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# 21 Icons celebrates Thato Kgatlhanye

21 Icons features social entrepreneur Thato Kgatlhanye, who turned waste into wonder with her project Repurpose Schoolbags.



There is something fantastical about Gary van Wyk's portrait of Thato Kgatlhanye – her bright yellow dress, the glowing lights all around, the gnarled tree behind her. In this story, Thato is the good fairy, a bringer of light, literally. It is a fitting tribute to the seventh subject of 21 Icons's new season.

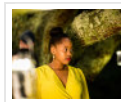
Twenty-two year old Thato is a social entrepreneur, having turned a student project into a non-profit organisation, [Repurpose Schoolbags](#). The NPO turns discarded plastic bags into sturdy, waterproof, reflective school bags for under-privileged children. And the real magic starts when the lights go out, as the bags are equipped with a solar panel (charged as their bearers walk to school and back), and can be used to shed light on homework, books, or general family life after dark. The project is a win on two counts – both environmentally through recycling waste plastic, and socially through the benefit to the learners who receive the bags.

While she hails from Mogwase, near Rustenburg, Thato attended St Mary's in Pretoria and then Vega in Johannesburg. She co-founded the social enterprise company behind the bags, Rethaka Trading, with a friend. Following her studies, Thato found entrepreneurial guidance, and even some enterprise funding through awards and competitions. She was one of just 16 people chosen to complete an internship with world-renowned marketer and author Seth Godin. She was also one of the 18 Red Bull Amaphiko Social Entrepreneurs in 2014, is a Anzisha Prize fellow, and has received a Samsung Student Excellence Award, third place in the SAB Foundation Social Innovation Awards, and a special ministerial award from the Minister for Public Service.

The bags themselves are funded through CSI initiatives, from businesses and more privileged schools who partner with Repurpose to see the bags made and distributed. This is a true case of the whole being bigger than the sum of its parts, she explains. It is not just a bag. Rather, she says: 'It's a child's way of having dignity... 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.'

21 Icons was established by photographer Adrian Steirn in 2013. It is a film and photographic project that documents and celebrates South African heroes, and 'showcases the pivotal moments of South Africa's nation-building journey'. This, the third season, is focused on our up-and-coming heroes, those shaping our nation's future, and the primary portrait images are captured by Gary van Wyk, while Adrian takes a step back to fulfil the role of behind-the-scenes photographer. You can connect with 21 Icons on Twitter, @21Icons, or with the hashtag #OurFuturesNow



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

- [Laduma Ngxokolo](#)
- [Catherine Constantinides](#)
- [Lucas Sithole](#)
- [Thulani Madondo](#)
- [Jes Foord](#)
- [Athi-Patra Ruga](#)
- Photographer [Gary van Wyk](#)

See [21icons.com](http://21icons.com) for more.

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