

The Burkini:

A Muslim Sportswomens' Dream Come True

> Karen Dabrowska

Lebanese-born Aheda Zannetti did more than complain about the limits the need for modesty placed on Muslim women's participation in dynamic sports: she designed a sportswear which enables Muslim women to swim, run, and take part in judo or any other activity they fancy.



The Sydney designer conceived of a semi-fitting two-piece swimsuit that connects to an 'ahioda hood' which is now being worn by Muslim Australian lifesavers. She was responding to a drive to recruit more Islamic lifeguards, particularly women, following riots in 2005 between Lebanese Muslim teenagers and white Australians on Sydney's Cronulla Beach.

Last summer Surf Life Saving Australia kicked off with a \$600,000 national program funded by the Federal Government called 'On The Same Wave', a partnership with Sutherland Shire Council and the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The pilot program was directly targeting Muslim communities and schools in Sydney's south and south-west but also involved Chinese, Lebanese Christian and African ethnic groups.

Zannetti migrated to Australia from Lebanon aged two. Now 38, married with four children she remembers growing up in Australia posed a lot of challenges for a young Muslim/Arab girl. Islam requires women to cover everything except their faces, hands and feet.

"As an active person who liked to participate in community activities and sport, I found myself restricted due to cultural and religious beliefs. As the years went by, I noticed there are younger girls and women who are embracing Islam and obeying their Islamic belief in dressing modestly, in turn, having to miss out on opportunities, and not taking part in the

many sporting activities that Australia has to offer. By facing this on a daily basis and seeing girls struggle with what is around presently, we at Ahidda have found a need to make specialized sportswear to suit the Muslim female," Zannetti explained.

"All eyes are on the appearance of Muslim women in sports. They should be modest and at the same time reflect a professional sporty appearance with pride. By providing the appropriate clothing for Muslim women who comply with their religious, cultural and sports obligation we are helping to bring out the best in Muslim women, to prove that they can be role models for women in the world, not oppressed, no name, no face beings. With Ahidda sportswear they can now compete with confidence."

Ahidda's products include 100% polyester swimwear which is 50+ UV protected, chlorine resistant, water repellent with low water absorbency and very quick drying. The Australian company is exporting its products world wide and many favourable testimonials are received. Diana from the US said: "After I converted, I gave up

swimming as there were no women-only swimming options where I live. After several years I decided to give it a try in a modest suit and see how it went. I tried a Turkish swimsuit but I found myself very uncomfortable - that style of the suit was totally impractical - the velcro from the hood hurt my chin and the hijab didn't stay in place. The suit was awkward and had zippers, ties and velcro that were ineffective and just uncomfortable. Swimming in that suit was like swimming in normal street clothes. I didn't want to swim, it wasn't enjoyable - I felt and looked awkward. Now that I have your suit I am thrilled. It is comfortable, the hood covers well and stays in place, the top is tied down so it doesn't ride up, the suit actually looks and feels like a swimsuit. In the water, I look like a real swimmer wearing a full body suit or scuba suit - but modest. Swimming is enjoyable again and I can actually swim for exercise like a real swimmer rather than someone in street clothes. The shipping was very fast also". For further information send an email to info@ahiida.com ■