

THURSDAY EDITION:

NATIONAL *Believing in love at first sight.* **A2**

WEATHER



TOMORROW

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DETAILS PAGE B7

The Standard

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SPECTRUM **Photographer offers glimpse behind the veil.** **C1**



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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2008

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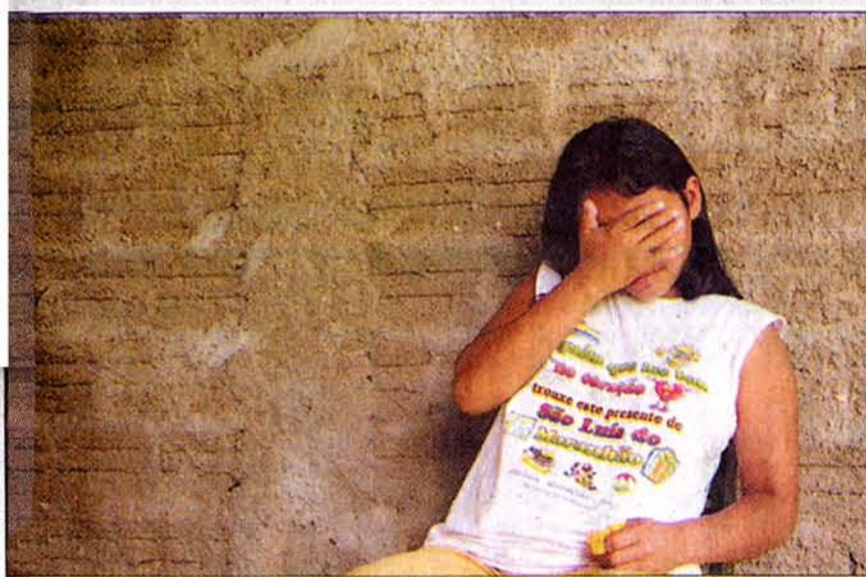
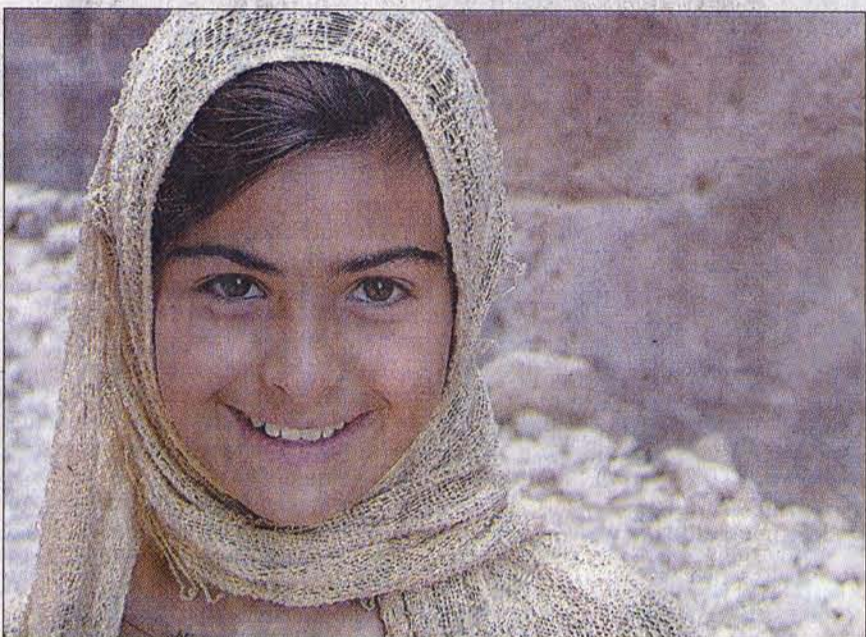
PREVIEW



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Port Dalhousie photographer Tasha Hakeem, at right, will be giving a talk about her travels to the Middle East Feb. 21 at the St. Catharines Centennial Library. Some of her photographs, from top left: a Petra girl who was selling rocks for 1JD (Jordanian dinar) to make money for her family; four students at the University of Jordan in Amman; a young Brazilian girl who, during interviews on infanticide, found out she had been a twin at birth. She is crying, having discovered her parents killed her twin.

STAFF PHOTO, RIGHT, BY BOB TYMCZYSZYN; OTHER PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE STANDARD BY TASHA HAKEEM

Behind the veil

Port Dalhousie
photographer
Tasha Hakeem
gives viewers
a glimpse into
the world her
Middle East
and Brazilian
subjects inhabit

By LORI LITTLETON
Standard Staff

A girl sits against a stone wall, her hand covers her face.
A woman holds her interlaced fingers over her breast.
A girl smiling, sweet as can be.
Ordinary photos with extraordinary stories behind them.
The girl is crying because she just learned her parents killed her twin.
The woman killed her baby by refusing to breast-feed.
The smiling girl sells rocks to make money for her family.

Port Dalhousie photographer Tasha Hakeem's pictures not only tell stories, they give a viewer a glimpse into the world her subjects inhabit.

"When you ... are able to talk about the stuff you've done, it's almost as though a weight had been lifted," she said of those she has photographed during an interview over omelettes at Beantrees Cafe in downtown St. Catharines.

