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Home / Entertainment / 21ICONS Features Phindile Sithole-Spong

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Phindile Sithole-Spong – “Life is the most powerful declaration you can make. Living it truthfully and being honest about who you are and what you want, that’s greatness.”

On 15 November 2015 on SABC 3 at 19h27, the acclaimed 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’. The episode will repeat the next day at 17h57 on the same channel.

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

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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.

Sithole-Spong has been selected for 21 ICONS South Africa Season III 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 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 African's to watch under 30.

Sithole-Spong tells Van Wyk that she was 13 when she lost both parents to full-blown AIDS 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.

In response, she 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."

During a portrait sitting she talks candidly about leading by example and being open about her HIV status, "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."

She continues, "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."

When Sithole-Spong first found out about her HIV/AIDS status, 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 she began exploring HIV discrimination and realised that the majority of individuals simply don't understand the virus.

Sithole-Spong started to look into the emotional implications and effects of having HIV/AIDS on people, and why in many cases, people who are HIV positive are in denial. She discovered that the emotional turmoil that affects those infected with HIV/AIDS is not addressed adequately.

Thereafter, she established Rebranding HIV, an initiative that strives to change the common misconceptions that surround the virus. She 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 tells Van Wyk 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, 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 she 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' which will appear digitally on the Monday after her short-film is released, Van Wyk describes the visual elements, "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."



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On the future of South Africa, she 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.”

Van Wyk concludes by asking the audience to share their stories on social platforms by 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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