



Local Author Details Changes in Lives of Women in Saudi Arabia

by Wendy Ross

Kay & Gary Campbell

The lives of women in Saudi Arabia are changing rapidly, Kay Hardy Campbell told a gathering at the Wiscasset Public Library March 28. She pointed to the fact that in June Saudi women will be permitted to drive, and strict restrictions on covering themselves with the abaya in public spaces are being relaxed.

To promote her highly acclaimed debut novel set in Saudi Arabia, “Caravan of Brides,” Campbell gave a fascinating hour-long illustrated presentation on Saudi history – beginning in the 1930s when oil was discovered in the poor desert kingdom, until the present where 95 percent of the population is educated and traditional tribal customs are giving way to modernization.

A series of recent decisions by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the country’s young de facto ruler, is making a difference in the lives of Saudi women, she said. For example, women have been named to prominent positions and now are allowed to attend soccer matches at public stadiums.

About two-thirds of Saudi Arabia’s 22 million citizens are under 30, she said. Hundreds of thousands of them have studied abroad, including in the United States, and some newly built universities in Saudi Arabia use the European curriculum.

Campbell said that social media and satellite television have played an enormous role in the modernization efforts, making even those who remain at home familiar with other societies.

International automobile manufacturers including General Motors, Ford, and Nissan are giving courses to Saudi women on how to drive, and yoga classes are becoming popular, she said.

But she said men and women are still separated in public spaces, and women still have to get permission from a male relative to do most anything, although that too, is changing.

Campbell and her husband Gary lived in Saudi Arabia from 1978 to 1985, after studying Arabic at the University of Minnesota. While he worked in business in Saudi Arabia, she began writing feature articles for the English language daily the Arab News. She went on to write for other regional publications, and has become a regular contributor to AramcoWorld, which takes her back on assignment to Saudi Arabia from time to time. She speaks Arabic and French and has a master’s degree from Harvard University in Middle Eastern Studies, and an MBA from Northeastern University. She and Gary recently