

Zubeida Jaffer

"I believe that I am part of a common humanity. One South Africa, one world, one universe. I'm a child of God. I've got many identities but I am not prepared to accept that I'm one thing only. We have to get people away from this idea that they're pink and blue and white and grey. In the end, we are very close, all of us, to one another. We have the same feelings and if we get hurt, we feel the same." - Zubeida Jaffer



The acclaimed series 21 ICONS South Africa has featured the fourteenth icon of its second season: Zubeida Jaffer, award-winning South African journalist and author. Holding a master's degree from Columbia University in New York, she was the first South African woman to receive the USA's Foreign Journalist Award in 1994. She also received an award from the New York Foreign Press Association for outstanding academic and professional work.

In a fitting honour, 2 November is International Day to End Impunity for crimes against journalists. This day is about acknowledging the defense and promotion of freedom of expression. It is a very dangerous time for journalists and they are being killed and imprisoned worldwide in record numbers. They face daily threats, attacks and intimidation from private individuals, non-state actors, and government officials who seek to silence them. The overwhelming majority of these crimes are committed with impunity. Jaffer is one such journalist who suffered as she used journalism as a weapon to oppose the domination of the Apartheid regime and was imprisoned twice for reporting news against the government.

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.

Journey as a journalist

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 Jaffer 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. She has nominated a charity of her choice to be the recipient of the funds.

It features Jaffer surrounded by sheets of newspaper swirling in the wind, conveying that her writing helped to free her and the South Africa she was fighting for.

In an intimate conversation with Steirn, Jaffer talks about her journey as a journalist who always seeks to uncover the truth and give people who can't extend their own voices an outlet to share and express their views, opinions and thoughts.

Born in Claremont, Cape Town in 1958 she was aware at a young age of the Group Areas Act and her segregation of children and people of other races. "I had a happy childhood but it was a confined one. I grew up in a coloured area and went to a coloured school and I never engaged or interacted with white people until I went to university."

Relationship with words

Initially wanting to be a clinical psychologist she says she didn't choose journalism and that it chose her. "I always worked during holidays, but within the community at the shops or butcher but then one day my dad said to me, why don't you write to some companies and see if you can get a holiday job as a student. And I wrote seven letters, and only one company responded, and it happened to be the Argus Company."

Thinking that she would be packing newspapers, sweeping or filing papers, on her first day she realised she was there as a journalist and that was the beginning of her relationship with words, authenticity and facts.

Not afraid to expose the truth, Jaffer was detained by the South African authorities for two months in 1980 after exposing police killings. During her detention, she was held in solitary confinement where she was tortured and beaten.

"I was arrested because I'd written a story about families that were shot and killed on 16 June 1980. There was a big stay away and the police wouldn't give the Cape Times the information about the families that were shot and killed. At that time, they had surrounded the different areas, near to where I lived, and they shot people whom they said were looting shops and were rioters."

In 1986, after editing community and trade union papers, she was detained again, while she was several months pregnant. She was released after six weeks, only to be re-arrested nine weeks later and jailed again with her infant. But by then the mood had changed ? "People were more defiant; I had changed and was involved in community organisations and in establishing the community newspaper called Grassroots. I was also responsible for the first United Democratic Front publications, and so that became my life. When I was detained the second time, I felt that in a way I deserved it, because now I'm involved with this. So I'm expecting it, whereas the first time I was clueless, and I was just continuously terrified."

Travelling to the states

She became a member of the Independent Media Commission for South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. After this, she went to Columbia University in New York City to deepen her skills and received a master's degree in journalism in 1996. She had not been allowed to travel in the 1980s, and the one thing she wanted to do was study further and live in a different city, outside South Africa.

Jaffer tells Steirn that she didn't want to travel to the States. "I was averse to go as we had lived through a very confined time with hardly any access to international news or even to television. But we were also aware of who was against us and who was for us. The British and the American government were opposed to the ANC and to Madiba and so I was not keen. Fellow icon, Albie Sachs, former Constitutional Judge and Apartheid activist, said that if I was serious about journalism that I would go to New York City because it is the heart of media reporting. And so he convinced me to enroll at Columbia University in New York."

She is the founding editor of Independent Newspapers' parliamentary bureau and was also a political analyst for the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.

Jaffer is also a graduate of both UCT and Rhodes University and is currently based at the University of the Free State as Writer-in-Residence where she has been tasked with reshaping the journalism curriculum.

In the present, and in celebrating twenty years of democracy, Jaffer maintains that the government must be put under pressure and held accountable for their actions. "I also hope that young people have the perspective to know where we come from as a nation and they need to understand that. However, I often feel that we don't comprehend or we don't fully grasp that whatever we are fighting or jostling for, that in the end, we still have to clean up the disorder in our communities."

Jaffer says she is not afraid to speak her mind. "With the Protection of State Information Act, I said to one of the ministers of parliament that if the act was to be passed, then the government would be putting me in jail in a few years time. When he disagreed, I, in turn maintained my position because if somebody is going to come to me with a bit of information that I think is important enough to be published, to take the risk to circulate it, then I'm going to do it. I'm not going to consider anything else. If it's important information or state information, and it needs to be known, I'm going to go ahead and write it. And then the state is going to have to put me into jail. I cannot support something that imprisons me."

Looking to the future, she wants her students to have the confidence to understand that they are bigger than the small areas that they come from. "They are smart and beautiful because they've been given talents, and it's for us as teachers, to facilitate those abilities, to bring them out. They all have flair, everybody, from the poorest community to the richest."

Jaffer publishes two websites, Zubeida Jaffer: www.zubeidajaffer.co.za and The Journalist: www.thejournalist.org.za

Programme synopsis

Zubeida Jaffer discusses her truth as a journalist and an activist who was a key figure in the struggle movement in the Western Cape during Apartheid. She talks to filmmaker and photographer, Adrian Steirn about her journey as a journalist who always seeks to uncover the truth and give people who can't extend their own voices an outlet by which to share and express their views, opinions and thoughts.

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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