

Muslim reality show, under fire, denies charges of extremism

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December 14, 2011

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(RNS) The cast and producers of "All-American Muslim," a reality-TV show that has been a lightning rod for controversy, said Wednesday (Dec. 14) they are helping change negative perceptions of Muslims, and rejected criticisms that the show is propaganda that sugarcoats Islam.

"These are our lives. This is what we've been doing for years," said Mike Jaafar, a sheriff's deputy in the Wayne County Sheriff's Department, who appears on the show that follows the everyday lives of Muslims in and around Dearborn, Mich.

"The charge of propaganda is based on the fact that the reality of the Muslim American experience does not jibe with their preconceptions of what Islam is," said Reza Aslan, co-founder of BoomGen Studios, which is helping promote the show.

"All-American Muslim" garnered the second-highest ratings ever for the cable network TLC, and is likely to enjoy continued high ratings after Lowes, the national hardware chain, sparked a national outcry when it pulled commercials from the show at the urging of a conservative Christian group.

Muslim, Arab, and interfaith groups have called for a boycott of Lowes, as did hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, who also bought commercial time on upcoming episodes of "All-American Muslim."

Cast members told reporters on a teleconference that they have been well received by both Muslims and non-Muslims.

"People have been extremely supportive, people from the broader, mainstream American community," said cast member Suehaila Amen, a single woman who wears a Muslim headscarf. "When we go shopping, people give us hugs. It's humbling."

"It's an amazing experience to hear the overwhelming responses from different religions. The silent majority has come out and shown the minority that there are many more good people than bad people in the world," Jaafar said.

Alon Orstein, TLC's vice president of production and development, said executives knew the topic would be "provocative," but said TV and cable were missing "regular exposure of regular American Muslim families."

"It was important to provide people with this experience, so they could form their own opinions," Orstein said.

Given the show's ratings and advertising success, Orstein said producers would consider a second season following another group of Muslims. "We're always interested in good characters and good stories."

The sixth episode of "All-American Muslim" airs Sunday night (December 18).