

# LABOUR OF LOVE

Self\*ish is a new activewear brand that aims to remove barriers to exercising for larger people. We talk to **Faapito Jonson-Faapito**, owner of Self\*ish, about the difference he hopes the brand can make.



**F**aapito Jonson-Faapito says, 'I know how difficult it is for an obese person to even get the motivation to start workouts. You get all the negative comments about what you should do and what you can't do, and it can be a downer.'

Faapito runs Self\*ish with his wife and sister-in-law. Their flagship product is a rash top in large sizing. 'It's not necessarily just for wearing in water. It's for any type of exercise activity because it's very light and breathable.'

The product is the result of his own experiences.

## MAKING CHANGE

'When I got diagnosed with diabetes,' says Faapito, 'I really didn't take it too seriously. Then the diabetes rolled on to kidney failure. That's basically when I took my view off myself and focused on the people who'd miss me if I was gone, and the people who needed me.'

'It switched my mindset to make it about them and not about me. When it was about me, I made a lot of excuses not to do the things I needed to, to stay well. But after seeing the tears in my wife's eyes, my children, and also my parents, I realised I had to make a change. Doing swimming was one of those things, and I wanted to do walking in water, because that's what was best for my joints.'

# TOLOPO



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The pool he attended stopped letting people wear tee shirts in the water – they would only accept rash tops. ‘So my wife bought me a rash top from the warehouse. It lasted all of about four months.

‘One day, I came out of the pool and people were all looking at me. I was thinking, “What?” I only realised in the shower that the rash top had ripped all the way, from neck to navel.

‘I thought, “Okay, I’ll just get a replacement.” Unfortunately, no one sold a size that fitted.’

He finally found one, but it was \$170. He decided he would try to get one made for him at a more affordable price – and one that he could guarantee the quality of.

He spoke to Tracey Drinkwater from the Kidney Society about it. ‘I told her my frustrations and that I was going to go and source my own rash shirt. She mentioned that I wasn’t the only person in that boat, and then she said, “You know, it’d be great if you could work out how to supply other people with it.”

‘I thought, “You know, that’s absolutely right.”’

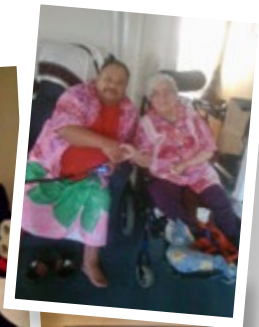
What Faapito had noticed at the pool reinforced the idea. ‘There were a lot of other large people there, like myself. Some were in the pool, but a lot of them were on the sidelines. They were either watching their children swim or waiting for a partner. It dawned on me that maybe they weren’t in here because they couldn’t get the garments to be in here.

‘I just wanted to be able to remove that hurdle for those people who’d made the decision to put the effort in to do something.’

From the start, Self\*ish was a business that runs on a strong set of ethics, and Faapito puts this down to his parents’ influence.

### NEVER FORGETTING HIS UPBRINGING

Looking back on his childhood, Faapito says, ‘Our beginnings were humble, just like many other low-income families. Dad was the only one working, and he used to walk to work, 12 to 15 km there and back, because we had no car. And when it came to any overtime he’d take it on.



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‘Every now and then, he’d be lucky enough to get a ride back home from someone, or someone arranged to give him a lift, but most days he’d be walking to work until we were able to actually get a car. And nine times out of ten that car was a push start. It had everything wrong with it – barely stuck together with tape! We did what we could with what we had.

‘Mum was pretty much the person that had to organise all the finances so that we’d even have anything to eat. She endured a lot of stress back in those days. A lot of the time, Mum would go without eating just so that we could eat. And any time we needed things for school, she would put aside other essential things just to get that done.

‘My Mum really struggled with the idea of letting us down. Anything she could do for us, she did. And she was a very strong-willed lady.’

### **CELEBRATING TOLOPO FALANAIPUPU FAAPITO**

Faapito’s mother, Tolopo Falanaipupu Faapito, had been a champion cricketer when she was younger. It’s Tolopo that Faapito has named this issue’s special edition MyID bracelet after.

He says, ‘She’s got a few records still and a trophy at home for 308 runs not out. That’s an indication of my Mum’s prowess and determination. She also was the main person involved with bringing a lot of our relatives from Samoa. So, even juggling our low income, she had the ability to bring over a few of my other cousins, who we raised and put through school.

‘She was all about service. Mum’s dad was a minister, and she comes from a long line of ministers. She was all about service and very strong in the faith, with God.’

Tolopo became ill when Faapito was 15. ‘She had a stroke and lived



for 30 more years. She survived three major strokes and many, many smaller strokes, up until last year. I know a lot of people would say this about their mum, but she was probably the strongest woman I’ve known.

‘And, when it came to her illness, I don’t think there would be many people who would’ve had the mental fortitude to handle that for so many years.’

