

a minnesotan's global view

Bahraini woman promotes her country half a world away



Mary Coons

In the end, after nine months of careful planning, organizers of the Summit on Equity, Diversity and Multiculturalism at the University of Minnesota Duluth were forced to shift to Plan B.

Fortunately, what could have been a disaster was still a success.

Psychology instructor Brenda Butterfield, who encourages university students to get involved with short-term, international-service learning projects coupled with study-abroad classes, worked diligently this semester to promote Arab Muslim culture in her "marriages worldwide" course. I introduced Brenda to Maryam al Sheroogi in December when Brenda was visiting Bahrain. As a part-time Bahraini resident these past three years, I happened to be in the kingdom when Brenda arrived. She was so impressed with Maryam's knowledge and obvious love and loyalty of her country that she immediately invited Maryam to Minnesota to participate in her class and workshop with me, coinciding with UMD's two-day Diversity Commission summit March 30-31.

Unfortunately, Maryam was not permitted to leave her job within the Ministry of Education to participate in person.

Thus the shift to Plan B.

During my travels to and from Bahrain, I had heard many generalizations and misconceptions that Americans have of Bahrainis and vice versa. This became the driving force behind writing my book,

Coons' book, "Culturally Speaking," is available at:

- UMD bookstore
- www.bookhousefulfillment.com
- www.culturallyspeak.com has autographed copies

"Culturally Speaking: Promoting Cross-Cultural Awareness in a Post-9/11 World," with its message of dispelling ignorance and promoting understanding.

My UMD presentations — both interactive and lecture-style — focused on creating dialogue for exploring assumptions and demystifying generalizations that Americans have about Bahraini Arab Muslims. I spoke specifically about American-Bahraini generalizations and insights into Arab marriage customs.

A Skype hookup allowed Maryam al Sheroogi to interact live with the daytime campus audiences. It was a perfect way to promote a country and learn firsthand about the complex fabric that intertwines culture and religion.

Sheroogi was warmly received as she shared her perspective as a Bedouin Arab woman. In every session, time expired before she could answer the bombardment of questions.

"The best way to truly understand another culture is to actually live it, but this is rarely possible for most Americans," Brenda told one audience.

"Having an articulate Arab woman who is obviously very proud of her country and culture participating made the experience all the more rewarding. I can't tell you how grateful I am to have had the opportunity to partner with both of these women."

Following the Alworth Institute-sponsored lecture, Cindy Christian, program associate for the Royal D. Alworth Jr. Institute for International Studies, wrote to me: "Those in attendance that were more

familiar with the stereotypes credited you with your clarity and courage in tackling issues that can lead to very emotional and politicized interactions. You clearly helped to promote a greater understanding of these two cultures."

How successful were the sessions on exploring assumptions and generalizations that Americans have toward Arab Muslims and vice versa? We may never know for sure as the seeds that were sown during those two days will take time to bear fruit. At the end of one of the sessions, however, an American student who had served in the military and fought in Iraq walked over and shook hands with an Egyptian Muslim student, telling him he was pleased to have participated in the workshop, acknowledging how he had just been exposed to an entirely different perspective from what he had experienced in Iraq.

My book's message is that ignorance is the enemy — not the Arab world or the American government — and once this ignorance is dispelled, we can begin to promote awareness, understanding, and tolerance for each other's culture, religion and customs.

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