



PRESS RELEASE

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“Hope is about thinking it can be better, it will be better. I love that.”

On Sunday September 1 at 6.57pm on SABC3, 21 Icons South Africa continues the series with its sixth icon, nurse and caregiver extraordinaire Lillian Cingo. An internationally renowned specialist neurosurgical nurse, Cingo has spent her life in service of the sick, the poor and the vulnerable, exemplifying the noble aspirations of her profession through her tireless and selfless campaigning for improved healthcare for all.

Cingo was working in Baragwanath Hospital in South Africa in the 1960s when a neurosurgeon spotted her skills and encouraged her to leave for the UK for further training because, as a black woman, she would not get that education locally. Within a decade, she was twice nominated as Nurse of the Year in London and, in 1975, she was presented to Queen Elizabeth as Best Neurosurgical Nurse Specialist. She was invited to start a regional neurosurgical unit at the Royal Free Hospital in London and managed it for the next 15 years.

In 1995, after South Africa had become a democracy and Nelson Mandela its first black president, Cingo was invited to return to the country to help manage Transnet’s Phelophepa (good, clean health) mobile health train, which undertakes journeys to remote corners of South Africa to bring healthcare closer to rural people. “The training I got in [the UK] was a blessing ... I know it was God’s plan. It’s as though every bit of my life’s learning was meant to be used fully on this train,” she later said.

Under her management from 1995 to 2008, the Phelophepa train became a vast operation that brought the services of an onboard pharmacy, cancer screening and education, psychology and health, optometry and dental clinics as well as diabetes, prostate and Pap smear tests to more than 40 000

people every year. Cingo lived nine out of 12 months on board — and even learnt how to drive the train and do basic repairs! Because of its success, Transnet was able to start another “miracle train”, as it is known among patients, in 2012.

“What attracted me about this train was that it was giving affordable healthcare to the rural people of South Africa. I am passionate about rural people. I am passionate because I know that those are the people who need the most, yet they are the ones who have very little. And because they don’t complain, they tend to be forgotten,” Cingo tells the 21 Icons team on set at Noah’s Ark in Kliptown, Soweto. Cingo has been representing this nonprofit organisation for the past few years, aiming to empower communities to care for their vulnerable children. “There are so many people already doing fantastic work, but we just need to do so much more.”

Cingo’s way of doing more has always been through educating while healing, which to her is inextricably linked. She is a strong proponent of empowering people through training and the transfer of skills so that they can take responsibility for their own health, for example, planting vegetable gardens for improved nutrition, which is invaluable to combat the scourge of lifestyle diseases in South Africa, including diabetes and hypertension.

This lifelong dedication to using her profession to not only heal but to uplift served as the inspiration for filmmaker and photographer Adrian Steirn’s portrait of Cingo, which was shot on location at Noah’s Ark using a simple and stark black backdrop. “I wanted to photograph her in a dramatic way,” says Steirn. “I wanted to take a portrait of Lillian that reflected her life of service, that spoke about nursing and how incredible it is what people like her do.”

The resulting portrait shows Cingo in an old-fashioned nurse’s uniform and speaks, simply yet strikingly, of a strong woman who has always honoured her profession through her actions and deeds. “It’s a dramatic portrait and I really think it shows the strength



it requires to undertake some of the most difficult situations in life like she has,” says Steirn.

The original, signed portrait, which will be published as a poster in the Sunday Times newspaper on September 1, will be auctioned at the end of the series and the proceeds donated to the Phelophepa I and II trains.

At an age when other people would be considering slowing down, Cingo believes that her work is not yet done. She continues to source donor funding for health facilities in remote rural areas, and even vehicles that can be used to create mobile clinics and reach places the train could not service. “I like doing this for humanity,” she says. “That’s why it’s so important for me that everybody in the world can just have an opportunity or somebody to lift them up, or just help them to get up so that they can enhance themselves in various ways.

“Looking back I think I’ve always been very concerned about vulnerable people, helpless people and children — people who can’t help themselves.”

Programme synopsis: Adrian Steirn spends time with healer extraordinaire Lillian Cingo, an internationally renowned neurosurgical nurse specialist, at the children’s NGO Noah’s Ark in Kliptown, Soweto. She tells him about her lifelong passion for securing the health and wellbeing of people, especially the poverty-stricken and often forgotten inhabitants of deep rural areas.

Photograph details: Photographer Adrian Steirn shot Lillian Cingo wearing an old-fashioned nurse’s uniform against a simple backdrop. It signifies her strength and the dignity and nobleness with which she has always approached her profession.

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On behalf of **21 ICONS South Africa**

Jo-Leen Jan

Publicity

joleen@honeybell.co.za

SA Mobile: +27 83 287 0165

+27 74 525 9014

Heidi Pretorius

Project Management

heidi@honeybell.co.za

SA Mobile: +27 82 940 3464