Faapito’s father, Lesa Amataga Faapito, and siblings all helped look after her. ‘We’d had her at home ever since she was first sick. We’d always been told by our medical professionals that she should be in care, but we wanted to take care of Mum ourselves, and we strongly believe that’s the reason she was with us so long.

‘In the last two years, Mum was taken to hospital a few times for various things, and we were told – probably about four or five times – that there was nothing that could be done for her. A lot of the time, doctors asked us to turn off the machines.

‘But we were with Mum every day and we could tell, even though she couldn’t speak, whether she was okay or whether something wasn’t going right for her.

‘Every time that happened, she would try and fight back, and then we knew she wasn’t ready to go. So we would go through the whole

*‘It’s about being able to exercise in comfort, and being able to feel dignified in doing what you need to do.’*

medical politics of all that, and, at the end of the day, they just let us take her home every single time.

‘I think Mum’s final wish towards the end was to pass on at home, with us. Unfortunately, with the last episode, Mum had obviously been battling for 30-plus years, and I think she was just finally tired and ready to go.

‘She’s the biggest hero and inspiration to us, along with my Dad. He never faltered ever, after Mum became sick.’

### **ETHICS OF THE BUSINESS**

Faapito saw his parents embody the ethics of service and of never quitting. ‘It’s basically you give the shirt off your back to help a fellow man. That’s what my parents instilled into us, and that’s what we try to live by.’

It’s easy to see how his upbringing has influenced Self\*ish – a venture that he runs with his wife and sister-in-law. ‘We weren’t so interested in the money side of the business. Money is great, and it does help, don’t get me wrong, but this seemed like the opportunity to help somebody else out if they were in my situation.

‘We wanted to provide a solution for large people wanting to get into the pool and exercise.’

They have repeatedly gone the extra mile for customers. ‘It was really crucial for us to explain to



our manufacturers who the shirts were going be for and why it was important to use the size chart that we had sent them, as opposed to the size chart that they were using. It did make the product more expensive to make because it was more fabric, but that was fine.

'So our sizing isn't based off standard sizing. It's based off US big size. For example, our 3XL is larger than a standard 3XL.'

They initially approached three potential manufacturers in China. 'After viewing the garment samples and trying them on myself, we decided on one. Then we trialled it for about two weeks of me going swimming every day, just to see if there was any shrinkage or anything like that.

'We were happy with it, so we finalised the label for washing the garment and decided on a first order of 500 shirts in total. That was 125 shirts in each size, so that, as time went on, we could fathom which sizes would sell faster.'

They have customers from all

around Aotearoa and sell on Trade Me as well as their own website, providing their reliably-sized garments.

Faapito notes that it can be deceiving buying plus size clothes in most shops. 'They don't actually say where the sizing is from. For example, one of our customers had bought a 6XL from a store, a rare size anyway, and when she tried it on it didn't fit. She sent us a message and asked us whether our 6XLs would fit her. I told her to use our size chart and choose her sizing off that.

'After looking at the chart, she thought she was probably a 3XL, but she wasn't sure whether that would be correct.'

Faapito suggested she come and see them. 'I gave her our address and she came on a Sunday. I said, "You can try the 3XL, and if it doesn't fit, you're welcome to swap it for something else larger." She took one look – she didn't even try it on. She just looked at it and went, "No, that's fine. 3XL is perfect."'

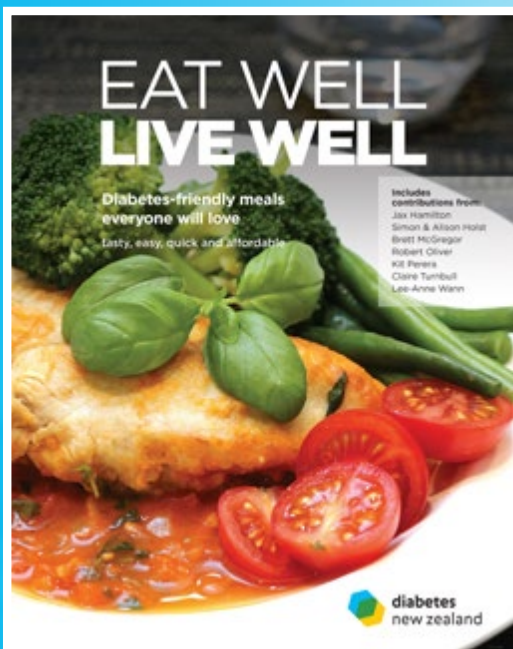
## LOOKING AHEAD

Faapito says, 'We've had awesome feedback from all our customers so far. They're very happy with the sizing, and they're also happy with the quality of the garments. We're stoked.

'We'd love to bring in one or two other colours as an option later on, but at this stage we're just wanting to get out as many shirts as possible for people to start getting into action.'

They may also branch out into other garments in future. 'Basically, anything that I come across as an obese person, that is a hurdle or a barrier in terms of clothing is somewhere that we want to put our efforts. It's about being able to exercise in comfort and being able to feel dignified in doing what you need to do.'

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