

Muslims caught in reality show crossfire struggle to understand controversy

by [Kevin Allen](#)

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/ DEARBORN, Mich. (RNS) When Fordson High School football coach Fouad Zaban was asked to be on a reality show about Muslim family life, his impulse was to decline.

"It doesn't seem like it now, but we kind of like our privacy," Zaban said. "We are simple people. We don't do crazy things. ... Quite honestly, what I told the show (producers) is I'm kind of boring."

Now that he and his family have appeared on TLC's reality series "All-American Muslim," Zaban struggles to understand how his life and the ordinary lives of four other Muslim families in Dearborn could be viewed as controversial.

That's the tag the show has after the conservative Florida Family Association attacked the program as Muslim "propaganda" designed to mask an extremist agenda. On Dec. 9, the Lowe's home improvement chain acknowledged pulling its advertising from the show.

"This is what I've been doing for 17 years of my life: teaching and coaching," Zaban said. "If you want to call this propaganda, then go ahead, but you couldn't be further from the truth."

Since 9/11, Muslims have struggled to be accepted in the U.S., despite the country's historic pride in being a melting pot of nationalities. Some Americans have become suspicious of Muslims and/or Arab Americans, equating them with terrorists.

Hani Bawardi, an assistant professor of history and Arab studies at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, said the negative depiction of Arabs has a long history in

America and "has shown no sign of abating."

"You can see it in magazines, newspapers, in Hollywood productions and made-for-TV episodes," Bawardi said. "But this show begins to chip away at it."

The sixth of eight episodes of "All-American Muslim" aired Sunday night (Dec. 18), and the show has averaged 1.2 million viewers a week. The series is scheduled to wrap up on Jan. 8, and TLC said no decision has been made about whether there will be a second season.

Among the cast are deputy chief Mike Jaafar of the Wayne County Sheriff's Department, party planner Nina Bazzi Aliahmad and a young couple having their first child.

The series has looked at issues such as high school football players who have to play while abstaining from food and even water for the holy month of Ramadan; interfaith marriage and conversion; and career women and a Muslim woman's decision whether to cover her head.

"One of the things that I like so much about this cast of characters is the empowerment we see in the female Muslim voice in the show," said co-producer Mike Mosallam, a Muslim who is originally from Dearborn. "It's definitely a stereotype that's being flipped on its head and re-examined."

University of Michigan-Dearborn student Maryam Fawaz, 19, sees the show providing a fair portrayal of a typical American Muslim family, not so different from her own.

"I have relatives in the military. My grandfather is a veteran and most of my ancestors are United States veterans," Fawaz said. "I really wonder if that is normal enough to be an American. C'mon, Florida Family Association -- is that not American enough?"

Since Lowe's pulled the plug on its advertising for the TV show, several groups have called for a boycott of Lowe's. Several stores have been hit with protests.

Lowe's issued a statement earlier explaining its decision: "It appears that we managed to step into a hotly contested debate with strong views, from virtually every angle and perspective," the company said. "We believe it is best to respectfully defer to communities, individuals and groups to discuss and consider

such issues of importance."

Alon Orstein, TLC's vice president for production and development, said the network considered featuring Muslims in San Diego, Washington and Northern Virginia before deciding on Dearborn.

"Once we found out what Dearborn is all about, we really decided we wanted to make Dearborn, the community, another character in the show," he said.

About 30 percent of Dearborn's roughly 100,000 population is Arab American, and Arabic culture is evident in the schools, stores and lifestyles. Storefronts have Arabic signs. Many female students wear headscarves, and halal foods (permitted by Islam) are readily available.

The city that is home to Ford Motor Co. is also home to the Islamic Center of America, described as the largest mosque in the United States when it was built in 2004.

Zeinab Hammoud, 16, said the show has created a buzz at Fordson High School and has been discussed in almost every class. "I think it is a very realistic portrayal," she said. "I think there is very big value, because people around the nation are truly seeing what Muslims are."

Cast member Angela Jaafar, who works in marketing in the auto industry and is married to the deputy chief, said she initially wondered why anyone would want to watch her family "try to live the American dream."

In her mind, she is doing what every other American is doing, trying to balance career and family, save for retirement and keep pace with the grind of life. But after seeing the reactions to the series, she understands why it was important that her life was televised.

"The best reaction that I get is 'I never knew that you were a Muslim,'" Jaafar said. "I think that's the whole point."

(Melanie Eversley contributed to this report.)