



HAIRapy Sessions

At Rockville's **Oasis Salon**, a diverse group of women connect over curl talk

By Alison Buckholtz

When **Avi Goldscheider** walked into Rockville's Oasis Salon last year to have her curly hair cut and styled, she was thinking about food.

At her house in Potomac, the Yemenite "overnight bread" known as *kubaneh* had been steaming for 24 hours and was almost ready. But she couldn't remember the spice that the bread is dipped in.

She mentioned that offhandedly to Wafaya Abdallah, Oasis' owner and head stylist. Abdallah, who has Yemeni relatives, didn't know the answer. But a client from Saudi Arabia recommended a Middle Eastern grocer nearby, and another client chimed in with a recipe for pita bread. Soon, a group of Muslim, Christian and Jewish women were shar-

ing culinary memories from their pasts.

"That's when I realized that Oasis is not your typical salon," says Goldscheider, 44. "At other salons, I always tuned out with my headphones or a book. But Oasis is like an old-fashioned hair salon where everyone talks to each other. The clientele is so diverse and interesting that people have meaningful



From left:
Rakia Mamodesene
Marleny Duran
Jess Kromi
Brittany Brown
Wafaya Abdallah
Tigist Hailu-Aga

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—Luby Ismail of Silver Spring

ple always asked if I was white or black. It made me very sensitive to people’s prejudices. I wanted to help inform people how not to be fearful of differences among cultures.”

At 19, she moved from Cairo to Maryland and decided to become a lawyer “to fight for the underdog.” But while working as a hairstylist to earn money, she “realized that since women create the culture of their communities, by working with and talking to women in the salon all day, I could have a positive impact.”

Abandoning plans for law school, she began working at a series of salons, including Visage in Montgomery Mall and Echo in White Flint Plaza, before buying Oasis.

She soon decided that the salon would specialize in cutting, coloring and styling curly hair, so she and her staff received training and certification from the New York City-based DevaCurl Academy, which designs cutting and care techniques for women with curly hair. Abdallah, whose hair falls in tight twists, likes the fact that the Deva system advocates cutting curly hair when it’s dry, rather than wet.

Shari Harbinger, director of the DevaCurl Academy, sees a link between changing women’s perceptions about their hair and changing their perceptions about the world. Curly-haired women have had a lifetime of bad experiences with stylists mishandling their curls. “Wafaya is a natural leader and educator” who can help clients approach their hair and their lives in a fresh way, Harbinger says.

“I listen to their stories and become their ‘hairapist,’” Abdallah says. “Then I teach them what to do so they’ll love their hair again, and they start sharing their stories with other clients in the salon. That’s how they begin to engage with each other and get to know each other. Hair is just the starting point.”

Daliael-Kassabany, a 22-year-old Arab-American who lives in Bethesda, had her hair “relaxed” in her teens because her tight curls were so hard to style. “The chemicals in the relaxing process totally destroyed my hair,” she says.

Once she discovered Oasis, she was amazed by the diversity of people “who all have hair like mine and wanted to stop straightening it. From there we started talking about other things we have in common.”

Yolanda Porché, 42, a Washington, D.C., resident, has come to Oasis for “hairapy” for two years. An African-American Creole from Louisiana, she initially was reluctant to make an appointment after a curly-haired white colleague recommended the salon.

“I just couldn’t understand how Wafaya could handle my white friend’s hair and mine, too,” she says. “But Wafaya listened carefully to what I had to say. Before I knew it, I was admitting I had hated my hair for my whole life. She brought me tea and talked to me about how to change that perception.”

That was the beginning of Porché’s transformation—not just her hair, which she now describes as “perfect corkscrew

conversations and you want to engage.” That sense of engagement is what Abdallah sought to cultivate when she bought Oasis from the previous owner in 2006.

“In our virtual world, the salon is one of the last places people have to go to for a service they need,” the 47-year-old Rockville resident says. “It’s an opportunity to connect,” a place where women can gather to improve themselves and the world around them.

A practicing Muslim, Abdallah was born in Egypt, grew up North Carolina and Qatar, and attended the American University of Cairo for a year. “I never fit in anywhere—in the Middle East I was too American, and in America I was too Arab,” she says. “In North Carolina, peo-

curls,” but her perception of the world. “Oasis is one place [where] race and nationality don’t matter,” she says.

“It’s brilliant to bring together Jewish, Arab, African-American, Hispanic and Mediterranean women over the question every curly-haired woman asks herself every morning: ‘What am I going to do with my hair today?’” says Oasis client Luby Ismail, 49. “We connect at this very basic place and get to know each other by talking about our lives, our families and our work, rather than starting with politics, which polarizes people.”

Ismail, a self-described “Arab-American curly girl from Silver Spring,” has been coming to Oasis for three years and likens the salon to Busboys and Poets, the local restaurant chain where politically minded patrons gather to eat and discuss the events of the day. “At

Busboys and Poets, you go out to dinner and learn something,” she says. “At Oasis, where there is such diversity and openness, you have your hair done and learn something.”

Abdallah’s commitment to social action extends into the larger community, as well. A condition of her stylists’ employment is to volunteer one Sunday per quarter in Montgomery County. She and her employees have cut and styled hair for free at Rockville’s Stepping Stones Shelter for the homeless and for families of wounded warriors at Walter Reed National Medical Center. Abdallah has also cut hair at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington’s “Mitzvah Day” for women and girls donating their hair to Locks of Love.

“Wafaya pays it forward,” says Ariel Glassman, 40, an Oasis client from Potomac who

has referred dozens of friends. “It’s not like other salons; it’s not just a business to her.”

The friendships extend beyond the salon, as well. Goldscheider proposed the idea of a book club tackling multicultural issues after she got into a discussion about Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* during a hair appointment.

“It’s a group of people I never would have met outside the hair salon,” Goldscheider says of the book group, which now numbers 16 and meets monthly at Oasis after business hours. “I’ve learned so much from them. Not about hair, but about life.” ■

Alison Buckholtz lives in Potomac and is the author of Standing By: The Making of an American Military Family in a Time of War (Tarcher, 2009). To comment on this story, email comments@BethesdaMagazine.com.