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THE CHALLENGES OF BEING MUSLIM AND HURRICANE RELIEF WORKER

BATON ROUGE, La- Nov. 29, 2007- The room was dim. Dark wooden walls surrounded him as he was being filmed on camera. He leaned forward in his chair slowly telling the chilling stories he encountered after the hit of hurricane Katrina. The darkness of the room coincided with the darkness that surrounded his narrative.

"It was like a ghost town. It was like a horror movie. You saw helicopters, humvees and nothing else. You saw dogs, some were dead. And then you'd see cats and some were dead. And you wouldn't really see anybody else," said Islamic Relief worker Ruben Vaughn.

As he explained the situation, those who were interviewing him looked on as if they were frozen in time. As if they were in complete disbelief.

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"We (Muslims) are a small group here, but we were able to help people in mass scale. The best thing we've been able to do is to deal with people individually, let them know we're Muslim and even though you aren't Muslim, we can still help you. We can still get along, we can have a friendship and learn from each other," said Vaughan.

Vaughan was being interviewed for a documentary to debut on Feb. 29, 2008 called "Tufaan," which is Arabic for "Great Storm." It is about the stories of the Muslim victims and relief workers of Hurricane Katrina.

"If people who aren't Muslim just realize that Islam has been around since the first man Adam, that we aren't aliens, that we aren't foreign and that Islam comprises of every race and background out there, then they can realize that they don't have to fear Islam," said Vaughan.

During the first week after the hit of the hurricane, Vaughan said he saw two very different reactions from non-Muslims who saw Muslim volunteers driving supplies.

"I remember there were a group of brothers bringing supplies to the affected areas. On their trip they were asked by different people what they were doing. One group of people would say, 'We don't need your help you can just take it back.' And the other group of people would load up their cars and help them on their (the brothers') way," said Vaughan.

Vaughan, former firefighter and former squad boss for FEMA, back when the Columbia Space Shuttle blew up over Texas, sought out relief organizations to join after Hurricane Katrina hit. He wanted to make sure he got to the affected areas to help in any way he could.

He contacted Islamic Relief and due to his background in relief work, he was allowed to go to New Orleans at a time when only select individuals could go into disaster ridden areas.

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"No one really knew what to do; this was the first time Islamic Relief had to deal with a disaster domestically. They've done it in other countries around the world. So coming in, it was definitely a learning experience," said Vaughan.

Some of the men volunteers have beards and the women volunteers wear hijab, a head cover. Unfortunately, some of these volunteers faced difficulties from the very same victims they were helping who were prejudice against Muslims.

"I want the non-Muslims out there to know that they don't have to fear people who are trying to help even though they see a hijab. And they don't know what to do or say because they are caught off guard because of all the negative things they see in the media," said Vaughan.

Vaughan still remains in Baton Rouge and is continuing with the hurricane recovery effort.

"I remember asking an old woman in a trailer park if there was anything I could do to help. She said what a lot of people are still saying, 'I want to go back to New Orleans. I want to go back home.' Then her face lit up, thought about what she said and then said, 'I know that's impossible. It's not going to happen.' So she just went back in and shut the door," said Vaughan.

"That's probably the one thing that sticks with me the most. These people want to go back home but they have no way of doing so."

The premiere of Tufaan will be held at Louisiana State University in the Student Union.

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Ruben Vaughan and the producer of the documentary are available for interview, to schedule

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