

When people are more educated and feel that they have more sense of self-worth and more value in terms of what's inside them, they just naturally treat each other better. I think that kind of self-worth leads to happiness

– Taddy Blecher

This week, 21 Icons SA shines the spotlight on the 20th icon of its second season: Dr Taddy Blecher, a pioneer of the free tertiary education movement in South Africa. A man with a great vision, he believes that with an inside-out approach to life, everyone has the ability to become successful.

The 21 Icons portrait features Blecher sitting in a vast lecture theatre with his arm raised, as if ready to answer the question "What wouldn't you know?" – a concept that captures his work with free education models.

In an intimate conversation, Blecher talks about his life as a philanthropic social entrepreneur, also known as the transcendental crusader.

Blecher is a bubble of energy and abundance, and he is very, very smart. He has single-handedly transformed the face of development through education by challenging conventional wisdom that only the elite are destined for power and wealth. He believes that it all comes down to the magic and genius within each of us.

Blecher is an actuary by profession, and has applied his insights towards creating a radical educational model to fill the gap in business education between matric and MBA-level qualifications.

In 1999, he and his colleagues opened the Community and Individual Development Association (Cida) City Campus in Johannesburg to give disadvantaged youngsters a chance to overcome hopelessness and earn a four-year business administration degree.

His basic philosophy is simple: if everyone gave something to someone else, no one would need anything.

Sello, one of Cida's former students, gave up his successful career path and large salary at Mercedes-Benz SA to join Blecher and his team. Sello's contemporaries are our next generation of Nelson Mandelas and Desmond Tutus – self-sacrificing individuals who want to help others realise their potential.

Sello echoes the words of his mentor: "The real secret to happiness is giving to other people and devoting your life to a higher purpose."

Before he'd secured university building space, hired staff or put together courses, Blecher faxed a letter of invitation to 350 schools from his office in Johannesburg. The letter asked that the brightest and poorest students apply to a new higher education institution.

This letter promised them the "best business education in Africa".

This was to be South Africa's "first free university", created to serve talented youngsters from poor black communities who could never afford to send their children to established universities.

"It went ballistic. We had 3 500 applications for an institution that did not exist."

The Teacher



MAN WITH THE ANSWER Taddy Blecher is pictured in Cape Town during the photoshoot for photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn's 21 Icons SA series

PHOTOS: GARY VAN WYK



A CURIOUS MIND Taddy Blecher says if everyone gives something to someone else, no one would need anything

IN BLACK & WHITE



PHOTO: ADRIAN STEIRN, 21 ICONS

says Blecher.

They were able to borrow a building for the institution, but without computers, the eager youth practised typing on photocopies of a keyboard.

Blecher realised that the solution was not to open one's wallet and

hand out wads of cash; it was to focus on education and entrepreneurship.

If South Africa was going to develop a long-term, sustainable future, it needed to provide a way into the professions for the poor black majority. It needed to give them a stake in society.

From an economic perspective, he held that higher education was the driver of wealth – and decided that he would create a free business university that would provide a gateway for those who would otherwise be excluded.

Access to free university-level education, launched with the help and content of Regenesys Business School, would provide a way out for them. Once it started, Blecher tapped into the business network to find people who could teach business skills – and he had an immediate response from companies that wanted to attract talented black youngsters into the financial services sector.

"Our students, from squatter camps and townships, were learning from people who had done R3 billion business deals," he says.

"My deepest interest is to help people realise how great they are. We really have to change the mind-sets of our youth to believe that they are capable of greatness, and of achieving something."

"Our students do degrees that are globally recognised and their professors are based in America. Every single day, they are learning from world-class experts at almost zero cost in a disused building in Johannesburg. They're getting a global education that can take them anywhere in the world, comparable to Harvard or Stanford or anywhere else, and 98% of them are getting employed here in South Africa."

Blecher concludes with the principle of the triple bottom line – people, planet and prosperity – and speaks of how a philanthropic culture can sustain people.

"This is a place to turn broken people into empowered people, and give them a place to achieve their life goals. I call it mass personalisation, fulfilling human potential using the inside-out mechanism. Education is dealing with fundamental attitudes of hearts and minds. We need to awaken what is inside us and unleash the passion. We need to focus on our greatness. Every student is a genius waiting to happen."

● Watch Taddy Blecher on SABC3 at 8.27pm today. For more information, visit 21icons.com

BEHIND THE ICON
COLLECT THE POSTER