

Getting to Know:

Grace Masuku

"In my culture we've got a saying: every parent is your parent, every grandmother is your grandmother."

These are the words of Grace Masuku, one of the heroines of our time. In this edition of *Leseding News*, 21 ICONS shines the spotlight on Masuku – a renowned traditionalist, conservationist and environmentalist. 21 ICONS is a showcase for the South African spirit; a tribute to the men and women who have helped to shape our country and, indeed, our world. The series is part of an annual project which features unique narrative portraits and short films by Adrian Steirn, one of the continent's pre-eminent photographers and filmmakers. Accompanying each short film is a black and white portrait of the icons that will be sold next year at a charity auction, with funds donated to the charity of the icons' choice. Masuku was born in the small village of Litukubusfontein in the North West, 72km north of Rustenburg. As a descendant of the Bakgatla ba Kgafela people, Masuku has worked tirelessly to preserve the tradition and culture of the Batswana people. She has established numerous community outreach projects aimed at improving the lives of her community and restoring their traditional respect for the environment. On her selection as an icon, Steirn said: "Mmakgotla Grace Masuku is a wonderful example of the diversity that characterises a country like ours, which is home to a broad range of South Africans, who have a strong respect for their cultural traditions and environment, while always displaying the utmost humility.

"She is also deeply rooted in her community and strongly believes in the Ubuntu creed that "without you, there is no me", and she represents a South Africa that many of us have left behind." Masuku talks about her life as a community leader whose role as a healer and environmentalist has seen her not only working with key international bodies (including the IUCN), but also becoming a custodian of her culture. She has established museums to preserve the heritage of the Bastwana tribe. Her desire to keep old customs alive is driven by her belief that losing touch with the moon, the stars and the land is equal to letting go of the hand that guides all of life's most important processes. Masuku says that, growing up in a community where there were no boundaries between families, it was inevitable that she should feel an intense connection



to humanity. She's equally connected to nature – again, not surprising, since nature has been very much a part of her life since early childhood. "Wherever we went, our elders would point out what this plant could be used for, how that plant could be used...We weren't even aware that, as they were doing it, we were attending a school of some sort." Unaware she may have been, but there's no denying that Masuku's life is entwined with the rhythms of the land around her and, by extension, with the people who share that space. It's the best way to live, she insists, commenting on the sadness of life in the city, where people have "become alien to themselves" as they chase intangible goals. Her life stands as a stark contrast: she has always strived to be an anchor of the community, a role she first fulfilled by qualifying as a teacher before going on to become a school principal. While she may have bid farewell to the classroom, her work in education continues in the broader sense: her goal now is to ensure that her people understand the importance of their culture, that they do not lose their essence by becoming beguiled by the conveniences of a modern world and thus lose sight of who they are.

Although Masuku is happiest and most alive when with the members of her community, she has kept august company, having attended college with former archbishop and fellow icon Desmond Tutu. As befits someone who values humility above all other attributes, she dismisses notions of his greatness, describing him as "just like any other boy you know". She adds that so many other people from that era have gone on to enjoy remarkable achievements. "There were so many of us that became important in our own way. This is something I wish our children could see when they are in the classroom – the impact you have when your goal is to make life better for others."