



20 NOV 2015

21 Icons: Phindile Sithole-Spong

The 11th short film in the multimedia series 21 Icons Season III celebrates HIV and sexual health advocate Phindile Sithole-Spong.

Recognised for her advocacy surrounding HIV and sexual health, both locally and internationally, Phindile was selected for *21 Icons South Africa* Season III for combating the stigma faced by South Africans living with the HIV virus. She is the founder of Rebranding HIV, an initiative that focuses on providing organisations and companies with relevant HIV and sexual health programmes. As a result, she has received various awards for her persistence to change perspectives

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and help those infected to process the emotional and physical scars.

She has won the PICA award for Best Non-Professional Writer award for her article "HIV, Sex and Me" in ELLE magazine South Africa, and she recently made the *Mail & Guardian* 's 200 Young South Africans list.

When Phindile was 13 years old, she lost both parents to AIDS, as well as five of her aunts and uncles. Seven years later, at the age of 19, she discovered she had been HIV-positive from birth. After finding out, she witnessed firsthand the stigma that people living with HIV face on a daily basis. She was concerned with the messaging around the virus and sexual health and began exploring HIV discrimination, realising that the majority of people simply don't understand the virus.

Phindile chose to publicly disclose her status to fellow students while completing her studies in Media and English at the University of Cape Town. "For me, the best way to educate anyone about HIV - if you're living with HIV - is to just be yourself, because there's this misconception that HIV-positive people are scary. But I'm still Phindi. Being HIV-positive has been the best and worst experience of my life. It taught me to be more present. It taught me to be more understanding and open. It made me feel a connection to everyone and everything and I became more human. I know it sounds crazy, but I think it's life-changing."

Phindile started to investigate why people who are HIV-positive are in denial, and discovered that the emotional turmoil of those infected with HIV/AIDS is not addressed adequately. She then established Rebranding HIV, explaining: "The goal of Rebranding HIV is to bring a new voice, a new image, a new sound, and a new texture to HIV itself."

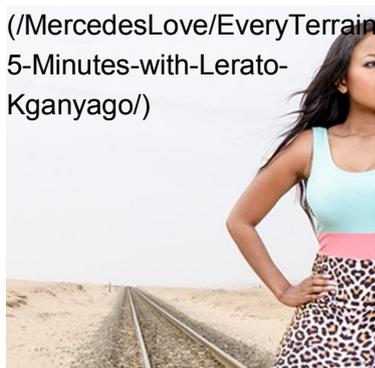
Phindile adds that she continues to push the envelope on HIV/AIDS

and sexual health issues. "The biggest misconception about HIV is that we don't have sex. There's this idea that we stop being sexual beings, and I think that's part of what is perpetuating the spread of HIV today."

She has publically disagreed with South Africa's adoption of the global slogan, "Imagine an HIV-free generation," saying, "It's premature to imagine an HIV-free generation. We should start focusing more on the HIV-positive generation who feel left out. Throwing ARVs at them is not the solution. If you don't have emotional support or feel included within your community, then it is difficult."

On the future of South Africa, Phindile comments, "The possibility of South Africa today excites me. There is still so much that can be and that will be done. It's scary sometimes because all new beginnings are, but the fact that we're building is amazing."

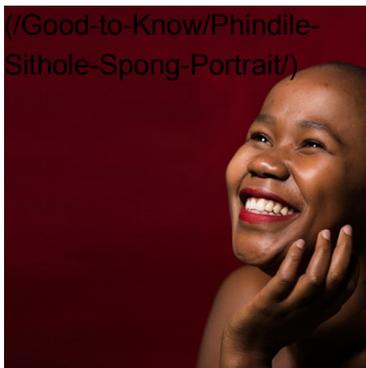
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