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21 Icons: Siya Xuza

The 20th short film in the multimedia series 21 Icons Season III celebrates renewable energy engineer Siya Xuza.

"I am an example of what happens when you give young South Africans opportunities," says Mthatha-born Siya Xuza. "When you follow your passion, shut out noise that can distract you and you are true to yourself, you achieve greatness."

Siya rose to prominence in his field of interest - renewable energy development - with the belief that greatness can be achieved if you apply yourself, regardless of your circumstances. "I always want people to see me as a person who kept failing and failing and

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eventually succeeded, because that's the true story of my success. It didn't happen overnight," he says.

A born innovator, Siya grew up in a small township in the Eastern Cape. He was a curious child and was determined to create an aeroplane of his own. But he realised he would first need fuel to launch the aircraft into space.

He recalls experimenting in his mother's kitchen to bake 'rocket fuel' like cookies, and was often reprimanded for starting fires. "I didn't know what science was. However, I knew I wanted to make things and build things. I was a kid going into the kitchen behind my mom's back, mixing things together, blowing things up and getting a hiding in the meantime," he quips.

This exploration culminated in a high school science project that sought to harness solar technologies to generate clean affordable energy. Siya's innovation led to numerous international science fairs and won him a scholarship to Harvard University in the United States. It was so remarkable that NASA-affiliated Lincoln Laboratory named a minor planet after him

"We procrastinate so much and we forget it's often the smallest starts in life that make a big difference," says Siya. "I did not have the laboratory and I did not have NASA facilities, those only came later. I simply had my mom's kitchen and I started there," he muses. "I don't blame my lack of resources. I don't blame not having laboratories. I saw that as an opportunity to use my limited resources.

"So many young people today play the victim game. We are not victims, we are conquerors. And the way to conquer is [not to] say I'm a victim of this therefore I will not get anything; [rather] say because I'm a victim, because I find myself in this situation in life, I'm going to work harder than the people who have access to resources that I

don't," he states.

Siya eventually established Galactic Energy Ventures to find solutions to address the energy crisis in South Africa and the continent. Using engineering and science, his research is geared towards using fuel cells as a means of storing energy. "I became interested in finding solutions to meet one of Africa's biggest challenges - energy."

Watch Siya's video here:

For more 21 Icons videos click here.

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