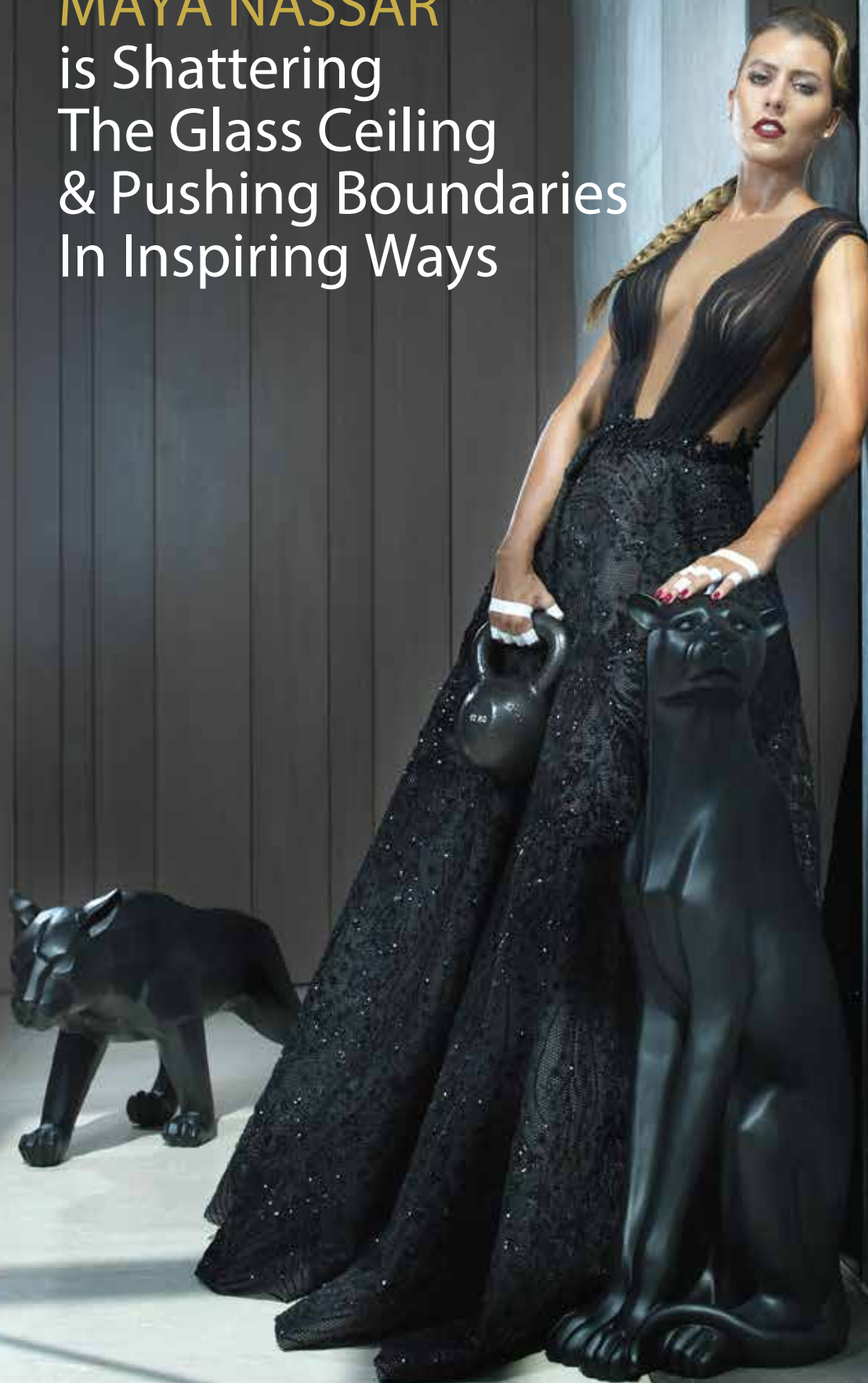


MAYA NASSAR
is Shattering
The Glass Ceiling
& Pushing Boundaries
In Inspiring Ways



Written By Denver Beaulieu-Hains

Most people perceive Arab women as timid, docile, suppressed and fully covered. Most don't even give a second thought to what might be going on underneath the traditional Habib, or of the mindset that allows for surrender and submission to one's doctrine, religion, culture and beliefs. So, it's an oxymoron, Arab or conservative, bikini and public exhibition, the concept doesn't quite go together under normal circumstances. However, it took a charismatic and courageous visionary, Maya Nassar, the Dutch-Lebanese competitive fitness model to work with women in her native homeland, Lebanon, on fitness sport, body building and bikini competition.

