

21 Icons features HIV activist, Phindile Sithole-Spong

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On Sunday, 15 November on SABC3 at 19:27, short-film series 21 Icons will feature the 11th icon of its third season: 26-year-old HIV Activist and founder of Rebranding HIV, Phindile Sithole-Spong.

An accomplished speaker and writer, she has been featured as one of *TIME* Magazine's Next Generation Leaders.

The short-film showcases how Sithole-Spong came to establish [Rebranding HIV](#) using her personal story as a voice for people living with HIV, as well as her aspirations to create an 'HIV Aware generation'.

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.

Sithole-Spong has been selected for *21 Icons* South Africa Season three for combating the stigma faced by South Africans living with the HIV virus and she has been recognised for her advocacy surrounding HIV and sexual health, both locally and internationally. The initiative 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 and help those infected to process the emotional and physical scars.

She has won the *PICAAward 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 African's to watch under 30.

Sithole-Spong speaks about how she lost both parents to full-blown AIDS when she was 13, as well as five of her aunts and uncles. Seven years later, at the age of 19, she discovered that she had been HIV-positive from birth.

During a portrait sitting she talks candidly about leading by example and being open about her HIV status. Sithole-Spong says; "Being HIV positive has been the best and worst experience of my life. It teaches you to be more present. It teaches you to be more understanding and open. If I didn't have HIV I'm not sure I would be as open. It exposes you to a point where you feel a connection to everyone and everything and you become more human. I know it sounds crazy, but I think it's life-changing."

Sithole-Spong established Rebranding HIV, an initiative that strives to change the common misconceptions that surround the virus. Sithole-Spong says; "The goal of Rebranding HIV is to bring a new voice, a new image, a new sound, and a new texture to HIV itself."

She speaks about how she continues to push the envelope on HIV/AIDS and sexual health issues, saying; "The biggest misconception about HIV is that we don't have sex, which is the biggest lie. There's this idea that we stop being sexual beings, we don't have sexual identities, 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,' and says; "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 the emotional support or feel included within your community then it is difficult."

For the portrait 'Still Me', Gary van Wyk, the principal photographer, describes the visual elements saying; "Sithole-Spong is photographed in front of a red backdrop, seemingly naked above the waist – acknowledging her birth with the virus and her shunning of stereotypes. With a vibrant energy and natural smile on her face, the portrait challenges what the world has been taught HIV looks like, and instead captures her innate joy, sincerity and vulnerability."

On the future of South Africa, she says; "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."

Van Wyk concludes by asking the audience to share their stories on social platforms by answering the question: "What do you stand for?"

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