penning a book, *Rules Britannia*, to highlight the pitfalls for Americans travelling to the UK.

“There are so many differences in vocabulary and culture,” said Toni.

“The first piece of

advice I give any American is, don’t ever say ‘fanny’.”

But it’s not just the Yanks who are prone to innocent language gaffes.

“The first time my mother came to stay with us, she was worried about sleeping in late because of jet lag,” said Toni. “She told Mark, ‘If I don’t get up in the morning, make sure you knock me up’ – which means only one thing in the US.”

Rules Britannia, published in 2006, was an instant success – and now Toni is working on a guide for Brits hopping across the pond to the US.

“I never saw myself as a writer,” said Toni. “I worked in London in HR after university, and went into exactly the same sort of role when we first moved to the US.

“But I gave up the

corporate world when I had my children, and went into this almost by accident.”

Toni was born and grew up in Gateshead, and studied law at Bristol university before moving to the States.

Husband Mark, 49, runs a financial and insurance consultancy, while Toni juggles writing her books, blog posts and articles with being a mum.

“We visit my parents, who now live in Rowlands Gill, every summer for a month or so,” said Toni.

“It is a big shock compared with downtown Chicago – we spent our first few days rescuing a baby hedgehog, which would never happen in the city.”

“But the kids enjoy it – they like to think of themselves as British as well as American.”

Toni’s book is available to buy from www.rulesbritannia.com

■ You can also follow her blogs at www.expatmum.blogspot.com and www.pondparleys.blogspot.com

