

SAUDI-BRITISH SOCIETY

THE RAWABI HOLDING AWARDS 2016

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY JUDY HOURY

- Saudi Arabia
- *The mystique:*
- They glide in rustling, sibilant thobe;
- The Saudis in their desert robe.
- Tall, regal, inscrutable face.
- Life seems to be taken at leisurely pace.
- The mystique hangs there of the bedu tent,
- Of camel and horse, and evenings spent
- Comparing the prowess of falcons fierce
- Whose trained talons soft hearts do pierce.
- The sun shimmers down - sand dunes glow
- All burnished orange -
- Allah's evening show. (Written by J. Houry 1974)

Asalaama Aleikim, Good evening, ashamed to say my Arabic is confined to taxi Arabic and horse Arabic so the remainder of what I say has to be in English.

Sheikh Abdulaziz al Turki, please know Sir, I never aspired to anything so grandiose as being a person who furthers inter-country relations – I eschew politics, I'm just a very stubborn person who does not accept no. But thank you from the bottom of my heart for your very kind decision and great generosity. I appreciate it so much. You Excellency - I am most honoured you would attend; Sherard - I know you were behind all this and Ionis who has been so warm and welcoming from the start. Thank you all so very, very much.

Having said all that, it may surprise you all to know that I don't feel that this is really about me. I could never have done what I have without dozens and dozens of others. This morning I got a wonderful surprise – that the Phillips were to be here tonight. They have shared the honour of giving awards to both my horses and volunteers – Anne to the horses and Tom the humans. I am also thrilled to have around my friend Gordon Atkinson long time resident of Jeddah and great contributor to both Open Skies and myself, Ibbi Al Ghamdi and his recent wife – Ibbi was one of my first volunteers way back when and a huge supporter at Open Skies; he left only to attend college; sadly, we lose many volunteers to education – but I can't really compete. My friend Jon Harrison is here a long time Jeddah resident – way back to the do you remember days and a good friend, and last but certainly not least a young man whose father once complimented me by saying he was possibly the most cosmopolitan independent youth in the country, Saif Sabban whom I tutored for 10 years, also in University now and studying some incredible micro bio something or other way beyond my comprehension.

First time I landed in JEDDAH 1974– at a pint-sized airport with no such thing as security, I walked out of the plane door, stood on the little platform and sniffed. I told the friend who was meeting me that

one day I would live here. It was like déjà vu – had lived here before and would return – it took 21 years! I then spent 3 hours asleep in the waiting room while someone tried to find wake the prince who was my sponsor – it was very early morning. My visa was of course valid! Once released, I can truly say I started to fall in love – a large part because of all the anomalies around me. Taxis without windows and the odd door missing – certainly no a/c, it took me years to tell the difference between a millionaire and a driver as they all wore the same uniform – thobes - and the drivers' watches matched their bosses but had been bought in the souk – there was only one at that time. The hotel lobbies (all 2 of them Kandara Palace and Khaki) where I met men who slept in the lobbies for 6 months awaiting their sheikhs and bathed whilst residents were out of their rooms. This I discovered by coming back early one day and finding a gentleman in my bath. It did not lead to a romance. I have always felt I have been incredibly honoured to be in KSA. Due to my do not disturb letter I was able to go everywhere, stay in hotels, travel on trains. I once managed to lock myself out of the country by not reading my Iqama date correctly – I spent an utterly miserable night in Cyprus and 2 months of utterly miserable boredom in UK. How I managed to get back is not a matter for public consumption – but I did – my Saudi friends were always amazed that they spent their time trying to get out and I spent mine fighting to stay in. I have rules about the kingdom – I may laugh and criticise my love, but I laugh with it; let not anyone **laugh at** it – I will attack. Never talk religion except with very level headed close friends; my mother taught me God helps those who help themselves – only call when in dire straits – it works wonders for me. Most important rule never, ever, ever use the 3 letter word never ASK WHY? The answer is It's a Saudi thing! My only real complaint is that Saudis do not explore their own country – their kids don't know about Hofuf – Abha, Najran I so enjoy telling them when I am meant to be teaching them English.

It was suggested I 'keep it light' – I have a myriad of stories but perhaps one of the shortest was leaving Tabuk where I had been honoured to attend a desert tribal wedding with the Governor and his wife. It was early morning, the airport empty - the customs kids bored. One opened my bag and took out a small jewellery box.....a thing never normally done, I nudged my friend to watch. As the young man lifted the lid off the box his face went grey..... then white..... then the darkest beetroot red. He found himself looking at my spare 2 front teeth.

I should like to thank you for listening to me, although you didn't really have much option. In closing: again, I feel so honoured and grateful and I thank everyone again. But there is just one thing I really want from the Kingdom – one day I have to leave - and when I do, I want to leave with a Lifetime Exit Re-entry Visa, so that I can always pop back if needed.

Thank you.