Escape from Afghanistan – Author to discuss new memoir, “An American Bride in Kabul,” at Forest Hills Y

By Anna Gustafson
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Phyllis Chesler with her husband around 1959, when the two met and fell in love while studying at Bard College.  Photo Courtesy Phyllis Chesler

Young and in love, Phyllis Chesler left the United States to move to Afghanistan with her new husband in 1961 to embark on what should thought would be a series of world traveling adventures in far-flung corners of the globe.

Chesler, who grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family in Borough Park, Brooklyn, expected she and the man she believed to be spend the rest of her days with would live a whirlwind of family dinners in Kabul and then move onto Europe – experience Paris and London and Barcelona.

Instead, the then 20-year-old’s life turned into a nightmare.

Chesler, who had met her husband, Abdul-Kareem, while the two were studying at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, had her passport taken almost as soon as she stepped foot into Kabul – and instead of attending large, raucous dinner parties with new relatives she expected to love, she was trapped as the property of a polygamous family.
“We were bohemians – intellectuals, and I thought we would travel through Europe,” said Chesler, a renowned feminist author and psychotherapist who will speak about her new memoir, “An American Bride in Kabul,” at the Central Queens YM & YWHA in Forest Hills at 1:30 p.m. on Monday, Oct. 7. “Maybe we would climb mountains and through deserts – and then we’d return to the U.S. so I could finish college.

“I was very young and naive, and he was a deceptive idealist, saying he wanted to return to his country to reform it, to bring it into the 20th century,” Chesler continued. “He did not tell me his father had three wives and 21 children – and that my American passport would be confiscated when we landed. I couldn’t freely go out, except with the permission of a male.”

Without an American passport, and as the wife of an Afghan citizen, Chesler quickly learned she was essentially stripped of most of her rights. She began to fear what was to become of her. Almost always relegated to spending time away from her husband and with her female relatives, Chesler was not invited into the family and her mother-in-law grew increasingly hostile with her, spitting on her while angry.

Facing the most dramatic culture clash of her life, the 20-year-old fell gravely ill and was told she needed to leave the country to get medical help. While her husband originally refused, she eventually convinced her father-in-law to allow her to depart Afghanistan for the U.S. with an Afghan passport. She never returned to Kabul – or Afghanistan.
After regaining her health, Chesler went on to graduate from Bard College and go on to get her PhD in psychology. Crediting her time in Afghanistan with inspiring her to become a feminist scholar, Chesler has gone on to teach psychology and women’s studies and write 14 books, including the 1972 best-seller, “Women and Madness.” She has written on a variety of topics, including gender, mental illness, and violence against women.

Her newest book, the memoir, “is a good read,” she said.

“It’s an adventure,” Chesler continued. “There’s poetry and a deep appreciation of eastern and Islamic culture and its people. It’s not a negative portrait – it’s one I crafted with love.”

Chesler’s talk at the Forest Hills Y will detail her time in captivity, gender apartheid, and how her personal experience shaped her passion for worldwide social, educational, and political reform.

The Central Queens Y is located at 67-09 108th St. in Forest Hills. The talk is open to the general public, and a $7 donation is suggested.

More information is available at www.eqy.org or by calling (718) 268-5011, ext. 151.