

Lena Khan

Tackling Social Issues With Warmth and Humor

By SERENA KIM

On a parched afternoon in Los Angeles, California, Lena Khan peruses the aisles of Hand Prop Room, a company that supplied props for Hollywood movies such as *The Aviator* and *The Departed*. From faux carcasses to bronze Buddhas, the shelves are stuffed with gizmos and curiosities. Khan unsheathes a ninja sword with a mischievous look. “This will work,” she says.

Though she defies expectations of what a typical filmmaker looks like—she is young, female, devoutly Muslim and Indian American—the 24-year-old UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) School of Theater, Film and Television graduate writes and directs music videos and short films, as well as commercials.

Khan’s father is from Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, and her mother is from Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh. They emigrated to Canada more than 30 years ago, and moved to the United States 23 years ago.

Khan won \$5,000 for *Bassem is Trying*, a one-minute short that humorously demonstrates how a Muslim American man tries to fit in, by blasting hip-hop music on his car radio. Her three-minute short *A Land Called Paradise*, set

to a song of the same name by Muslim country singer Kareem Salama, won a \$20,000 grand prize in 2007 from One Nation, an American group that seeks to clear misperceptions about Muslims in the United States and sponsored the film competition. Khan directed dozens of people of diverse backgrounds to hold up handwritten signs that say what they would like the world to know about them as Muslim Americans. The statements are as whimsical as “I, too, shop at Victoria’s Secret,” or as serious as “My sister died on September 11.”

One of the judges, former professional basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, gave *A Land Called Paradise* high marks for its “beautiful cinematic language,” while journalist Mariane Pearl commended the film “for its freshness and sense of humor while addressing vital emotions felt by the Muslim population and the rest of us.”

Pulling off *A Land Called Paradise* was a major effort, Khan recalls. It started with a question: “If you could say something to everybody in the world who is not Muslim, what would you say?”

“I sent out e-mails; I went to mosques; I used every major Muslim Listserv I could think of,” she says. The first response Khan received was “Islam inhibits my suicidal thoughts.”

“That’s when I knew that this

was the video I was going to do,” she says. “I was trying to fix the representations of Muslims, but I don’t think I can speak for all of them. And this was my first clue. I got 2,500 responses, collected them, narrowed them down and made the video.”

Since the video’s launch, Khan has received hundreds of e-mails from people who say it has made them cry, inspired them to open a discussion about Islam with their families or broken down walls built by stereotypes.

Khan became interested in cinema as a form of social activism, which she considers an important tenet of her faith.

As an undergraduate majoring in political science and history at UCLA, Khan noticed that students would become interested in genocides such as those in Rwanda and Darfur only if they saw a movie about the topic or if an actor publicized the cause. She was also tired of seeing Hollywood films such as *The Siege* and *Black Hawk Down* which she felt used images to connect terrorism to ritual ablutions and the call to prayer.

“These things ate at me. So I decided that instead of complaining about them, I would enter the field and do something about it,” Khan says. “I wanted to make movies about social issues because...that’s when people really listen and relate to



Courtesy Lena Khan

people who are going through those things.” She went on to get a masters degree in film at UCLA.

Back at Hand Prop Room, Khan digs into a box of ninja stars. Once she has selected her props, she drives over to Western Costume Company in search of ninja masks and suits.

In addition to her ninja commercials, her future projects include a set of commercials about the presidential election and another music video for Salama.



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For more information:

A Land Called Paradise

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbcmPe0z3Sc>