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people by: Kate Ferreira · 12 February 2016

# 21 Icons celebrates Siya Xuza

Our own shining star, innovator Siya Xuza brings homegrown 'global excellence' to bear on the world's energy crisis.

'To go from looking up at a plane in 1994 and 21 years later you are pointing to the very same sky, but now you're pointing to your planet...'

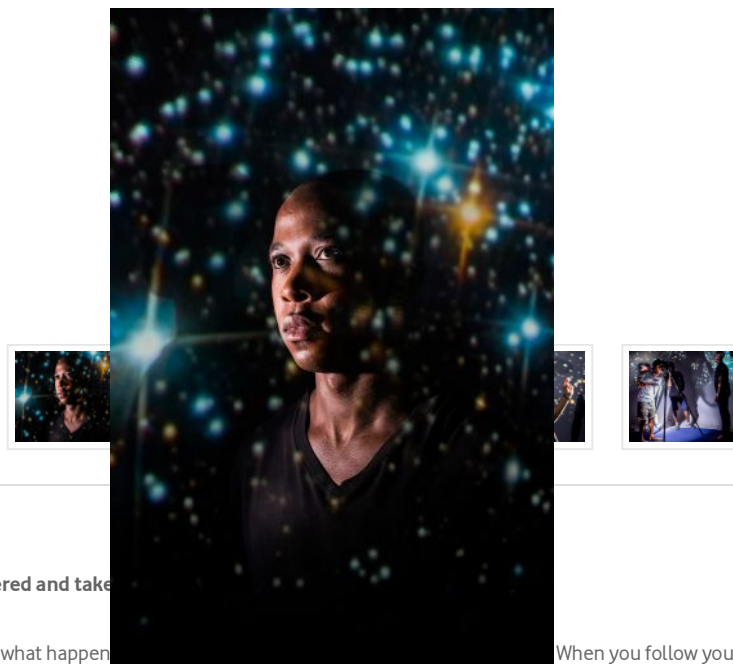
It's been a remarkable journey for innovator Siyabulela Xuza, whose interest in science was first sparked as a young boy seeing a plane flying over his hometown of Mthatha for the first time. Today he is a Harvard-educated engineer, with the remarkable and virtually unique honour of having a minor planet – 23182Siyaxusa – named after him.

## Starry-eyed

Siya is the subject of the latest 21 Icons short film and portrait release. Shot inside the Cape Town Science Centre's portable planetarium, he is captured with a galaxy of stars projected onto and all around him. It's a direct reference to his achievements, of course, but also conjures ready metaphors of limitless potential and exploration.

As Siya says, in the film's opening shot, 'if you aim for the stars, one day you might actually own one of the stars'. It's a new take on an old trope, but coming from Siya, the saying takes on real gravitas. After all this is someone whose first experiments with fuel began in a kitchen. Not only that, but his work in energy began life as a humble high school project. This is clearly not someone who is prepared to be limited by where he comes from or external expectations of his limits.

I am an example of what happens when you give young South Africans opportunities.



### Opportunities offered and taken

'I am an example of what happens when you follow your passion, shut out noise that can distract you and you are true to yourself, you achieve greatness,' he says.

Siya's school project grew and earned major attention, exhibiting at international science fairs. From there he was awarded a scholarship to the prestigious Harvard University in the US, completing a degree in engineering. Siya worked at the Harvard Center for Nanoscale Systems and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Microsystems Technology Laboratories, focusing on micro fuel cells. His work on this was published in the Journal of Electroceramics in 2013.

He is also a fellow of the African Leadership Network, and an energy advisory panel member to the African Union.

### A brighter future

Today, Siya's main focus is Galactic Energy Ventures, his investment holdings firm that invests in energy projects working towards cheaper, cleaner energy. He sees the solution to South Africa's youth unemployment woes in entrepreneurship, saying all South Africans are capable of 'global excellence' and we should be coming up with our own brands and products. 'That, for me, is our next narrative.'

### About 21 Icons

21 Icons is a photographic and short film project focused on our national icons and leaders. The third season icons are all under the age of 35, and were selected as youth leaders and inspirational stories about the direction South Africa is heading in. According to 21 Icons, 'By making accessible the personal stories of young individuals whose lives are catalysts for positive change, the purpose of the project is to show the way forward for a new generation to aspire to be socially conscious and active citizens.' You can engage with 21 Icons on Twitter with the hashtag #OurFuturesNow.

**For more coverage, check out our stories on the third season so far:**

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- [Oliver Hermanus](#)
- [Ezlyn Barends](#)
- [Mikhael Subotzky](#)
- [Jolynn Minnaar](#)

- [Kyle Shepherd](#)
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- [Michaela Mycroft](#)
- [Ludwick Marishane](#)
- [Thato Kgatlhanye](#)
- Laduma Ngxokolo
- Catherine Constantinides
- Lucas Sithole
- Thulani Madondo
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Rape survivor and activist Jes Foord has turned her experience of sexual violence into a beacon of hope for others.



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**21 Icons celebrates Ludwick Marishane**

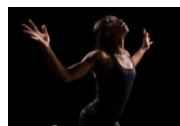
21 Icons's Ludwick Marishane shows vision and drive as SA's youngest patent holder, and a successful entrepreneur by 25.



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21 Icons turns the lens on photographer Mikhael Subotzky for an intimate portrait of the visual artist



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The latest 21 Icons portrait features South African gold medallist Caster Semenya #OurFutureIsNow

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