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Summer projects

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Julie Meer, left, demonstrates the Dorn massage method on Heavenly Beauty Salon and Spa co-owner Misriya Mohammed. Amy Leang / The National

Finding their groove

After three weeks, our Summer Diaries participants are working hard, and whether they are dealing with contractors, advancing in a fitness boot camp or fleshing out a screenplay, all are making inroads on their life-changing challenges. Katie Boucher reports

Julie Meer is spending the summer starting up a business – Body Balancers – a wellness, sports and physiotherapy centre in Dubai.

This week is primarily about location. Having been in the UAE for 16 years, my initial thought was to start in the Jumeirah/Umm Suqeim area. But when I started looking there, I was in for a bit of a surprise. It wasn't just the price of a villa, but also the hidden add-on costs. There was the Dh50,000 to change it from a residential to a commercial villa. And the real shocker was an additional Dh150,000 for parking. That put everything out of my budget. Luckily for me, I was introduced to a doctor who was setting up in Jumeirah Lake Towers. Initially I wasn't sure because I wondered whether it was too new, or if people didn't know about it. But then I realised that it's so centrally located to New Dubai. Having been here for so long, I had to really open up my mind to the demographic shift that has taken place here. Dubai now has a much younger population.

I'm now dealing with contractors and fitters. To sum it up, you get what you pay for. I've looked at six contractors of all different price ranges and experience. I've had to really do my homework, because sometimes in a freezone the contractors have to be certified to work there. Then there are the health and safety requirements. Also, because I'm working with the Ministry of Health, they have certain requirements too. These are all additional costs that I didn't budget for.

Now I've started looking around at several spas and different kinds of facilities to see what they have done in terms of flooring and light-

ing. I want to keep it looking fresh. It's been a bit of an emotional roller coaster. You have good days and you have days that are so frustrating. It's mainly been trying to get responses from people. You want to get going quickly and the contractors are taking their sweet time.

Steve Watson used to work in media but has, since arriving in Abu Dhabi last August, been a house husband. He is writing his first screenplay.

It was a wonderful experience to sit down with Magy (my mentor), someone so knowledgeable who could put it all in context and give me guidance. On the back of her suggestions I have been doing some deeper research into situations that I'm attempting to convey. I want to write about events that arise within the expat community. When you come here you can either grasp the opportunity and become extrovert or you can become reclusive. Some choose the latter, hence there are any number of people who can suffer from depression because they've lost the familiarity of home and they don't have that family network. Magy suggested I go and explore those situations where I have gone out and created networks and opportunities through the running club, Aussie rules football, cycling on a Friday. Explore some of the idiosyncrasies and the stories you hear there and see if you can build them into a plot.

Magy also told me that once you have your characters and your plot, you don't have to write it sequentially. You can go to the end and write back from there. So this morning I spent two hours writing in one area and then I moved to another part.

I've watched a lot more films over the past few weeks. This week I watched the miniseries *The Pacific* for the second time, this time with a totally different mind-set. Rather than simply being entertained, I was questioning how I could incorporate some of the ways they do it

I've not been focusing too much on the weight loss. For me it's about strength and energy.

Jeanne LeSage participant in the Original Fitness beach boot camp

into my own writing.

The group of ladies I spend a lot of time with doing pilates and, this week, water aerobics, have all been keen to help out. They're constantly throwing up ideas about what they've experienced. The funny thing is that there's been this new interest in me because I'm not known as a person who writes. Doing this shows another side of me.

I've also had many people who have read the article come up to me and say, "I'm happy to be your proofreader". I might well take them up on it. I just need to make sure I don't give them the chapters that they feature in.

Jeanne LeSage is the managing producer of the Abu Dhabi Film Festival. She is working on her fitness this summer at the Original Fitness beach boot camp.

I feel like I'm always the slowest in the pack, but there's been so much support, not just from the instructors. I'm also finding it from my team mates, because you're all out there working hard. The funny thing is there's no standing around and chatting. But there are people who've gone out of their way to encourage me, especially if they see you're really working hard. Total strangers will say, "you're doing great, keep going."

The sessions are still really tough and right afterwards you're just exhausted. But then it's only 7.30 in the morning. That's still early in the day and by the time you get to the office you feel like a million bucks. I have so much more energy than before. On boot camp days, 9 or 10pm, I'm still going. I think three mornings a week is enough for me,

though, just in terms of getting up that early. There is a fourth optional run day on Friday at 6am and I would love to go and meet the group and have a gentle run – but I just don't have the fourth 6am in me.

I've not been focusing too much on the weight loss. For me it's about strength and energy. One side effect I have noticed is that I do not want to eat bad food. And that's a pretty great result. My body wants to eat healthy food, like lean protein, and I'm not wanting to eat as much. It's as if my body wants fuel. And I am trying to stick to not eating late at night.

I only recently moved here so I'm new to town and now I'm starting to feel more of a balance between my work and my personal life. Since I'm not a late-night person, the early mornings don't tend to infringe on my social life.

Murtuza Kaizar is branch manager of Hafele, a German company that supplies the construction industry with door hardware. He is studying level three Arabic at Berlitz Language School in Abu Dhabi.

This week I've really been feeling the pressure. Levels one and two were quite basic. But with level three I'm being introduced to many new words. Yesterday, when I was leaving the class, I read on the board that the complete course will take me 10 levels. I was quite daunted by that. If I complete the four levels, I will be able to do a bit of buying and selling and go to a restaurant and order some food. But if you really want to enjoy socialising and have an easy conversation with someone, you need to do all 10. I really need to budget and prepare myself for that.

With the summer and Ramadan coming, people are expected to work longer hours to deliver goods on time. But for this reason you have to start your day very early. I tend to start mine during the morning prayers, at around 4.30. You need to if you want to complete all that you want to do.

It's a long day. When I come home after work, my wife persuades me to close my eyes for 20 minutes and that's how I try to balance myself. Then I get up, have a cup of tea and get to work. It's quite challenging.

I want my son, who's 10 months old, to benefit from this language, because I know it's not going to be easy for him. It's becoming more cost prohibitive day by day and education is so expensive. I don't know whether I will be able to afford it for him or not. So I may as well work a bit extra and train him simultaneously.

A few days ago I met a friend in my apartment and I told him I was learning Arabic. Another friend accompanied him. I tried to talk to him in Arabic but the friend kept talking to me in English. My friend reminded him so this guy said to him: "He won't understand, let me continue talking to him in English." People don't really encourage you, but you've got to keep trying to communicate.

I have changed from four lessons a week to three. My tutor has advised me that I need to go a bit slower so that I have time to go back and review what I've learnt. You need to alternate the classes, so that you have one day in between to review things. Otherwise I go to the next class and I haven't had time to do my homework.