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21 ICONS: Ashley Uys

21 ICONS Art&Culture Television by *Louise* - 29th October 2015 0



Ashley Uys has been selected for 21 ICONS South Africa Season III for developing medical products that can detect life-threatening diseases and reduce the high-risk fatality through accurate and

timeous diagnosis. His development of a self-testing malaria kit has led to global recognition, as the tests' reliability and affordability present a more promising health future for people in low-income areas.

Ashley Uys – *“For me, success is what makes you happy. Everybody should move towards that.”*

As the managing director of Medical Diagnostech and OculusID, the combination of Uys' entrepreneurial sense and business savvy has seen his work praised and profiled by the likes of CNN, Forbes and SAB.

From humble beginnings in Belhar, Uys always dreamed of being a scientist and after matriculating he enrolled at the Faculty of Science at the University of the Western Cape. After his first year, he was awarded an academic scholarship and worked part-time while completing his studies.

He says, “At University I worked quite hard knowing that four or five years of sacrifice could potentially yield something big. “Being the eldest of six children, I decided I needed to set an example. I was going to sacrifice at least six to eight years of my life to see where we could go.”

And he achieved ‘big things’ taking his first steps towards achieving his dream when he attained a B.Sc. Honours Degree in Biotechnology. He also holds a Management Advancement Programme certificate from Wits University.

In 2010, he established the company Medical Diagnostech in Cape Town, which is run by an award-winning team of scientists. The facility locally manufactures its own cost-effective, high-quality medical test kits for pregnancy, syphilis, malaria, HIV/Aids and ovulation. It has also introduced a diagnostic tool to identify a variety of recreational drugs.

During a portrait sitting he tells Van Wyk that it was while he was growing up in Belhar when he first noticed how kids were no longer participating in recreational activities and ‘wheeling and dealing’ on the streets.

“Kids were doing less sport and hanging around at the corner. You could see they were up to no good. That transition (active to apathetic) encouraged me to look at inventions and things that could impact socially in our community. That’s when I identified a gap in the market to manufacture scientific products that would influence and address health and social issues such as substance abuse,” he says.

He explains in a conversation with Van Wyk how he used that window of opportunity to transform his ideas into problem-solving innovations that can make a positive impact in areas such as the

Cape Flats where alcohol and drug abuse is on the rise. “Our products benefit communities in terms of accessibility, availability and cost. They are there for everybody,” he says.

At the age of 23 he approached a pharmaceutical chain in the Western Cape to brand a diagnostic kit for methamphetamine by positioning the product to the wholesalers as part of their corporate social investment. On the uptake of his product, not only in retail but also by members of the public, he comments, “Substance abuse in schools has a big impact on learning, so it’s very satisfying to know that my product can help in this area.”

While his test kits impact socially by providing cost effective diagnostics of disease, epidemics and drug use, the organisation is also creating jobs by employing unskilled labour from the local community rather than automating the laboratory’s operations. “I believe you need a team to be great. You need people who complement you and share your vision. Everything starts with hard work and getting a team together,” he notes.

This a life lesson that he shares wherein nobody is good at everything so surround yourself with experts in their field and a supportive team.

For the portrait *‘Knowing and not Knowing’* which will appear digitally on the Monday after his short-film is released, Van Wyk describes the visual elements, “Responsible for the development of affordable, reliable and, in many cases, life-saving malaria testing kits, Uys is photographed walking along a dirt road in Hout Bay, traversing a straight white line – representing the visible linear result that appears on the tests themselves. The portrait imagines Uys walking the line between information and unawareness, fear and courage, and speaks to a generation of Africans for whom knowledge brings empowerment.”

On 8 November 2015 on SABC 3 at 19h27, the acclaimed short-film series 21 ICONS will feature the 10th icon of its third season: 33-year-old biotechnologist and entrepreneur Ashley Uys of Cape Town.

The three-minute film showcases how Uys came to develop a range of notable medical testing products lauded for their potential to transform the ordinary African’s ability to diagnose and treat diseases and will repeat the next day at 17h57 on the same channel.






Connect on Twitter: @21Icons using the hash-tag #OurFutureIsNow and www.facebook.com/21icons


More about 21 ICONS

21 ICONS traces South Africa’s history over the course of its three seasons, moving from the fight for freedom to the country’s growth during democracy, and concluding with a vision of the future. It is a celebration of individuals who inspire multitudes through their impact, integrity and influence using photography, film and narrative to showcase the pivotal moments of South Africa’s nation-building journey.

Young South African talent Gary van Wyk (34) has stepped up as principal photographer for the third season. In previous seasons, Van Wyk has been a crucial part of 21 ICONS camera work, visually recording the nuances and intimate moments of each shoot in his distinctive reporting style. Adrian Steirn, who conceived the project, continues his involvement as one of the photographers capturing the behind-the-scenes images.

This season has been envisaged as a tribute to the country’s future, shedding the spotlight on young South African icons. Their energy and drive has been captured in coloured portraits; a major departure from previous seasons which featured black-and-white fine arts portraits.

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