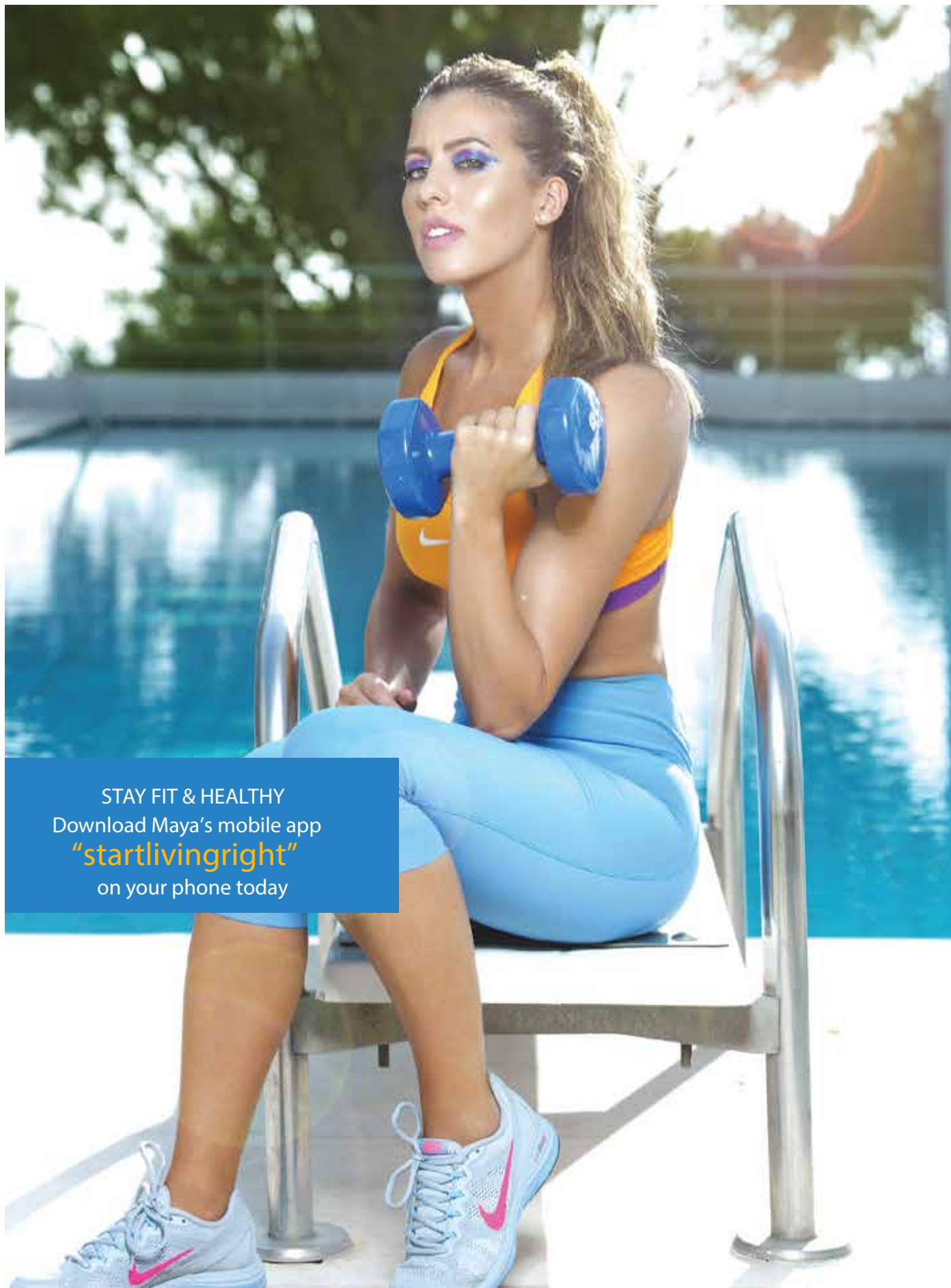
According to the most recent study conducted by Statistics Lebanon, a Beirut-based research company, Lebanon is estimated to be 54 percent Muslim, 27 percent Shia, 27 percent Sunni. While the Christian community is also comprised of the conservative Maronite 21 percent, Greek Orthodox 8 percent, and Melkite 5 percent. Lebanon is only about 1 percent protestant.

Let's face it, women everywhere struggle with body image! At 31 years of age, Nassar, a pacesetter, TV host and entrepreneur has fought her own battle against obesity and poor self-esteem. She's beautiful, but it goes much deeper than that... She wants women everywhere to feel not just beautiful, but also healthy and empowered.

In April 2014, Nassar sought and received the official endorsement of the Lebanese government for her participation in the competitive body building sport on behalf of her country. In February 2017 she opened her gym in Antelias, in hopes of helping others find a venue for their own transformation and mental, physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Pushing the envelope, Nassar continued to work despite her pregnant glow and a growing waistline. She recently celebrated the birth of her first child Andrew in September.







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A new mother, body builder and competitor, what's next? With a baby in tow, an expanding point of view, and fresh insight and perspective, Nassar is set to continue to change minds on the male dominated sport, after all, she's got one more huge motivator... that little one she carried inside is likely to see opportunity and not barriers, just like mom.

