

Thato Kgathanye is a young South African entrepreneur who has always people around you, and embracing that sense of community is how you get far." She is a young woman from the small town of Mookosi outside of Rustenburg, had big dreams from a young age. She attributes her nature to serve others to her mother, who is a healthcare worker, and her entrepreneurial spirit to her father, who runs a successful taxi business.

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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, including with a vision of the future. 21 ICONS is a celebration of individuals who inspire multitudes through their impact, integrity and influence.

As a world-class communicator of powerful stories, 21 ICONS uses 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 capturing the behind-the-scenes images.



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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.

Kgathanye has been selected for 21 ICONS South Africa Season III as an inspiring social entrepreneur and humanitarian who stands as an example of how with tenacity and determination anyone can overcome great odds and find solutions to address South Africa's social issues.



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She says, "As much as it feels like I'm walking a tightrope every day, I'd rather that than be the person that's looking up at the person walking the tightrope."

It started with an assignment at university to create something, and the idea of a schoolbag made from recycled plastic emerged. While her peers have gone on to join the corporate world, Kgathanye tackled what once scared her most, her ambition and the unknown with the bags.

Through the establishment of the non-profit organisation, Repurpose Schoolbags, she has made a sustainable contribution to the environment by using reinforced plastic shopping bags to create recycled school bags for disadvantaged learners thereby empowering multitudes of lesser-resourced learners across South Africa.

This a collaborative project with society at large, as her organisation partners with private schools who acknowledge the need to go green and collect plastic bags on their behalf and people who go to land fill sites and collect plastic from waste.

Aimed at children in rural communities, the bags serve to waterproof their books during the rainy seasons. The bags are fitted with retro-reflective material that improves the bag's visibility ensuring child-safety.

It also features a solar power point that enables schoolchildren living in households with limited access to electricity to use the bags as an energy source to read, study and do their homework, thereby eliminating the danger of shack fires caused by paraffin lamps.

She says, "It's a child's way of having dignity, because a lot of the children that we gift these bags to don't even have a school bag. From having to carry their schoolbooks in a plastic bag or under their jersey, they now have a school bag, and that's big."

Kgathanye continues, "What the bags represent for the kids is a way of looking at themselves. It might seem like I am nothing but I am something. Imagine a plastic bag. No one really looks at it and thinks, wow. But if someone else comes along, picks it up, looks at it, and sees something different...that could be you."

During a portrait sitting, Kgathanye tells Van Wyk about the importance of innovation and the idea that shared humanity is more important than anything else. She adds, "You can't serve the community, you can't serve people according to their passport or what country you are in, if you truly want to serve, it will be to any human being."

The film gives an insightful and inspiring glimpse of her journey to self-discovery and her belief that all individuals are on this earth to fulfil some kind of purpose and once they have discovered their place in society their destiny can be achieved. She says, "When the dots connect then it all starts making sense as to why you think the way you do, why you see gaps where other people see normal life."

For the portrait 'Entrepreneur' which will appear digitally on the Monday after her short-film is released, Van Wyk describes the visual elements, "Along the branches of a large, old tree located in Cape Town's Klein Constantia, multiple solar powered lights in glass jars are hung. Kgathanye stands strong at the foot of the tree, one of her innovative schoolbags in hand. The portrait is a literal representation of her work with Repurpose Schoolbags while also referencing her illumination of pressing social issues facing the rural child."

On the future of South Africa, she comments, "I see opportunity in the hands of young people. And it's waiting for us to take it and run with it."

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

Followers are encouraged to share their personal triumphs or to nominate a member from the community who is making a profound difference.

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