



THE SHEPHERDESS
PHOTO: ADRIAN STEIRN

This week, 21 Icons focuses its lens on the 10th icon of its second season: Tebello Nyokong, renowned scientist, chemist and professor at Rhodes University in Grahamstown.

Adrian Steirn's portrait features Nyokong in a field dressed in traditional garb and surrounded by sheep, but over her attire she wears the white coat of a chemist.

The picture is a representation of Nyokong's standing as an award-winning and internationally recognised scientist who is at the cutting edge of cancer research, yet also acknowledges her childhood in Lesotho.

Because the community needed its children to guard the sheep, boys and girls attended classes only on alternate days - the rest of their time was spent shepherding. Growing up in this environment, in poverty, Nyokong says she never aspired to anything more than owning a pair of shoes.

"You didn't dream too far because in that environment, there aren't many people who have gone far."

This may be why - although she is the recipient of such prestigious awards as the Unesco L'Oréal Award and the Order of Mapungubwe, and was named Shoprite Checkers Woman of the Year - she quips that her career highlight was being given her own parking bay when she was made a professor at Rhodes.

On a more serious note, Nyokong's work on cancer treatments is breaking new ground. She insists that her role is one of several contributors, but it's clear that the contribution is a significant one. Nyokong's research focuses on photodynamic therapy, a form of treatment that uses the dye responsible for giving denim its blue colour. Unless activated, the dye is completely harmless. However, when exposed to a red laser beam, it generates toxins that kill cancerous cells without affecting healthy ones. This makes it one of the only therapies involved in cancer treatment that does not have severe side effects.

One of Nyokong's most striking features is her humility. In spite of the vital contribution she is making to her field, she does not believe that she is any more important than anyone else.



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"I completely object to the notion that there is anybody special in this world. We are all good at what we do. We just have to find a way of understanding what we want to do, and not ask for short cuts." Her empathy stems, possibly, from the challenges she endured as a student, and the determination it took to overcome them - as well as the triumph she experienced in reaching her goal.

"After school, I knew that I was a scientist, one way or the other. How far I would go with the science, I did not know. I didn't know what chemistry was about, I didn't even know what I would do with chemistry, but it was challenging and I liked it." What is, perhaps, most interesting about Nyokong's

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We need to know the past so that we do not repeat its mistakes, but if you live in the past, 50 years from now on you'll still blame somebody else for something you could have corrected. We really have to move forward as much as possible

TEBELLO NYOKONG



THE NATURAL WORLD Tebello Nyokong pictured in Cape Town as part of photographer Adrian Steirn's 21 Icons SA series

PHOTO: GARY VAN WYK

The compassionate scientist



FIELD OF DREAMS Tebello Nyokong says her love for science was sparked while tending sheep as a child PHOTO: GARY VAN WYK

story is that it started in that field with those sheep.

"I learnt a lot from being in the fields. You have to learn about the birds. You have to learn the sounds. That is science, you know. You had to learn in the field what kind of plants are edible, and so science started there in my view. I think that is when a scientist was born."

Steirn's portrait of Nyokong appears alongside the collectible poster portraits included in the projects and will be sold at a charity auction next year. The funds raised through the sale will be donated to Nyokong's nominated charity.

- Watch Tebello Nyokong today on SABC3 at 8:27pm
- For more information, visit www.21icons.com
- Download Zappar for free from your app store and zap the thunderbolt icon to watch the trailer and visit the site



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