

Hanover author aims to bridge gap between Americans, Arabs

Book sheds light on misconceptions, promoting understanding

by Mindy Mateuszczuk

More than 7,000 miles separate Hanover, Minn., from the Kingdom of Bahrain that is just off the coast of Saudi Arabia.

It's not just the miles, but the cultural stereotypes that often separate the people of America and the Middle East. These stereotypes are exactly what Mary Coons, of Hanover, sets out to address in her new book, "Culturally Speaking: Promoting Cross-Cultural Awareness in a Post 9/11 World."

Coons believes too many Americans seem to view the Islamic world as the enemy. She, on the other hand touts ignorance as the enemy; profound ignorance on both sides, which she would like to see conquered. Her book outlines 22 commonly believed myths by Americans and Muslims — 11 on each side. Through interviews of more than four-dozen individuals, both American and Muslim, Coons offers a discussion on several topics from several personal points of view.

Although Coons is no stranger to the world of journalism — she touts a 30-year freelance writing career, founded a communications company specializing in a variety of writing and is author of a book about Hanover history — she came about her latest endeavor most unexpectedly.

Coons began visiting the Kingdom of Bahrain in December 2005 accompanying her husband who was on business during the holiday season. Her trip was planned on very short notice, so the visit was not precipitated by any preconceived notions of religion or politics about the country.

"I was immediately in awe of the Arab culture, religion and people," she said. After several visits and a few serendipitous events she was well on her way to creating a book about her experiences.

Coons soon saw that there were many misconceptions that just weren't true, as she experienced many positive interactions with Bahrainis and others from all over the Middle East. One of the first people she met was the former U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain, Dr. Sam Zakhem, while socializing in the business center at the hotel where she stayed. Zakhem would eventually pen the foreword for the book.



Dr. Sam Zakhem, former U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain is seen with author Mary Coons. Zakhem wrote the foreword for Coons' book about breaking down misconceptions between Arabs and Americans.

In addition to these experiences, on one of her trips, Coons was asked to try to deliver a journal from her nephew to the family of his deceased college roommate, Mohammad, who also coincidentally was from Bahrain.

"I thought no way I can match up this name which is like five names long," said Coons. But when she employed the assistance of a secretary in her husband's Bahrain office, sure enough, she was able to set up a meeting with the family. Coons and her husband spent several hours with the family and felt so comfortable with them she knew she must pursue a book that would provide readers the insight she was

gaining from personal interactions with Bahrainis.

Mohammad's sisters were included in the interview process along with several others between ages 20 to 70, Sunni, Shiite, Catholic, Protestant, university students, retired businessmen and women, individuals within the Bahraini government, housewives, professional men and women.

The book was officially released Sept. 13, just days after the seven-year anniversary of 9/11, amidst a heated U.S. Presidential election race and dire economy.

"We should never forget 9/11 but we need to understand that was a result of a violent minority of Arabs and not representative of the majority [of followers] of the Islam religion," Coons said. "They're shamed, they honestly feel horrible about that and hate Osama bin Laden for bringing so much negative attention."

One of the big focus points of her book is dispelling the belief that all Muslims believe in violence as part of their religion. She emphatically states that is a minority sect. Through her book she also hopes to:

- Promote a healthy culture through understanding, respect and dialogue.
- Discuss examples of what both countries have done to bridge the cultural gap and offer ideas of what individual Americans and Bahrainis can do
- Recognize the commonalities each share including: a desire for world peace, respect, love of family, career and education aspirations, and basic needs of sustenance.
- Achieve a better understanding about Islam and learning how the Arab culture affects the religion.

Coons will embark on another trip to Bahrain in October, where she plans to present her book to the King of Bahrain. According to reports on her Web site, her book is viewed positively and "much

needed" by Bahrainis and those in its government.

Upon return to the U.S. Coons hopes to continue to find avenues to get her book into the hands of readers. Though a primary focus for Coons is colleges and universities that offer courses the book could complement, she believes it is written different than a textbook, in a style conversational enough for everyone to enjoy.

For residents in such homogenous communities as the northwest suburbs of Minneapolis, such as her town of Hanover, she believes understanding and awareness as depicted in her book is especially important as young people branch out to more culturally diverse universities and communities.

"The world is small," she said. "We don't need to agree or believe the same things but at least be open-minded and understand there are differences. But that's the beauty of the world."

Coons' book can be purchased at: www.culturallyspeak.com or www.amazon.com.



Mary Coons (front row left) is seen with some of the Bahraini women she interviewed for her recently released book.

Front row (left to right) are Mary Coons, Fatima Senan and Wafaa Ashoor.

Back row: Maryam al Sherroogi and Lee Ann Fleetwood.