

Siya Xuza

"I am passionate about innovation and I am passionate about Africa, but more importantly I am passionate about the potential of young people." - Siya Xuza



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On 7 February 2016, the acclaimed short-film series *21 ICONS* featured the 20th icon of its third season: 26-year-old South African energy entrepreneur and industrialist, Siya Xuza. His company, Galactic Energy Ventures, is at the forefront of the development of sustainable models for energy storage.

Xuza was selected for *21 ICONS* South Africa Season 3 to demonstrate that through hard work and dedication individuals can overcome barriers and adversity and strive to be the best possible version of themselves.

On his selection as an icon Xuza comments, "I am an example of what happens when you give young South Africans opportunities. When you follow your passion, shut out noise that can distract you and you are true to yourself, you achieve greatness."

A born innovator, Xuza grew up in a small township, North Crest in Mthata, Eastern Cape. He says, "I'm proud of Mthatha, I'm proud of where I'm from. It's part of my identity and it's a reflection of the talent in South Africa, which does not lie in typical places. There's talent everywhere."

He was a curious child and began experimenting with alternative fuels in his mother's kitchen at the age of five. Inspired by an aeroplane flying overhead during the 1994 elections the sighting rendered him determined to create one of his own. But he realised that he would first need fuel to launch the aircraft into space.

“We procrastinate so much and we often forget that it’s often the smallest starts in life that make a big difference. I did not have the laboratory and I did not have NASA facilities, those only came later. I simply had my mom’s kitchen and I started there,” he muses.

He recalls experimenting with utensils in his mother’s kitchen to bake rocket fuel ‘like cookies’ and was often reprimanded for starting fires; “I didn’t know what science was. However, I knew I wanted to make things and to build things. I was a kid going into kitchens behind my mom’s back, mixing things together, blowing up kitchens and getting a hiding in the meantime,” he quips.

This exploration would culminate in a science project during high school that would later develop into a cheaper and safer rocket fuel.

His high school research sought to harness solar technologies to generate clean affordable energy and saw him globally lauded at numerous international science fairs. His work as an energy-engineer won him a scholarship to Harvard University in the United States and was so remarkable that Nasa-affiliated Lincoln Laboratory named a minor planet after him. This is an insurmountable accomplishment that few could ever imagine.

He notes that through education and opportunity he was able to change his life; “Education is freedom. Education transformed my life. For me education was critical, not just formal school education but teaching myself. University didn’t teach me to invent, I taught myself that, and I think it is something we should encourage more.”

He continues, “I am using [my freedom] to be an ambassador of possibility. Using my talent to the best of my abilities.” He further adds that South Africans can’t afford to become complacent, as we still have a lot more to do.

“So many young people today will play the victim game. We are not victims, we are conquerors. And the way to conquer is [not to] say I’m a victim of this therefore I will not get anything, [rather] say because I’m a victim, because I find myself in this situation in life, I’m going to work harder than the people who have access to resources that I don’t,” he states.

Xuza established Galactic Energy Ventures to find solutions that would address the energy crisis in South Africa and the continent. Using engineering and science his research is geared towards using fuel cells as a means of storing energy; “I became interested in finding solutions to meet one of Africa’s biggest challenges, which is energy. That’s when I shifted my attention towards fuel cells.”

About the portrait

For the portrait ‘*Within Reach*’, Van Wyk describes the visual elements, “At Cape Town Science Centre in Woodstock, Xuza is photographed inside their planetarium. His face visible through a constellation of stars, the portrait speaks to his early explorations of science and the minor planet – 23182 Siyaxuza – named in his honour, and is a tribute to his assertion that it is in reaching for the stars that we will ultimately achieve greatness.”

On the future of South Africa she says, “What I see in the future is a South Africa becoming a global leader in innovation. As South Africa where we are coming up with our own brands and our own products, that for me is the next narrative.”

He concludes by saying, “I could be anywhere with the skill that I have, with the education that I have. I could be anywhere but I’m so glad I’m in South Africa.”

View the video

About 21 Icons Season 3

The short film-series documents the conversations between Gary Van Wyk as the photographer and filmmaker and the icons. Each short film provides insight into both the subject and photographer's creative approach to the portrait.

Behind each portrait lies a carefully planned concept that captures not only the essence of each icon visually, but also in spirit and in terms of their unique legacy.

Season three of 21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa.

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