

# A tête-à-tête

with *ANDIE HALAS*



In her former life, **ANDIE HALAS** was a director at **SEAFOLLY**, Australia's biggest swimwear brand. This October, she will celebrate the 10th ANNIVERSARY of **THREAD TOGETHER**, her NOT-FOR-PROFIT passion project that redistributes clothing from Australian fashion companies to those in **NEED**. With nine mobile **WARDROBE VANS** and 11 clothing hubs, **THREAD TOGETHER** has dressed at least 750,000 people to date in **NEW CLOTHING** and helped stop excess product from ending up in landfill. She tells **PATTY HUNTINGTON** what an **EYE-OPENER** the experience has been

**Harper's BAZAAR:** So, the catalyst for Thread Together was a couple hundred defective Seafolly towels?

**Andie Halas:** There was a slight production issue, a dye problem, which is not uncommon. It was also after we had just returned from a trip to China, and I was a little overwhelmed with the volume of clothing being produced — which we were a part of. When I returned, I suppose that was where my mindset was: *Wow, we're producing a lot.* So, I thought, *What are we going to do with these? We can't just put them in landfill, and we can't sell them.* So, I went to the Asylum Seekers Centre [in Sydney's Newtown] and said, "Would they be of any use to you?" They were providing free legal services, medical advice, food, but they only had an old box full of donated clothing. When you're thinking of refugees, when they're coming into the country — often with nothing because they've usually escaped trauma — and then to be confronted with this box of old clothing, it's really not very dignified. The other thing: it doesn't have what they need. There was a young girl there, six years old, and there was nothing for her. There was a woman who needed scarves for religious purposes. So, I thought, *Hold on. We can do better than this.* I knew we could because every fashion company has excess stock, whether at the end of the season or there's a slight fault. But it's brand new, and it's perfectly good. So, I just made a few calls to my mates in the industry. The Specialty Fashion Group came on board. Then it exploded pretty quickly. A men's shelter needed tracksuits and runners, so we approached Bonds and General Pants. Then we were dealing with an organisation for at-risk youth, young girls who had been thrown out of home and needed school formal dresses, under-16 girls who had fallen pregnant ... Suddenly we realised we needed to broaden our clothing range. We went from one to 10 brands. Now we've got 1000. The response from the industry was unbelievable. They want to do the right thing, and they want to contribute. During the 2019-2020 fires, of course, we had the basics: underpants, socks, bras, jeans. But we also had Carla Zampatti knits because it was getting cold, and [people] had lost everything. I remember one person, Judy, to be able to have this beautiful jumper, it just meant the world, when everything was falling apart around her, to be able to say, "I feel good today."

**HB:** How has the recent spate of back-to-back disasters and refugee crises impacted demand for your services?

**AH:** It's just gone through the roof. We set up a hub in Lismore [in Northern New South Wales, after the floods earlier this year], and it was just devastating. I couldn't even believe it was Australia because every house, every school, the local doctor, the local hospital — all just gone. It felt like a war zone. Again, the industry was incredible. There were lots of young people coming with babies, they'd lost their homes, they'd lost their jobs and didn't know when insurance was coming. But it was a really joyous place. We provide people with dignity. [It's like saying], "You found yourself in a really bad place, just take your time, find what you need, bring in a friend."

**HB:** Can you give us an idea of the scale of Thread Together?

**AH:** We clothe about 2000 people a week, which is about 10,000 units, going out every week all over Australia. We've got two warehouses in Sydney, one which the Goodman Group gave us, our distribution centre. The Toll Group picks up the goods from our fashion partners all over Australia and [brings them] to our warehouses. We are a not-for-profit, so we are very small. But we use a lot of technology. We don't pay for Toll — we couldn't do it without them. We don't pay for the warehouses; we use volunteers to do all the sorting and distribution. The vans are donated. We've got hubs in every major city. Sometimes we'll partner with a larger charity, for example, Vinnies in Canberra or Anglicare in Adelaide, and they will provide the volunteers. There's an online booking system. You might have a group of girls who are at risk, or you might have a group of ex-inmates.

Damian Bennett

*"During the 2019-2020 fires, we had the basics: underpants, socks, bras, jeans. But we also had Carla Zampatti knits"*



**HB:** Beyond the floods, do any particular stories stand out?

**AH:** A few years ago, the police called us and said, "Can you open your [Sydney] hub? We have these women." So we went in really early, and it was just horrific. I don't know what had gone on, but these four women came in blankets, nothing else, naked. That was probably the most traumatic. We have a lot of women escaping domestic violence. I've been blown away. It happens in the Eastern suburbs, it happens in religious families, it really could happen to anyone. Then I was in the warehouse a few weeks ago, and this man, Darren, said, "I came in because I wanted to say thank you by volunteering my time. I was in jail for 10 years, I left two weeks ago, and when I left the jail, I left in the suit that I went to the court in 10 years ago — nothing else. And I had lost a lot of weight while I was in prison, so the suit didn't fit me, and everything was just so daunting and embarrassing. I arrived at my temporary housing, and there was a box with underpants, socks, pants, shirts, jumpers, jackets — everything in my size. It just made me cry." He comes in every fortnight. People give back. What I find with this is it is very much paying it forward. With the refugees from Afghanistan, we organised similar to what we do with the temporary housing for prisoners: we find out the size and what they need, and we have boxes for them as they arrive. It seems so small, yet it has such a big flow-on effect.

**HB:** How has your experience with Thread Together helped open your eyes to social inequities and check your privilege?

**AH:** I struggle with [privilege]. It's the last thing I want to be. I feel humbled that I can do it, but there's no difference between me and the person I'm helping. We are the same, and I do believe bad things can happen to anybody, anytime. So, while I right now am very lucky and privileged and all the rest of it, I don't for one second think that things couldn't tip on their head — I've seen it too much. Whether it's a natural disaster, whether it's COVID, whether it's mental health. I'm the mother of three children. I don't know what's going to happen. I just feel like while I can, while things are good for me, I just do my best to give back.