



Laughter goal of Muslim act; Comedy tour visits MTSU on Saturday

By Doug Davis
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MURFREESBORO — "The Muslims are Coming!" to Murfreesboro and, unlike the controversy surrounding construction of a local mosque, all the members of the traveling comedy troupe want to do is make you laugh.

The touring group of Muslim-American stand-up comedians from New York and Los Angeles — with a couple of others from the Volunteer State tossed in for good measure — will bring their free act to Wright Music Hall at MTSU Saturday.

"Our goal is not to create more controversy, but to bring people together," said show co-producer and comedian Dean Obeidallah prior to Thursday night's show in Birmingham.

The tour began Aug. 5 and will take the comedians to Florida, Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee over the next several weeks. A second leg of the tour is scheduled for the fall in the "Red States" of the Midwest.

Excerpts from all of the shows will be featured in an upcoming documentary, also titled "The Muslims Are Coming!"

"The show doesn't speak for any organization," Obeidallah said. "We are just a grassroots effort to speak for ourselves to try to make a difference."

Tuesday night, the entertainers packed an auditorium in Lawrenceville, Ga.

"There were over 200 people, mostly Christians, a few Jewish people, a couple of atheists and 10 or 12 Muslims," said Obeidallah, who is co-producing the comedy tour with comedian Negin Farsad.

Earlier on the tour, 300 turned out for the show in Gainesville, Fla.

"The purpose is to share a laugh and to get the community together in a way that cheers up the community," said Saleh Sbenaty, MTSU faculty adviser of the Muslim Students Association, which he said is sponsoring the visit.

Sbenaty is also a member of the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro that has been at the heart of heated debate in the past year over its plans to build a new, larger mosque on Veals Road off Bradyville Pike, south of Murfreesboro. Opponents of the mosque contend it could be used as an extremist training ground and have also argued in a lawsuit that site plan approval by the Rutherford County Commission should be voided because they say inadequate notice of the proposal was provided to the public.

Proponents say they have every right to build and worship here just as any other church in America.

The debate has made national and international news at a time of growing fears over the proliferation of Islamic mosques in America, including one proposed near the site of the World Trade Center terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, and fears that Muslim extremists will try to force Shariah law on Americans.

Obeidallah said the comedy troupe has been reaching out to communities with their "Ask a Muslim booth," which amounts to a man on the street approach to people's questions, prior to their shows. One of their contests is a "Name that religion." Participants guess where a Scripture comes from: the Old Testament, New Testament or the Quran, which is the Muslim holy book.

"We are picking tougher questions. Most people don't know that Muslims view Jesus as a prophet and Muslims view Mary as woman preferred above all other women, and in the virgin birth of Christ. But Jesus is not viewed in the Quran as the son of God; Muslims believe he is a prophet," Obeidallah said.

"The goal (of the booths and the game) is to answer questions people have about Muslims (and Islam) and to reach out to people who may not be coming to the show. If they come to the show, that would be great."

People have opened up to the group one-on-one during interactions, he said.

"We've had people ask some tough questions," Obeidallah said. "But we have been well-received."

A customary 30-minute question-and-answer session will follow Saturday's stand-up show, but Obeidallah said the entertainers will not bring their Muslim booth out prior to the show.

"(Sbenaty) was worried for us that someone would taunt us and we would react in a way to make the Muslim community in Murfreesboro look bad," Obeidallah said.

There was also a concern, the entertainer said, that "it would be bad if we stoked up more concern of some in the community by being there."

Sbenaty, though, said the booth was really just a way to advertise the show. "Since the event was well-publicized, there is no need to have a booth," he said.

Sbenaty added that attendees to the stand-up show will be invited to ask questions after the laughs have finished.

"It's not particularly a discussion time for the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro, but if somebody has a question in mind, just come," Sbenaty said.

The show will begin at 6 p.m. No reservation or tickets are required, but there are only 450 seats in the auditorium, and they will be filled on a first-come, first-served basis.

IF YOU GO:

What: The Muslims are Coming!, a 90-minute professional stand-up comedy show followed by a 30-minute question-and-answer time.

Where: Wright Music Hall, 1439 Faulkinberry Drive, MTSU in Murfreesboro

When: 6 p.m. Saturday

Cost: Free, but seating is limited. Arrive 30 minutes early for seating.

For more information: Call the MTSU School of Music at 615-898-2493 or Saleh Sbenaty, MTSU faculty advisor of the Muslim Students Association, at 615-898-2966

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