"So often, they don't know any other way. They don't know about human rights."
The Cambridge, Ont., native has been on many journeys, to places some of us would be too nervous to explore, including the Brazilian Amazon and the Middle East. Her mission is to expose social injustice, including homelessness, sex trafficking and honour killing.

The 31-year-old will present some of the photos she took while in Jordan at a free public lecture at the St. Catharines Centennial Library on Feb. 21.

After spending four months in Jordan, Hakeem gave some talks about her observations. During these presentations, she wore a burka, a traditional headpiece worn by Muslim women. As her presentation progressed, and she related the trials and joys of the women behind the veils, she removed layer upon layer. She was amazed at people's reactions.

"It totally opened their eyes to the fact that (Muslim women) are people. It was encouraging," she said.

When Hakeem decided to embark on a social justice journey in 2004, she planned to visit seven countries. However, she quickly realized travelling

alone to all the nations on her long list would be too dangerous and she didn't have enough time to learn about each one. So, after first visiting Australia and Papua New Guinea, she went to Jordan, a relatively stable and safe Middle Eastern country.

Hakeem also decided to focus on one issue — honour killing, which is a murder (almost exclusively) of a woman, who has been perceived to have brought shame on her family.

"When I was trying to understand honour killing, I had to step out of my mindset of right and wrong," she said.

"One of the things I learned from Jordan was that I can't judge a society based on my world view or mindset. It's a huge opportunity for misunderstanding."

Hakeem, who spent time in England after graduating from high school, attended the University College of the Caribou in Kamloops, B.C., and the University of Waterloo, where she graduated with a degree in fine arts in 2001. She then worked at a young offenders' prison.

Please see Photographs page C2

Photographs

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1

After Jordan, Hakeem, who was living in Oakville at the time, went to Hawaii in 2005 to take a three-month digital photography course, which is where she met her husband, Nathan.

In November 2005, Hakeem was offered a chance to go to Brazil with an international mission organization.

"I sort of piggybacked what they wanted me to do with my own work," she said.

She travelled around the south of Brazil and was planning to visit the northeast when she became aware of, and involved with, the issue of infanticide in the Amazon. She stayed there for two months.

"I wanted to ... take a back-seat observation on the sex trade — the northeast is (rife) with child prostitution — but sometimes I think God prevented me from going. I might have been killed for the things that might have come out of my mouth," she said.

"Brazil was really hard because I didn't have anyone to talk through what I was seeing. There was a language and cultural barrier. I was left with a lot of stuff to work through."

While in the Amazon, Hakeem was told her cellphone was likely tapped.

"It was really dangerous. Someone said to me that I better be glad it's not the 1970s because I would have gone missing," she said. "I wasn't prepared for that. It wouldn't have changed my mind. I know what my calling is. It wouldn't have scared me but to be more prepared would have been good."

One of her worst experiences was attending a meeting between government officials and agencies to discuss the case of a girl with cerebral palsy. The girl's

WHO WHERE WHEN

WHAT: Women of the Middle East in Photographs and Words with Tasha Hakeem

WHERE: St. Catharines Centennial Library, 54 Church St.

WHEN: Feb. 21, 7:30 p.m.

INFO: www.capturedbytasha.com

CALL: 905-688-6104

mother wanted her to remain in Manaus, the Amazonas State capital where the meeting was being held.

Some Amazonian Indians practise infanticide for babies born with physical or mental disabilities, as well as those considered "abnormal," including twins and triplets. These babies are buried alive, suffocated with leaves, poisoned or abandoned in the jungle.

"Even though they knew that when the baby would be sent back to the tribe she would be killed, they still wanted to send her," Hakeem said. "It was really upsetting for me." The girl was rescued when the mother, on the way back to her tribe, told an aid worker to take her baby and care for her.

Hakeem came to St. Catharines in June 2006 and has since focused on creating fine art photography and greeting cards, available at the Village Gallery in Port Dalhousie and the Watering Can and Southridge Community Church, and working as development co-ordinator at Hannah House in Niagara Falls.

In May, Tasha and Nathan Hakeem will take seven Brock University students to Japan. The envoy will focus on homelessness, orphanages and prostitution. A second intent is to hold a photography exhibition in Niagara in the fall to display their work from the trip.

"We're exposing the students to the issues, but we're also bringing value back into (the subjects') lives. We will do certain things that does that and doesn't further exploit them," she said.

A long-term issue Hakeem plans to explore is sex trafficking. As a start, she is distributing a prayer guide for the victims, which contains a lot of information about the global problem. For example, UNICEF reports there are more than one million children entering the sex trade annually.

"We in the Niagara region seem to be very ignorant of the fact that it's happening here," she said. "It's so hard to raise awareness at the top level. It's easier to brush it aside. If the government continues to decriminalize brothels, that says something, not only about the women involved in that but about how we are looked at in general. Do I want my country looking at me like I'm a commodity?"

Clearly, the issues Hakeem tackles are not uplifting and she admits that, for many people, it gets to be too much and people just ignore what is occurring.

"I heard a quote once, that when you see injustice, now you must respond to bring further awareness to it and you can act on it," she said.