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CRONULLA JOURNAL

Australian Muslims Go for Surf, Lifesaving and Burqinis



Tony Sernack for The New York Times

Suheil Damouny, left, and Mecca Laalaa on duty. Ms. Laalaa's outfit is meant to comply with Islamic modesty.

By RAYMOND BONNER Published: March 9, 2007

CRONULLA, Australia, March 3 — As a teenager growing up in a Sydney suburb, Mecca Laalaa never felt anything but Australian, even though she was for the most part unable to engage in the most quintessential of Australian pastimes: swimming at the beach. "Restricted by my clothing," Ms. Laalaa explained.

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Tony Sernack for The New York Times Ms. Laalaa and Mr. Damouny, both 20, are Muslims taking part in an outreach program called On the Same Wave, which started a year ago.

Ms. Laalaa is a Muslim and has voluntarily worn the burqa, the traditional head-to-toe covering for Muslim women, since she was 14. It is hard to swim, she said, if your body is swathed in cotton, which is very heavy when wet.

Now, her clothing quandary solved by a novel fashion, the burqini, Ms. Laalaa, a vivacious 20-yearold, has become a Surf Life Saver, as volunteer lifeguards here are known, lured to the beach by a new outreach program for Australia's Muslims.

The program, On the Same Wave, was started a year ago by the nonprofit group that organizes the volunteers, Surf Life Saving Australia, along with the federal Immigration Ministry and the local council.

The outreach was the response to an ugly episode on Cronulla Beach, about 20 miles south of downtown Sydney, in December 2005, when skinheads and neo-Nazis, many drunk and with racial epithets painted on their bodies and T-shirts, marauded through the area



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Cronulla, a short drive from Sydney, is a popular summer resort.

beating up Lebanese men.

Many here and abroad wondered if Australia was headed for a period of rising racial tension. The riots set off a round of soul-searching and left many Australians asking if the violence reflected an underlying racism in their society.

Among Australia's population of roughly 20.2 million, fewer than half a million are Muslims, most of them in Sydney and Melbourne.

On the Same Wave was intended to promote cultural understanding, introduce people from minority groups — Chinese, Somalis, Sudanese — to beach culture and safety, and above all to increase and diversify the membership of Surf Life Saving, said Vanessa Brown, its membership director.

It has also challenged the public perception of a virtually sacred Australian icon, the Surf Life Saver, as someone who is always blond, blue-eyed and sun-bronzed. "It's a stereotype, that's accurate," said Suzie Stollznow, diversity manager for Surf Life Saving New South Wales.

Under the program, 22 men and women, from 14 to 40 years old and including a woman with three small children, signed up to become Surf Life Savers. Most were ethnic Lebanese, but there was a Palestinian, a Syrian and a Libyan.

"But all proudly Australian," said one, Suheil Damouny. "It's important to mention that."

Like most Muslim immigrants here, Mr. Damouny, 20, a sportswriter at The Torch, a weekly newspaper, does not like to be referred to by ethnicity. His grandparents fled Palestine in 1948 and moved to Lebanon, then to the United Arab Emirates, where he lived until moving to Australia seven years ago. He considers himself Australian.

Mr. Damouny said his friends could not understand why he wanted to be a Life Saver, especially in Cronulla. And they did not think he could pass the rigorous eight-week course. "But I did," he said proudly. Seventeen finished; one woman dropped out after making the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and coming back in a full burqa.

Nodding to where a yellow surfboard with the red letters "Surf Rescue" rested waiting to be paddled out in an emergency, Mr. Damouny, who is about 5 feet 7 and weighs 140 pounds, said: "The hardest was getting used to that big, ugly thing. It is quite heavy."

One requirement was to be able to pull an unconscious swimmer on board, and then get him to shore, "through massive waves," Mr. Damouny said.

Ms. Laalaa broke her nose when she was trying to paddle out through the crashing surf and the board reared up and kicked back into her. She also twisted both ankles, she said. "I have black-and-blue bruises all over my body," she said. "But I'd do it all over again."

She admits that she was an unlikely candidate. "I'm a girly-girl," she said. "I like to walk on the street in high heels."

But Ms. Laalaa said one reason she had joined the lifesaving program was to educate Australians about Muslims. "They don't think Muslim women swim," she said. "Or do anything," she quickly added with an irrepressible laugh.

When people see women wearing the burqa, they think they are oppressed. "I am not oppressed," she said. "I do have my own mouth. I am educated. I do make my own decisions."

For her and other women, the biggest obstacle, she explained, was what they would wear. That was solved by a local fashion entrepreneur, Aheda Zanetti, who designs "dynamic swimwear and sportswear for today's Muslim female."

For Surf Life Savers, Ms. Zanetti, whose label is Ahiida, came up with a two-piece outfit made of spandex, form-fitting but fully covering, even the hair. Ms. Laalaa pulls her hair

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back into a bun and hides it under a bright red hood that is an extension of the long-sleeved yellow top.

Ms. Laalaa said her father, a welder, was completely supportive, as was her mother, a homemaker, and her three brothers and sister. She said her family was not that different from other Muslims in Australia. Most are moderate, she said. Experts here agree. It is the radicals who grab the headlines, they say.

Ms. Laalaa said Muslims had felt fully integrated into Australian life until the attacks of Sept. 11. That is when the tensions mounted, when many Australians began looking at Muslims with suspicion.

“Before 9/11 they didn’t know us,” said Shayma Almoty, a friend of Ms. Laalaa’s. “Now they’ve become afraid and fearful of us.”

“Which is ridiculous,” chimed in Ronya Chami, 21, an accountant and another longtime friend. The message to other young Muslims, Ms. Chami said, is, “Get out there and be part of Australia.”

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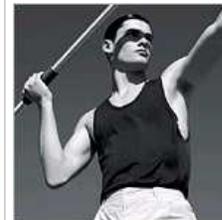


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