

Taddy Blecher

"When people are more educated and feel that they have more sense of self-worth and more value in terms of what's inside them, they just naturally treat each other better. I think that kind of self-worth does lead to happiness, I don't think it's the only thing that creates happiness, but it definitely is a factor in societal happiness, on all metrics." - Taddy Blecher.



The acclaimed series 21 ICONS South Africa will feature the twentieth icon of its second season: Dr Taddy Blecher, a pioneer of the free tertiary education movement in South Africa. A man with a great vision, he believes that with an inwards-out approach to life, everyone has the ability to be successful.

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.

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."

Steirn's portrait of Dr Taddy Blecher appears in the Sunday paper alongside the collectible poster. The beautiful portrait included in the project will be sold at a charity auction next year. He has nominated a charity of his choice to be the recipient of the funds.

Sitting in a vast lecture theatre, the portrait features Blecher with his arm raised, as if answering the question "What wouldn't you know?" - a concept that reflects his work with free education models.

Development through education

In an intimate conversation with Steirn, Taddy Blecher talks about his life as a philanthropic social entrepreneur, also known as the transcendental crusader, who looks like Harry Potter. Blecher is a bubble of energy and abundance; and he is very, very smart. He has single-handedly transformed the face of development through education, by challenging conventional

wisdom that only the elite are destined for power and wealth. He believes that it all comes down to the magic and genius within each of us.

Blecher is an actuary by profession, and has applied his insights to creating a radical educational model to fill the gap in business education between matric and MBA-level qualifications. His basic philosophy is simple: if everyone gave something to someone else, no-one would need anything.

Blecher, wealthy, white and in his late twenties, was ready to emigrate from South Africa when he took stock and realised that his home was where he was needed to make a difference. "I saw aching poverty," he said, and he made a life-changing decision to do something about it. In 1999, he and his colleagues opened the Community and Individual Development Association (Cida) City Campus to give disadvantaged youths a chance to overcome hopelessness and earn a four-year business administration degree.

With the opportunity to live on the 40th floor of some high rise in Manhattan, he realised he would be totally alone, totally separate from his people and totally alienated from himself.

Sello, one of Cida's former students who gave up his successful career path and large salary at Mercedes-Benz South Africa a subsidiary of the global company, Daimler AG, to join Blecher and his team. They are our next generation of Mandela's and Tutu's; self-sacrificing individuals who want to help others realise their potential. Sello echoes the words of his mentor, "The real secret to happiness is when you actually give to other people and you devote your life to some other kind of higher purpose."

SA's first free university

Operating from his office in Johannesburg, without any university buildings, courses or staff, Blecher began by faxing a letter of invitation to 350 schools. The letter asked that the brightest and poorest students apply to a new higher education institution. This letter promised them the "best business education in Africa". This was to be South Africa's "first free university", created to serve talented youngsters from poor black communities who could never afford to send their children to established universities.

"It went ballistic. We had 3,500 applications for an institution that did not exist," said Blecher. They were able to borrow a building for the institution and without computers, the eager youth practised typing on photocopies of a keyboard.

He realised the solution was not to open one's wallet and hand out wads of cash; it was to focus on education and entrepreneurship. If South Africa was going to develop a long-term, sustainable future, it needed to provide a way into the

professions for the poor black majority. It needed to give them a stake in society. From an economic perspective, he held that higher education was the driver of wealth - and decided that he would create a free business university that would provide the gateway for those who would otherwise be excluded.

Access to free university level education, launched with the help and content of Regenesys Business School, would provide a way out for them. Once it started, Blecher tapped into the business network to find people who could teach business skills - and he had an immediate response from companies wanting to attract talented black youngsters into the financial services sector. "Our students, from squatter camps and townships, were learning from people who had done R3bn business deals," he says.

Holistic education

"Education needs to be holistic," he says with conviction. "The school system is not producing a happy society, and people are not awake in the way they should be." Besides providing tertiary education to youngsters who could not afford to attend existing universities, he hopes to help people find direction in their lives and help to transform communities. "My deepest interest is to help people realise how great they are."

The educational model is a holistic one, based on the knowledge that "businesses don't hire people with facts, they hire people with qualities". What Blecher means is that good businesses don't go out to look for someone who can read a balance sheet; they look for someone with integrity, self-discipline, focus, passion, compassion, initiative and team spirit - who can read a balance sheet.

South African education needs revolutionary thinking, "We really have to change the mindsets of our youth to believe that they are capable of greatness, and of achieving something, and switching them on."

"Our students do degrees that are globally recognised and their professors are based in America. Every single day they are learning from world class experts at almost zero cost, in a disused building in Johannesburg, and they're getting a global education that can take them anywhere in the world, comparable to Harvard or Stanford or anywhere else, and 98% of them are getting employed here in South Africa.

Furthermore, students maintain the institution: they clean, they do the repairs, they cook the food, and they are also required to volunteer for community work when they go back home during the holidays. Some teach whilst others mentor teenage orphans who are responsible for looking after their younger siblings. The final aspect is that all students have to start a business, for which they are given start-up funding. This capital must be repaid. The model is to create entrepreneurs, a mind-set that needs to be learned. And all of them have to give something back to their communities, furthering Blecher's dream of awakening South Africa.

A philanthropic culture

"We want to create a hundred thousand people who will be their own unique individuals who keep alight what being a human being should be when Ubuntu is alive. And we really care about the dignity of other human beings and what we mean to each other. That's if South Africa is going to keep Mandela's flame alive then we must bring up young people up with that. That must burn in their hearts, of what it is to be human, and what it is to be South African, truly. Not about making money and doing a BEE deal and getting rich quick but the South Africa that runs deep in all of our veins, that kind of humanity."

He concludes with the principle of the triple bottom line: people, planet and prosperity, and speaks of how a philanthropic culture can sustain people. "This is a place to turn broken people into empowered people, a place to achieve their life goals. I call it mass personalisation, fulfilling human potential using the inside-out mechanism. Education is dealing with fundamental attitudes of hearts and minds; we need to awaken what is inside us and unleash the passion. We need to focus on our greatness. Every student is a genius waiting to happen."

Programme synopsis

Taddy Blecher talks candidly to Adrian Steirn about how education is dealing with fundamental attitudes of hearts and minds; the need to awaken what is inside us and unleash the passion, focusing on our greatness. Every student is a genius waiting to happen.

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.



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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