



## PRESS RELEASE

---

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
**ATTENTION: NEWS/ENTERTAINMENT**  
**DATE: 11 NOVEMBER 2013**

### **Evelina Tshabalala – The Icon that Never Gives Up**

On **Sunday November 17**, the 21 Icons project features a legend in long-distance running circles whose courage has earned her a fine reputation beyond her field — the irrepressible and awe-inspiring Evelina Nokufa Tshabalala.

The phrase “never give up” could have been coined with Tshabalala in mind; her life story is rife with loss, yet she has accomplished more than most people who did not face the hardships she did. In the eyes of filmmaker and photographer Adrian Steirn, it is her bravery and pluck in the face of challenges that make her an iconic human being. “If I do something, I do it properly,” she tells him in their interview, which will be screened on SABC3 at 6.57pm.

The 48-year-old Tshabalala started running to school as a child on a farm in Harrismith, Free State, one of eight siblings whose family had been farm workers there for four generations. After she completed Standard 4 (Grade 6) the family moved to Bergville, KwaZulu-Natal, and although she continued her schooling, Tshabalala never completed matric. In fact, soon after she gave birth to her first son when she was 17, she became a domestic worker in Durban.

In 1985, Tshabalala moved to Cape Town in search of a better income. It is here the 19-year-old took up training, barefoot, at 4am each morning with a fellow athlete who encouraged her to enter her first race. She remembers: “He told me there is a race on Saturday, you want to go run? I was so excited I said yes, I want to. I didn’t have shoes, but I ran with my bare feet anyway. I remember it was June. We went to Sea Point and it was a 10km race. I ran and I won and I got the money, R500, which was a lot. And then there was another race in the afternoon and he said you want to go and I said I want to. So I went to

Pinelands. It was a 5km race. I ran, I won and I got to pay for shoes.”

These two races got Tshabalala noticed by clubs and soon she was running for the then Western Province, earning her provincial colours. She took up ultra-marathons and won bronze at the South African Championships, and in 1994 she realised an important dream when she took part in the London Marathon — and came an astonishing 25th. It was never easy, though, because sponsorships were elusive and just getting to an event proved to be a challenge for this athlete, whose day job was being a cleaner for retailers such as Pick n Pay and Spar.

Tragedy has struck more than once in Tshabalala’s life: her father was shot in front of her on Christmas Eve in 1989 and later died from the assault and then, in 2003, her second son, Emmanuel, drowned during an epilepsy attack. And, in 1999, when she noticed her deteriorating health, her worst fear was confirmed: she tested positive for HIV. But she tackled it with her characteristic determination and resilience. “I told myself that now I got this virus it is not the end of my life,” she says in 21 Icons. “I can train, I can do what I want to do, and I can still run. Nothing is going to stop me. But first I had to accept it, take my treatment, and then life had to go on.”

Tshabalala took the life-affirming decision to share her HIV-positive status with her family. When she realised that they accepted her, she also told friends and people in her community. In this way she has become a beacon of hope for others with the virus, helping to remove the stigma surrounding it and proving that one can live a positive life through taking one’s medication, staying fit and eating healthy food. She says she is available by phone 24 hours a day to give advice and support to people with HIV and, through her sterling example, she has helped many to get up and carry on with their lives in a positive way.

Tshabalala has also scaled three of the highest mountains: Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Elbrus in Russia and Aconcagua in Argentina. She had hoped to scale



---

all seven of the world's highest peaks by now, but she is satisfied that, after Kilimanjaro, she got to meet her ultimate hero: Nelson Mandela. Her feats have also seen her on the front page of the Wall Street Journal and as the subject of many local and international television documentaries.

But closer at home, the sports-crazy Tshabalala is giving back to her community through running. Residing in Joe Slovo township, Langa Cape Town, she spends her free time coaching and running with the children of her community in an effort to keep them off the streets and away from drugs and all the other perils besetting the impoverished who live in claustrophobic shack environments all over South Africa.

"The outside world is bad now," she says. "Drugs, drink — at school and everywhere you see drugs. And so I thought sport was an easy way to keep them from the streets. We meet after 5pm or on weekends and we run. Sometimes we do fun runs and they get medals, and after that they want to do it even more. Let the people just run. It's nice, man."

Perhaps this desire to help others harks back to Tshabalala's dream career when she was a child – social work. But as she never got to finish her schooling, the dream remains unrealised. Not that she has given up hopes of getting her senior certificate. "Even now I want to go back and finish my matric. I know I am old already, but I see that guy, the singer [Sipho Hotstix Mabuse], he was 61 when he finished matric. So I can still go and finish my matric."

Looking at her life, it seems likely that Tshabalala will achieve this dream too. As Steirn says: "Evelina for me is representative of so many South Africans. She faces challenges daily, but it's her positive bravery that defines her as an iconic human being."

For his portrait of her, which he describes as technically the most difficult yet, Steirn used a double exposure to capture Tshabalala both kneeling, head down, and on her feet in a forward running movement.

"The portrait is all about a woman who just won't give up. Despite everything life throws at her every day, she picks herself up and keeps running forward," he says.

The portrait will be published in the Sunday Times on November 7 and its original, signed version will be auctioned at the end of the series and the proceeds donated to Tshabalala's choice of charity.

Public participation is invited on **Twitter: @21icons;** [www.21icons.com](http://www.21icons.com) and [www.facebook.com/21icons](http://www.facebook.com/21icons).

**21 ICONS South Africa** is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Nikon and Deloitte and supported by The Department of Arts & Culture as a nation-building initiative.

#### **PROGRAMME SYNOPSIS**

Photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn discovers the inner strength and bravery of the HIV-positive long-distance runner Evelina Tshabalala, whose life serves as an inspirational example to others to never give up despite hardships, and who continues to serve her community selflessly through sport and setting an example of living positively.

#### **PHOTOGRAPH DETAILS**

Taken in a studio in Cape Town, photographer Adrian Steirn's portrait of Evelina Tshabalala is a double exposure showing her both kneeling and running. Highlighting her trim and fit body despite being HIV-positive, the portrait shows someone who, no matter what life throws at her, gets back up and carries on stronger than ever.

ENDS