



2 of us

ARWA & HAZEM EL MASRI

Hazem El Masri, 36, was born in Lebanon and emigrated to Australia in 1988, when he was 11. He played professional rugby league with the Canterbury Bulldogs from 1996 to 2009. His wife, Arwa, 35, was born in Saudi Arabia and is the daughter of Palestinian parents. They have three children.

ARWA: A university friend booked an interview with this up-and-coming Muslim footballer and asked me to accompany her to help with any Islamic references he might make. When the day, June 12, 1997, came for the interview, she was sick. She implored me to go for her. A football club. A young lady alone. It was a big no-no for me. But to help her, I went.

Hazem walked out of the tunnel at the sports ground and, as soon as the sun hit his face, I was captured by a feeling that I'd met him in a past life. I felt I knew him. I thought that football players were womanising, disrespectful, loud and obnoxious. He changed my idea.

He lowered his gaze the entire time I was interviewing him, which is something we're instructed to do in Islam – not to overly communicate with your eyes with the opposite gender. So he maintained a very high level of respect, and that respect has never wavered.

That 10-minute interview turned into a 40-minute chat. I didn't think I'd see him again, but I certainly wanted to.

He lived near the University of Western Sydney where I was studying, so I saw him at the uni gym. We also spoke over the phone, but there was never anything beyond friendship. Then some family friends made a marriage proposal to me. The man was a fitting

candidate, an educated Palestinian from a good family. What was absent was love.

I could see Hazem was devastated when I told him I was engaged. But he hadn't voiced his feelings for me, so there was nothing for me to go by. Still, I realised that true love requires courage. To tell my father I'd made a mistake getting engaged was very difficult for me.

When I finally introduced Hazem to my dad, I thought my father wouldn't get along with him, because he played sport and didn't have a degree. But after that first meeting my father said, "I don't think you'll find a better man than Hazem."

Hazem is a very competitive person and being a football family was a challenge because his training schedule changed every week, and he was also doing extra goal-kicking sessions. For two years I would pack up the kids and we would go to the football ground so we could be with him. He would kick 200 balls: five or six in the same position, then go again, until he got it right, for three hours. So when he finished football in 2009 and became available, it took some adjusting to. He's still busy now – he has set up a security company, and does public speaking as well as community work – but in a different way.

I share Hazem with the rest of the community. If it means less time with me that's fine, because I know the commitment he has to community

“
I thought that football players were womanising, disrespectful, loud and obnoxious. Hazem changed my idea.
”

work. Haz will get a call at 8pm saying there's someone in hospital doing it tough and he'll get up after a long day and drive to see that person.

When some of the Bulldogs players were suspects in a rape case [in Coffs Harbour, NSW, in 2004 – no charges were laid] it was a challenging time, because of Hazem being tainted as guilty when he had nothing to do with it. Also, his refusal to do a DNA test, which was his legal right, attracted hysteria from the media. It had no effect on our relationship, but having people doubting my husband's fidelity was difficult. He is my best friend and definitely the love of my life.

HAZEM: The week we met there was a riot [at Canterbury's then home ground, Belmore Oval] between police and some of the Bulldogs fans. Being Lebanese, the media wanted to talk to me, but I refused to speak to anyone because I didn't want to be misquoted by the press. A few of the managers said, "There's a lovely lady outside and she wants to do an interview," and finally I agreed.

As soon as I saw Arwa's face and her manner, I was very impressed. She was a complete package. She was pretty on the outside, but her inside was very nourishing as well. At the end of the interview I wasn't just going to let her go. I built up the courage and said, "Just in case you forget some material or you need something extra, I'll give you my number. That way you can call me." Afterwards, I didn't stop talking about her.

Then the off season came and I'd be training at the uni gym sometimes and we'd have a chat. I'd shown my interest to her, but it was hard to be upfront and say, "Look, I want to marry you." Once I asked her – she being Palestinian and myself being Lebanese – about the cultural differences with regard to marriage. She said they didn't talk about that in her household and it was none of my business. That set me back. I thought, "Maybe she just likes me as a friend and that's it."

It upset me a lot when she told me she was engaged, and still upsets me to this day. I thought that my body language and the way I was speaking made it clear that I was interested, but I think she wanted to hear it. I've always been shy and reluctant to step forward.

When she told me she was no longer engaged I was still hurt, but I expressed my interest. The biggest obstacles in her mind were the different cultures. Her parents are high on education, which is fair enough; my parents are, too, but we had a lot of obstacles with the [1975-1990 Lebanese civil] war. Rugby league wasn't something I aimed for, but it was an opportunity that presented itself and I grabbed it.

We were engaged almost a year and a half before we got married in July 2000, and we built our relationship upon friendship. She understood my job as a footballer and my role in the community probably more than any other person.

Arwa's a wonderful mother. She's caring and giving, and she's not materialistic at all. She's content with life, which is wonderful. Her memoir, *Tea with Arwa*, is fantastic – she's got great talent. I hate talking when she's talking because I end up speaking like a fool. I'll use 10 words to describe something and she'll only need one or two, and that's something you can't teach.

We made the special spiritual journey to Mecca – just the two of us – at the end of 2006. The beauty about Islam is it's a guideline for life. It is about treating the other person equally and as they deserve. I'm not perfect and she's not. But we feed off each other, and at the end of the day the relationship is built upon respect. GW