

# Turning the Tide

## The Body Shop teams up with FASSTT in a national refugee awareness campaign.

LOUISE DOYLE reports on a company that proclaimed its commitment to human rights and “walked the walk” when it linked up with the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT).

Four year old Rama, from Sudan, is standing on top of the photographer’s step-ladder in a Melbourne park. It’s a sunny late autumn morning. Delighted with the attention, Rama bestows us all with a queenly sunbeam of a smile.

Osman and his wife Hagir arrived in Australia with their three children in late 2002 from the Sudan. Like many newly arrived refugee families they have been assisted by the FASSTT agency in their new home city. Their case-worker visits them regularly at their house in an outer Melbourne suburb, where she helps them to recover from the experience of being tortured in their own country. Slowly they are rebuilding lives that had been shattered by unstable governance, imprisonment, torture and other human rights violations. This is their story as it appears in a flyer available for customers to take with them when they visit Body Shop stores in August.

*“My name is Osman. I came from Sudan in Africa. I have a wife and three children. My daughters, Zulfa (10) and Rama (4) and my son Fady who is eighteen months. We also have a pet dog called Lucky from the Lort Smith Animal Hospital. I was campaigning for a democratic, multicultural government in Sudan and because of this I was imprisoned and tortured for 3 years.*

*“We were in Cairo for 18 months after we left Sudan, waiting for the United Nations to tell us we could come to Australia. We could not work and the children could not go to school. We couldn’t go home and we couldn’t stay in Cairo and we couldn’t know if another country will welcome us. It was 18 months at full tension and feeling very sad to miss our families.*

*“I have been in Australia for 9 months. I am studying*

*to improve my English. I am a geologist and want to continue to work as a geologist, so I may need to go back to university before I am able to work again in Australia. My wife, Hagir, is an economist and hopes to work here, too.*

*“We wish for a settled life and for a peaceful life. We wish for our children and ourselves to contribute to Australia and to achieve our full potential.”*

Early in 2002 The Body Shop first indicated they were interested in running a major awareness raising campaign on refugees. In the preceding six months, the Australian government had requested the Tampa saved a boatload of asylum seekers headed for our shores, before thwarting their attempt to find safety on Christmas Island. The Government had been re-elected in a campaign where the treatment of asylum seekers, framed as “Border Control”, was a major issue. On the other hand, Australians had woken up one Sunday morning to discover that they’d been misled about the “children overboard” affair. Journalists were denied access to detention centres and in addition, Australia had enacted the “Pacific solution” which to some seemed more of a problem than a solution. The treatment of refugees and asylum seekers seeking safety and a new life in Australia was high on the agenda. Everybody had an opinion and was airing it - no matter how ill informed.

Looking back it was the low-point, although at the time, many must have wondered if the situation would get worse. Australians’ fears were stirred up and being vocalized and, in contrast to the great wave of anti-refugee sentiment, there seemed to



be only silence. No voice reminding us of the great contributions that refugees and asylum seekers make to Australia. No voice inspiring us with visions of a happy, productive, multicultural future for our country. But slowly those voices of opposition began to be heard. As 2002 wore on, one Australian after another realised they would have to fight for values they had always taken for granted.

In the depressing post-Tampa climate the idea that a big corporate entity would make its voice heard in support of refugees seemed impossible.... The subject was seen as too political - too hard.

At a time when corporate funds are being channeled to less controversial causes, The Body Shop has decided that this issue deserves their full support.

In August 2003, the windows of each of their 72 stores around Australia will display posters of Osman's beaming family and 16 year old Bosnian refugee Mina, together with their respective stories. The caption shouts out the message: "Recognise the Journey – Celebrate the Future".

Inside the stores, customers are encouraged to send postcards, which tell Osman and Mina's stories, to friends, to family or to their local politician. Leaflets for customers with definitions of refugees and asylum seekers, myths and facts, and information about how to help refugees by becoming a member of FASSTT or making a donation, are also widely available. Secondary school students can enter a national writing competition about "How refugees and asylum seekers make a positive contribution to Australia"

and win cash prizes donated by The Body Shop.

Customers will be able to stamp "passports" with messages like "Refugees and Asylum Seekers deserve dignity and respect", "I support the protection of refugees" and "I welcome refugees to Australia". These messages of support will be displayed in the shops before being gathered up in each state and territory to become part of state-based displays in September. All eight displays will be brought together nationally in October to mark Refugee Week.

The preparation for the campaign has been intense. Sue McGrillen from the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture says "involving clients in a campaign like this is a very sensitive issue. I agonised about it – just wanting to make sure that Osman and Mina really understood what it would mean and how high profile it would be. I don't know how I'd feel about having my picture in 72 shops! But Osman and Mina are both very committed to telling their stories and they know that by doing so they are, in a way, speaking for all those who have had a refugee journey". "I think it's a very serious job doing this campaign," says Osman. "I want to do it because I think it makes it easier for other refugees to come."

All Body Shop staff will be wearing t-shirts and badges to promote the campaign, and they will be ready and willing to talk to customers about it. FASSTT has been involved in a two-part program training Body Shop staff members across the country. The second round of training looks at the issue of refugees specifically and staff from FASSTT



will be available in each state and territory to answer the more complex questions.

When you work for The Body Shop, you commit to spending some of your leisure time learning about the issues that affect your community and your world – and the staff wouldn't work anywhere else. Nicky Tracey, speaking for The Body Shop, says that all staff are expected to be actively involved, and that it is part of the job to participate in Body Shop campaigns. This campaign has enjoyed especially strong support from the staff: "We have found that 99 percent of the staff support and endorse the campaign. So far we have had no refusals. Staff are now undergoing the second lot of training, and not one person said they did not agree with what we are doing".

Holly Fraser, a manager at the Bourke Street Mall store, in Melbourne, feels very strongly about this issue and cannot wait for the campaign to start: "I look forward to learning more and continuing to be inspired and enlightened by other people's stories. This campaign has come at a poignant and challenging period in Australian and world history and I feel honoured to be a part of it."

The Body Shop (Australia) runs a major social or environmental campaign each year. Last year's major campaign focussed on global warming and green energy. **The 2003 campaign, funded almost entirely by The Body Shop** provides FASSTT, as the campaign partner, with an opportunity to gain valuable public exposure and raise awareness of their work with refugees. Body Shop customers will be encouraged to sign on as members or make a donation to support FASSTT's work with those who have survived difficult journeys.

A national launch was held in Melbourne on August 4<sup>th</sup>. The launch was predominantly for the media so that this message of welcome and hope can be broadcasted far and wide. Those who have worked so hard to make this campaign happen will be there to celebrate.

You can get involved by going into a Body Shop store between August 4<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> and stamping your message of support on a passport, or by logging on to [www.thebodyshop.com.au](http://www.thebodyshop.com.au) or [www.fasstt.org.au](http://www.fasstt.org.au) to enter the writing competition if you're at high school. You could also get involved by becoming a member of FASSTT and supporting its work rebuilding the shattered lives of refugees.

The photo shoots on that autumn morning were beautifully organised - relaxed clients, enthusiastic Body Shop staff and lots of laughter. There was even a Body Shop gift basket for the Osman's family and for Mina. As the photo shoot draws to a close, I see Sue, never missing a trick, explaining all the products in the gift basket to Osman's wife Hagir. Labels are a challenge when your first language is Arabic. ■