DUNIA Magazine (DM): Please give us 3 words that best describe your personality, and why.

Maya Nassar (MN): Independent, cultured and humble. This is because I come from a multicultural background. I have a Dutch mother, Lebanese father, was born in the United States and grew up in Nigeria. Along with this, I am very well-traveled and love exploring new countries. Being exposed to many different cultures has made me very humble and enabled me to appreciate and value diversity.

DM: Describe your transformation from obesity to fitness model... What were the significant milestones?



MN: The first milestone was learning what to do to transform. It is very important to follow a proper, healthy diet and exercise program. Unfortunately there are many weight loss scams that promise quick results with little to no work, and this only sets you up for failure. Once you familiarize yourself with the proper way to transform, the next step is to take action. If your readers need help following a proper diet and exercise program, they can follow the free plans on my website or by downloading my mobile app by searching for "startlivingright" as one word on their smartphone stores.

Another milestone is to create new lifestyle habits and stick to these for long enough to see results. For me, the first step was sticking to a healthy diet and giving up unhealthy food that I ate on a daily basis. This was probably the hardest step. The next, was to start training and lifting weights. The results were amazing and I started losing weight and seeing results on a weekly basis. **It is always hard at first, but then the results become your motivation to keep on going.** I always say that it takes three weeks to build a new habit and then it becomes a part of your lifestyle.

DM: What were some of the physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and cultural barriers you felt you had to overcome?

MN: In terms of physical, mental and emotional, I simply had to change my way of thinking and learn how to adopt new lifestyle habits. This brought about positive changes because I started believing in myself and developed a new sense of inner discipline and willpower to help me reach my goals which I never had before.

In terms of cultural barriers, the biggest challenge was competing in a sport that did not exist in my country. I had to educate others about "female bodybuilding" and also had to deal with the controversy of this sport. Although I have been criticized on social media for entering such competitions, **I have also been heavily supported and helped to inspire other women to start lifting weights. I enjoy breaking stereotypes and empowering women to become strong and independent through sports.**

DM: *How did you move forward despite the challenges?*

MN: *Fitness helps you build incredible mental willpower which helps you overcome all challenges.* My attitude was to never see anything as “failure”. If I did not achieve a goal, it did not mean I failed. It simply meant that I had feedback to try again with more experience. For example, in my first competition I did not win. I did not see this as failure. I came back again the next year after training harder and learning from my first experience and this time round, I won first place.

DM: *How did the government endorsement come about? Why was this important to you? Did it impact your career?*

MN: My trainer encouraged me to approach our minister of sports and tell him about my competition. I was competing internationally in a sport that nobody was familiar with, and wanted government support to recognize my competition and give me permission to officially represent Lebanon. After meeting with the minister, he wrote me a letter and endorsed my competition.

This was important to me because no other female in Lebanon had been give this endorsement before and it meant that I would officially represent Lebanon abroad. This totally impacted my career. After receiving my endorsement, this attracted immense media attention and helped to raise awareness about female bodybuilding. In addition to that, it landed me my own TV show on MTV Lebanon.

DM: *As a fitness model, what does it mean to you to see your body changing as you prepare for the birth of your child? Is there any fear associated with the birth of your child?*

Maya Nassar (MN): At first I was scared of weight gain and stretch marks, but I learnt that you can still keep fit as you are pregnant. If you follow a healthy diet and exercise regularly, then you will minimize weight gain and the

appearance of stretch marks. I am lucky to have maintained a healthy weight and do not have stretch marks due to keeping active. Seeing your body change because you are carrying a life inside you is a positive and rewarding experience for any woman. I do not have any fears associated with the birth of my child. Exercising helps to minimize health complications and I am hoping to have a safe and smooth delivery.

DM: *Tell us about your American/Lebanese heritage, and some of your core values in life.*

Maya Nassar (MN): Since I come from a cultured background, I have been exposed to many different traditions and ways of life. I have brought out the best in me from all cultures. *I also believe I am very good at understanding other people, especially those who are different from me because of my different heritages.* My core values are to always respect others and help other people believe in themselves based on my own experiences. This is partly why I opened my own gym, as I wanted to help change the lives of others the same way I changed my life through fitness.

DM: *What would you like to say to readers in closing?*

Maya Nassar (MN): I would like to encourage all your readers to take on a healthy lifestyle and see it as something rewarding. *Many people see healthy living as a punishment, but it is the greatest reward and investment you can make in yourself.* It improves your health, your mental wellbeing, boosts your confidence and helps you reach all other goals in your life. Being fit and healthy is not only about staying in shape. It is also about preventing diseases and living a long and healthy life to watch your grandchildren grow up. I hope readers can learn from my experience and see that if I turned my life around, then they can do it too! 0



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