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Egyptian-American Exchange Is Theme of TV Reality Show

Landmark program aims to break down cultural stereotypes



By Ralph Dannheisser
Special Correspondent

Washington -- After an exchange of visits arranged for a pioneering television program, the participants -- two from the United States and two from Egypt -- sharply revised their views of the other country's culture.

During the reciprocal two-week visits, camera crews followed the four as they immersed themselves in each other's culture -- eating the food, sharing work activities, taking in a baseball game or visiting the pyramids and, most of all, meeting ordinary people.

The result is a one-hour reality TV program, "The Bridge," which aired in December 2007 on the Hallmark cable channel in the United States and was due for broadcast in Egypt as well. It was co-produced by Egypt's Video Cairo SAT, Common Ground Productions of Washington, and New York-based Downtown Community Television and Baraka Productions.

A press release from the producers cites ambitious objectives for the show, saying that through the "exciting experiences" of the travelers, "the culture gap between Egyptians and Americans is bridged." The program is a pilot for a future series featuring exchanges between people in the United States and countries throughout the Middle East.

Participants were chosen on the basis of common interests that gave them at least a head start on compatibility. American Mike Blase and Egyptian Mahmoud Hassan both work with, and share a love for, horses. Spirit -- the only name she uses -- is an African-American relationship therapist who hosts an Atlanta-based call-in radio program, and Bothaina Kamel is a television talk show host in Cairo.

In an interview with *America.gov*, Blase -- an insurance adjuster in Mobile, Alabama, who doubles as a cowboy and farmer -- said the project helped correct mutual misperceptions.

Blase said he encountered a broadly held view among the Egyptians he met that "America is all about money and power." However, there are many in America who live modestly, particularly "simple country people," he said, using a self-characterization that crept into his conversation often.

"A lot of big-city life and corporate stuff has kind of twisted what America was all about. Just good, simple people farming -- a little garden in their backyard, or 2,000 acres [809 hectares] of cotton or peanuts -- or fooling with horses, or raising their kids wholesome. I mean, that's America," he said.

Indeed, Blase feels there are sharper differences between rural and big-city Americans than between a rural Southerner like himself and the people he met in Egypt.

"The people from New York that were doing the filming, they were stranger to me than the people in Egypt," Blase observed. "I said, 'Hey, we need to do a documentary on good old country people going to Manhattan [New York City] and Manhattan people coming down here' to the southern United States.

Reflecting on his visit to Egypt, Blase recalled the pride and generosity he encountered.

"The poorest people there were some of the most wholesome and proudest," he said. Children working in the brick factories would refuse a small gift of money, and "everywhere you went, even if [people] didn't have any money to their name, they'd buy you a cold drink and give it to you as a guest in their home. It was just so humbling."

But the visit highlighted some areas of friction as well. In the television footage, Hassan points out the high-rise where one of his two wives lives, but says Blase cannot meet her. "My wife doesn't like to talk to Americans because she has so much anger against them for what is happening in the Muslim world," Hassan explains.

Blase said Hassan seemed to be deeply affected by his U.S. visit. "When Mahmoud came here, the night before he left, he sat on my back porch and he wept. I mean, he finally got the point as far as how I am and who I am. I'm an American. I'm a diehard American. Money versus values, I'd rather have the values."

Blase would like to see such exchanges broadened. "I'd love to see a car salesman go over there or a mortgage broker. Just ordinary folks from different walks of life," he said. And he made clear he would love to go back himself.

Spirit had her own stereotypes shattered as soon as she arrived at the Cairo airport and met Kamel.

"I was so surprised by her liberal attitude," she said. "The idea of this woman greeting me at the airport in jeans and a tank top and sandals was just totally unexpected. I thought she'd have the traditional hijab [headscarf] on."

But Spirit is aware that Kamel remains an exception, not only in the Middle East at large but even in the less traditional Egypt itself.

Indeed, Kamel is even unusual within her own family, Spirit said. "Her sister is a very devout Muslim and she will not be seen without the headdress. ... When Bothaina took us to meet her family, her sister was upset because her mother didn't have her hair covered. And she chastised her mom, demanding, 'How dare you be inappropriate in front of men?'" Spirit recalled.

Kamel, Spirit says, wants "women to assume the kind of mindset that she has, as though her goal is to liberate Muslim women."

That trait came through clearly when both Kamel and Hassan appeared on Spirit's radio program while visiting the United States in August 2007.

Rejecting criticisms of polygamy and what he saw as U.S. misperceptions, Hassan declared: "We don't treat our women bad like you think. Our women in Egypt are well-protected, and well-respected too."

"Who told men we need their protection?" Kamel shot back. She later told Spirit, "We are Egyptian, but we are extremely different."

Spirit showed Kamel both well-to-do areas and pockets of poverty in Atlanta. The greatest revelation for Kamel, Spirit believes, was the aftereffects of slavery in America. "I think she didn't have a good understanding before about the frustration of African-American people in America. She didn't understand the idea of



Joining hands are (from left) Mahmoud Hassan, Mike Blase, Bothaina Kamel and Spirit, participants in *The Bridge*. (© AP Images)

institutionalized racism, so that concept was really strange for her.”

Spirit’s conclusion from taking part in “The Bridge,” she said, is that “we are all so much more alike than we are different. We want to be able to live peaceably, to take care of ourselves and our families, to raise our future generation.”

Spirit cried when Kamel left Atlanta, and she plans to return to Egypt with her children this summer to visit.

“I think I made a sister 6,000 miles away,” she said.

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