

Presidential award 'might be premature'

In some ways, Dr Patience Mthunzi, who last year was awarded the Presidential Order of Mapungubwe, wishes she had not received it.

It's not that the 36-year-old scientist working at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) is ungrateful. It's just that she feels that the award might have been a bit premature.

"To be honest, I wished it away because I think it came prematurely. I have not invented anything yet, so I am not yet at the level to have been awarded such an honour," she said.

Mthunzi, who was awarded the bronze rank of the order, was last week also named as one of three South Africans on Forbes magazine's list of the 20 Youngest Power Women of Africa.

The other two - radio talkshow host Redi Thladi and Yolanda Sangweni, a senior editor at Essence.com, a leading publication for black women in the US, both work in the media.

Mthunzi, who is pioneering the study of biophotonics - a combination of biology and photonics, the latter involving the generation, manipulation and detection of photons - has achieved several firsts.

It was the knowledge of being the "first Zulu physicist" at St Andrews University, in Scotland, where she did her PhD, that kept her pushing through during tough times.

"When I got to St Andrews the principal visited my supervisor's labs because he wanted to meet this girl from Soweto and he looked at me and said: 'Do you know that you are our first Zulu physicist?' That made me sure that I was going to get through my PhD," she said.

Just as with the presidential award, Mthunzi was surprised when she learned that she had made it onto the Forbes list

"I didn't even know what the Forbes list was," she said.

But it was her awarding of the Order of Mapungubwe that put her in the limelight.

"When I was contacted by a woman from The Presidency, I put the phone down in her ear, because I thought it was a hoax. I mean, who gets calls from The Presidency and then get asked for for a copy of your ID and your CV?"

Mthunzi's groundbreaking work could well change the lives of millions of people around the world.

It could contribute to medical science and also has applications in agriculture, environmental and life sciences.

Source: *The Times* via I-Net Bridge.

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