

Wednesday, February 20, 2008

Bassem Is Trying by Lena Khan
Filmed in 5 minutes or less, 7D

In focus: Lives of Muslims

By Jason Millman
USA TODAY

Muslim Americans say they often feel like strangers in their own country, and the struggle to overcome stereotypes became more complicated after 9/11.

So when given the chance to tell their stories, more than 100 young Muslim American filmmakers poured their creative energies into producing four- to five-minute films about Islam and its followers for an online competition. Winners are being announced today.

More than 18,000 people voted online for six finalists in six categories. A celebrity panel of judges, including former basketball star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, actor Danny Glover and Mariane Pearl, wife of slain journalist Daniel Pearl, selected winners in the six categories, who receive \$5,000 each. There will be one \$20,000 grand prize winner.

"Film is one way, one avenue, in which we can change the perception of men, women and children who share the Islamic faith," Glover says. "I found what I saw to be both insightful and informative, and I was really moved by it."

Many of the filmmakers relied on humor and some good-natured self-ribbing, but in the end, the message was clear: Muslim Americans are, above all, Americans.

Lena Khan, 23, an independent filmmaker from Alta Loma, Calif., won the grand prize for *A Land Called Paradise*, which asks Muslims what the world should know about them. The answers, which included "I, too, shop at Victoria's Secret" and "Islam inhibits my suicidal thoughts," were meant to humanize Muslims, Khan says.

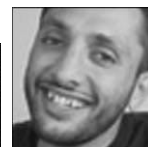
"We should be dealing with a better understanding across cultures," says Kim Spencer, president of Link TV, which co-sponsored the competition with the non-profit group One Nation. "For there to be an entire group of people who are misunderstood and we can't talk about is absurd."

The winning films can be seen at www.linktv.org/onenation/films/finalists.



'Healing Our Community'
Documentary

By: Sharif Rosen, 28, LA
The University Muslim Medical Association Community Clinic in South Central Los Angeles has given free health care to more than 20,000 people since 1996. Rosen, an undergraduate at Loyola Marymount University, is its community relations coordinator. He said he wanted to highlight the relationship of trust Muslims have built with such a diverse community.



'Muslim While Flying'
Comedy

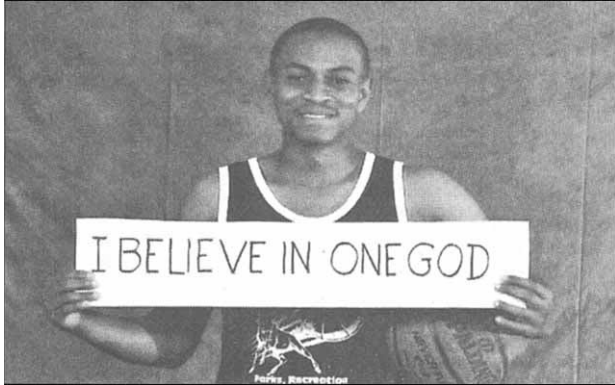
By: Ali Ardekani, 33, Sherman Oaks, CA
A funny thing happened to Ardekani at airport security last month. Going through his bags, security guards found a DVD of his comedy about Muslims being targeted by airport security. They watched it and were amused, much to Ardekani's relief. "I figured if I used comedy to bring up these sensitive issues, people are more likely to listen."



'The Countdown'
Youth, Under 18

By: Rene Dongo, now 19; Boston
Dongo, a freshman at Emerson College, wanted to remember Sept. 11 in his film but did not want to include the horrific images from that day. As his friend Sofia Snow reads her poem about the terrorist attacks, Dongo uses the Boston skyline and flying airplanes as a haunting backdrop. Dongo, who is not Muslim, said, "People can see that in everyday life you can still notice 9/11 and its impact in regards to Muslim culture."

Young filmmakers use video to share what it's like to feel like a stranger in America.



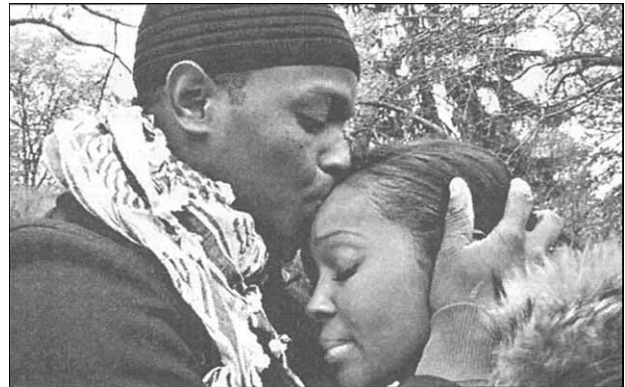
'A Land Called Paradise,' 'Bassem Is Trying'

Grand Prize, One Minute and Less categories

By: Lena Khan, 23 Alta Loma, CA

Frustrated with the myths and stereotypes surrounding Muslims in the media, Khan wanted to help viewers relate to Muslims in America. "The idea was, 'I really wish everyone knew this about Muslims,'" says Khan, a USC film school graduate. So she collected more than 2,000 comments from Muslim Americans, many of which she put into a music

video set to Kareem Salama's song *A Land Called Paradise*. In *Bassem Is Trying*, Bassem is shown "trying way too hard all the time" just to fit in, Khan says. He tailors his clothes to make them look more American, and he blasts rap music from his car when he's stopped at a traffic light. But in the end, he still draws suspicion because of his Muslim appearance.



'Arranged'

Animation

By: Mediha Sandhu, 25 Bayone, NJ
Confronting the tradition of arranged marriages, Sandhu provides a cynical look at a practice still followed in some Islamic countries. Sandhu, who is pursuing a degree in fine arts and works with UmmahFilms, a Muslim film company, wants to dispel the common misconception that all Muslim marriages are arranged. Sandhu is visiting family in Pakistan and could not be reached for this story.



'Glimpse'

Drama

By: Qasim A. Basir, 27, New York City
Growing up black and Muslim in Ann Arbor, Mich., Basir was used to discrimination. "Black and Muslim -- it's like a double whammy, you know?" he joked. Basir, a graduate of Wayne State University, has used his life experiences to write *Moozlem*, a full-length feature film about Muslims in America. *Glimpse* is just a small taste of that film, which is set to start shooting around June.

Article on USA TODAY website: http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-02-19-muslim-film-contest_N.htm

Photo credits: Lena Khan by Ruby Ahmed; Mediha Sandhu by Mediha Sandhu; Sharif Rosen by Angie Ellaboudy; Ali Ardekani by Leila Kassim; Rene Dongo by Carmen Dongo