

# 21 Icons ... a show of positive energy

By: Martin Makoni

The world acclaimed "21 Icons South Africa" exhibition has debuted in the Free State with a call for people to be eloquent in the way they think so that they can clearly define who they are and the kind of South Africa they hope to build.

The 21 Icons exhibition celebrates South Africa's 21 years of freedom through a unique concept that combines fine-art portraits, short films, behind the scenes photography, written narrative and a documentary featuring 21 distinguished individuals who helped shape today's South Africa.

Officially opening the exhibition on Wednesday night at the University of the Free State (UFS), one of the featured icons, activist and scholar Zubeida Jaffer said the artistic display should not only be seen as a presentation of pictures and literature but an opportunity for people to define who they are by learning about those who worked hard to change the world around them.

Jaffer, who is presently a writer-in-residence at the UFS said finding herself surrounded by the

images of the 21 icons was both humbling and an honour as she has also learnt a lot from them.

"It is so comforting. I feel like I'm surrounded by a circle of energy from which I have been fortunate to draw strength from," said Jaffer, who is also a journalist and author.

Among the extraordinary South Africans featured in this collection are struggle icons Ahmed Kathrada, Advocate George Bizos and former president Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, human rights and environmental activist Kumi Naidoo.

Celebrated storyteller Gcina Mhlope, Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer, activist and musician Yvonne Chaka Chaka, gender activist Sophia Williams De Bruyn and artist William Kentridge are also featured.

Jaffer said: "It's a choice that we make... whether to draw energy from those who are positive and forward looking or to surround ourselves with people who are fearful. There is a lot to be fearful about in our country. We have lived through very fearful and difficult times.

"But to cope with these times, these people and many others have kept their focus on hope. They have kept their focus on what is possible... and what they would like South Africa to be in future. If you choose to be miserable, you can choose to be with people that are always complaining."

The exhibition toured the country since its inception in 2013. The current one has been specially curated for the UFS and the "Arts 4 Social Justice Week", another arts exposé running alongside it.

The 21 Icons project is the brainchild of photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn. He is the founder and director of the popular venture.

According to the project's official website 21icons.com, the exhibition is a visual celebration of the lives of men and women who have shaped the world around them for the better.

Inspired by the life of Nelson Mandela, it tells the stories of people who have continued his legacy and those whose lives have made the world a better place.

"The project seeks to celebrate those who have achieved success and widespread recognition, as well as individuals whose work has been conducted without prior acclaim," reads part of the description.

The project started with Nelson Mandela's last official photographic portrait in Season One and continued last year in its second season when it featured people who have shaped South Africa's democracy. This year the 21 Icons project turns to the future. The third season will celebrate contemporary icons: men and women who hold within them the potential of Madiba's legacy.

"The hope was to capture in an immersive manner the lives of the people it features. This meant striving for intimacy during the portrait shoots and interviews, to ensure that the charm, humility and sincerity of South Africa's most remarkable people came through," according to the website.

The exhibition which is presented by the 21 Icons organisation and the UFS will run until September 18.