

Herman Mashaba

'I decided I must go into business because I realised that I must do something with this precious life that I have only got one chance to live.' - Herman Mashaba. (video)



Herman Mashaba is pictured in Cape Town on 27 June 2014, as part of photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn's 21 Icons South Africa series. Inspired by Nelson Mandela, 21 Icons is a series of short films and photographic portraits documenting the stories of key figures in South Africa's recent history, including Nelson Mandela, former president FW de Klerk and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu. (Copyright Adrian Steirn, 21 Icons)

21 ICONS - the series that celebrates the South Africans who, through their passion and dedication, have played a key role in shaping our country and our world - has shone the spotlight on entrepreneur and philanthropist, Herman Mashaba. As founder of ethnic hair-care company Black Like Me, Mashaba is not only an influential and inspiring businessman; he also stands as an example of how tenacity and determination can overcome great odds demonstrating his iconic traits.

This intimate glimpse of Mashaba, his passion and his driving force, forms part of a series that pays homage to other South African giants. Their spirit has been captured in a striking and haunting manner by Adrian Steirn, one of South Africa's leading filmmakers and photographers.

Steirn comments, "I've met many people whose stories are incredibly powerful - it's a true privilege to discover more about the human spirit and share these individuals personal accounts, their positive character traits and their propensity to influence and shape perceptions and transform societal norms for the better, impacting the communities around them."

Accompanying each short film is a black and white portrait of the 21 ICONS. The portraits appear in a Sunday newspaper on the same day that the film is flighted, and will be sold later this year at a charity auction, with funds donated to the charity of the ICONS' choice. Mashaba has nominated

The Field Bank Foundation to receive the funds generated through the sale of his portrait, which is a dramatic study in simplicity. His face merges with the black background; he looks up at the camera at a slight angle, with his eyes and facial features highlighted by contrast. The picture makes a stark contrast: Mashaba is black like me.

'It's all about mindset'

Listening to his story - the tale of a child raised by a mother who earned barely enough, cleaning houses, to feed her own children - Steirn and his production team are struck by Mashaba's refusal to let his circumstances define, or confine, him. "It's all about mindset," he insists.

His own mindset is proactive; he's constantly alert to opportunity. This is how, at the age of 24, a young man who had only once visited a hair salon came to found a company that is, today, worth billions and which has, moreover, become known as an aspirational and motivating brand amongst the black community. Today, Black Like Me is as much a market leader as when it was established almost 30 years ago - yet its beginnings were markedly humble. "I started my career in business as a sales rep, selling products for different companies from the boot of my car on a commission basis. That's how I came across this fantastic opportunity to get into hair-care products - I noticed hair salons springing up all over the townships, villages and cities. Black women were starting to take care of their hair, and I realised that this was going to be the market of the future."

Mashaba's story is an illustration of one man becoming master of his own destiny - something he believes that we all can, and should, do. We can't rely on government to turn our lives into success, he maintains; they should provide an enabling environment, but after that, it's up to us to make the most of what we've been given.

That's why Mashaba urges today's youth to see education as the key to a better life. He explains to Steirn: "You need to use your education, because that's what is going to give you the mental capacity to change your circumstances." Hard work is equally important; Mashaba says that there are no short cuts, and that without sacrifice, you can never expect to succeed in any area of your life.

Family - front and centre

Steirn perceives that vigilance is another hallmark of his philosophy. Mashaba learnt this lesson the hard way, when, in 1993, the state-of-the-art factory he had only recently built was torched by an arsonist. Devastating though this event was, Mashaba chose to see it as a wake-up call; a lesson that life mustn't be taken for granted. It also cemented in his mind the importance of taking a proactive stance; it's the difference between determining your future, or letting your future determine you.

The future is something Mashaba is keenly aware of - his family's future, for a start. Family - and indeed, his community - remain front and centre in his heart and mind. That's an interesting view for a businessman, especially one who has invested so much in his business, but Mashaba says that the company is simply the vehicle that allows him to provide his family with the things they need. He's committed to helping other entrepreneurs achieve the same success. To this end, he established an investment company that provides finance for small businesses.

His real passion, however, is serving our country. Now that he is no longer actively involved in Black Like Me's operations, he spends most of his time - when he is not golfing or playing the piano - facilitating NGOs that represent causes close to

his heart.

Giving back to the community

One such organisation is the Field Band Foundation; an initiative that uses music to teach children life skills. The organisation currently reaches more than 5,000 children throughout the country.

For Mashaba, it is the men and women who make causes like the Field Band Foundation successful that are the true South African ICONS. "There are so many South Africans, black and white, who might not have high profiles but who are doing beautiful things every day to help our society," he reflects.

For him, that's the most important job anyone can do. "To me, being South African means being a human being. It means having a role to play in our beautiful country."

Programme synopsis

Herman Mashaba, founder of Black Like Me - a leading ethnic hair-care brand - talks to filmmaker Adrian Steirn about his determination to rise above his circumstances and his ongoing dedication to helping others do the same.

About 21 Icons South Africa



21 ICONS South Africa is an annual collection of photographs and short films of South Africans who have reached the pinnacle of achievement in their fields of endeavour. These men and women have been an inspiration through their extraordinary social contribution. It is not a definitive list and does not denote any ranking.

The short film-series documents the conversations between Steirn 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.

The original photographs, signed by the icon, will be sold at a future charity auction and the proceeds donated to his or her chosen charity.

Season two of 21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Momentum Asset Management, Nikon, Deloitte and the Department of Arts and Culture.

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