

Sisters United Muslim Association puts their most-fashionable foot-forward

By: Carmel Delshad

TAMPA—When the Sisters United Muslim Association set out to start the 2008-2009 academic year with a bang, the organization fixed its eyes upon revamping its “Fashion Forward” program and flexed its creative muscles.

The result: Niles Stylez, a middle-eastern-inspired show that brought hijabs (head scarves worn by some Muslim women), jilbabs and abayas (loose overdresses worn by a number of Muslim men and women) and other forms of modest clothing from Jordan. The event took place on Friday, August 29.

Sisters United Muslim Association (SUMA) President Diyanah Elyaman said this year’s fashion show was on a far larger-scale than that of previous years.

“We’ve had fashion shows in the past, basically with different designers who came in with a Muslim clothing line. This was bigger than what we had done before. We did [the show] in the new Marshall Center ballroom, we had an elevated catwalk and we had a speaker as well,” Elyaman said.

The Niles Stylez event was a bright and colorful display of middle-eastern clothing, directly from Jordan, brought back by a member of the organization. Glittering abayas with iridescent beading and intricate details—still discernible from the elevated catwalk—were sashayed down the runway by members of SUMA and women of the Muslim community.

“The theme behind it was just modesty, but it’s stylish at the same time. It’s kind of the best of both sides. Usually, if you go to the mall to look around it’s usually one or the other: either you’re modest or you’re stylish,” Elyaman continued.

Around 100 women from various cultures and religious backgrounds ventured to the Marshall Center to view the array of clothing. Color permeated from every corner of the room: pink and lime green tablecloths covered the end tables and shades of red, blue, black and other colors were featured in the clothing.

Sarah Soltau, a senior majoring in bio-medical sciences, said she found the variety of clothing to be surprising.

“I really did not know what to expect, coming to the fashion show. Sometimes events like these end up showcasing stale fashions that are too out-of-date to even consider wearing, but a lot of these clothes I found to be very stylish. And not everything was black, which was a good thing,” Soltau said.

Guest speaker Rydanah Atfeh, a prominent local figure in the Muslim community according to Elyaman, spoke of Islam and modesty in her lecture.

“[Atfeh] teaches classes at the masjid (mosques) and basically her message was about hijab and its role in Islam, the reason we cover, and the importance of modesty,” Elyaman said.

Others, like Tagharid Alrajoula, a junior majoring in mass communications who wears the hijab, believe that oftentimes these motivational speeches do not fit in with popular culture and modern expectations.

“I think it’s really sad what’s happening to the hijab. I think girls who wear scarves are the face of the religion, but not too much should be expected also. We are humans,” Alrajoula said.

Clothing varied from basic black abayas, or coverups, colored abayas with intricate stitching, different

styles and colors of hijabs, and other types of clothes that are considered suitable for women's-only parties.

Students, both from USF and surrounding high schools, modeled the fashions on the elevated catwalk. Each girl paused at the end of the runway while the strobe lights bounced off the ornate beadwork of each item.

“Girls who are covered have a really hard time finding clothing that they find appealing and that fits their religious dress code and it was good for them to have a place to display those clothes. But personally, growing up here I got used to a certain style of dressing, and I could not find anything that matched my specific style. But I think that if you liked the clothes, this was the perfect event,” Alrajoula said.

“Even though I do not cover, I still think I could wear those styles in the mosque for Eid (the end of Ramadan) or maybe even wear the scarves during the winter. It all boils down to personal style and what fits in to your specific lifestyle,” Soltau continued.

Elyaman continued to speak of the fashion show as an eye-opener to the Muslim world.

“The main thing that we, as an organization had in mind with this fashion show, would be battling that stereotype that Muslim women are oppressed and that the hijab is an oppressive tool. It's just the opposite. It's liberating. Modesty is beautiful, and it's truly a way of life.”