



21 ICONS  
SEASON II  
SOUTH AFRICA

*Adrian Steirn*



## MEDIA RELEASE

**Embargoed until 10 August 2014 at 12h00 (SA)**

**Johannesburg – 10 August 2014** - Imtiaz Sooliman - “The greatest thing South Africa has taught me is the spirit of love and being together.”

On 10 August 2014 at 20h27 on SABC 3, the acclaimed series 21 ICONS South Africa will feature the second icon of its second season: Imtiaz Sooliman, the founder of the South African based humanitarian aid organisation, Gift of the Givers.

21 ICONS is a showcase for the South African spirit; a tribute to the men and women who have helped to shape our country and, indeed, our world. The series is part of an annual project which features unique narrative portraits and short films by Adrian Steirn, one of the continent’s pre-eminent photographers and filmmakers. Steirn’s evocative and moving work has successfully captured the essence of people who, through their dedication and vision, have become role models for communities grappling with the challenges of transformation.

Steirn comments, “I’ve met many people whose stories are incredibly powerful – it’s a true privilege to discover more about the human spirit and share these individuals personal accounts, their positive character traits and their propensity to influence and shape perceptions and transform societal norms for the better, impacting the communities around them.”

The beautiful portraits included in the projects will be sold at a charity auction later in the year. Sooliman has nominated the Gift of the Givers Foundation to be a recipient of the funds.

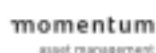
Steirn’s portrait of Sooliman appears in a Sunday paper alongside the collectible poster of the first icon of Season two, Albie Sachs. It features Sooliman standing in front of a broken down building, which has been reduced to rubble. Wisps of smoke rise behind him. Against this bleak backdrop, Sooliman holds an outstretched hand; in it is a small gift. The portrait is a reflection of a life that has been dedicated to giving and offering assistance and hope, even in the most dire of circumstances.

In an intimate conversation with Steirn, Sooliman talks about his life as a humanitarian and the courage it takes to lead in in disaster situations. He also discusses the importance of innovation in his work, and the idea that shared humanity is more important than anything else: class, race, language and religion.

Indeed, this was the observation that led to the establishment of Gift of the Givers in 1992. Sooliman explains that he was travelling in Istanbul, Turkey, with his wife at the time. “This was after the Gulf War, which had an enormous and negative impact, polarising religions and communities. In the Muslim mind, the Gulf War had created the impression that other religions were against us, and that the East was against the West. Coming from an Apartheid past in South Africa, we were greatly affected by this notion, because we had a limited vision. And yet, as we walked into Istanbul we saw people of all religions, all countries. We thought, have we come to the right place? How can all these people be in a Muslim holy place?”

Discussing his confusion with a spiritual leader, Sooliman was told that, yes, there are many different types of people in the world; but that mankind is one single nation.

A year later, while celebrating a religious ceremony, a different spiritual leader looked Sooliman in the eye and told him he would found an organisation called Gift of the Givers. “He said, you will serve all people, of all races,





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of all religions, of all colours, of all classes, of all political affiliations and of any geographical location, but you will serve them unconditionally.”

Sooliman heeded this instruction, but it has not been easy. In the 22 years since the organisation’s inception, Gift of the Givers has provided assistance in 41 countries, and Sooliman candidly admits that he believes he has seen the worst side of humanity.

Then again, he has also played a key role in some of the most inspiring and uplifting situations. For example, Gift of the Givers designed the world’s first containerised mobile hospital, which – when introduced for the first time in Bosnia – provided treatment for thousands of people. “When I returned to the hospital in 2005, I was told by the doctors that they could do anything in that container besides open heart surgery. Well, we have in fact performed open heart surgery there, removing shrapnel from a woman’s heart. That same woman went on to deliver four children inside that very hospital!”

Sooliman says that each visit to a disaster zone raises thousands of contrasting emotions, but one thing remains the same: “Each visit makes me determined not to stop. One of the strongest memories I have is of a child in Somalia who was so thin, so weak, he was just lying there. I put a biscuit in his hand, and he rubbed my face and gave me a big smile ... it was so touching. Every time I am in a situation like this, I think – what if that child was my child?” Something else his work has taught him is that, as a South African, there is so much to be grateful for. “Every visit to another country makes me miss South Africa, especially the peace we enjoy in this country, and how we all get on together, irrespective of our pasts. The fact that we are so compassionate towards each other, so caring. I think that the Ubuntu spirit and the feeling of togetherness is the best I’ve ever seen, anywhere in the world.”

That’s why Sooliman insists that South Africa’s future is a great one. Yes, he says, there are political issues – but he maintains that the willingness of the people, and their skill, outweigh all our problems and difficulties. “We have great people – and, more to the point, a new generation who are capable of looking beyond colour and race. It’s going to be a great country – in fact, it’s already a great country. It’s just going to get better.”

Season two of 21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Momentum Asset Management, Nikon, Deloitte and the Department of Arts and Culture.

The 21 ICONS App features additional information about the icons, the project and its creators to provide a fully interactive experience. Download it from iTunes App Store: <http://tinyurl.com/lf3cfzm> or Google Play: <http://tinyurl.com/ovtcy45>

For more information, follow us on Twitter: @21 ICONS, Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/21ICONS>, Pinterest: <http://www.pinterest.com/21ICONS/> or visit [www.21ICONS.com](http://www.21ICONS.com).

#### **PROGRAMME SYNOPSIS**

Intiaz Sooliman, founder of the humanitarian aid organisation Gift of the Givers, talks to filmmaker Adrian Steirn during a portrait sitting about his work in the world’s disaster zones; his view that, regardless of race, religion or geography, humankind is one nation; and the notion that South Africa may be one of the only countries to have embraced this fact.

#### **NOTE TO EDITORS**

**21 ICONS South Africa** is an annual collection of photographs and short films of South Africans who have reached the pinnacle of achievement in their fields of endeavour. These men and women have been an inspiration through their extraordinary social contribution. It is not a definitive list and does not denote any ranking.

The short film-series documents the conversations between Steirn as the photographer and filmmaker and the icons. Each short film provides insight into both the subject and photographer's creative approach to the portrait.





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On behalf of **21 ICONS South Africa**

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