

'Love takes us places hate cannot'

Nine-year-old Soborno Isaac Bari is an Asian American from New York and the world's youngest professor. The maths and science genius visited South Africa and became a Da Vinci Institute laureate for social architecture. Bari, a Nobel prize nominee, tells **Denvor de Wee** about maths education, his hobbies, the day he was honoured by the US's President Barack Obama, as well as his philosophy on tolerance and mutual respect

Are you ever treated differently by other children your age?

Age doesn't really matter because it just dictates how long it's been since you were born. So, I feel playing with kids my age is necessary because it is important to socialise with others your age. When I meet other kids my age they don't treat me differently.

Just because someone is a genius does not mean they should not be allowed to socialise with other people. I find that I am treated differently by adults; they see me as an example of how children can possess exceptional skills with a passion for what they know.

What do you do for fun?

I always go biking, I play chess, basketball, I draw and play with other kids my age. There's not much else I do for fun other than maths and science.

What motivates you?

When I was two or three years old, I had a passion for maths and science. My father was and still is a professor in maths and science. He was writing on the blackboard and I wondered what these weird-looking symbols were. One day my father caught my fascination and I started asking what these symbols meant.

But nothing was coming of it. So, my father started teaching me maths and I realised that it's a fun thing to know and learn. At school they make it sound very difficult like something only geni can do. So, I think that maths and science are not that complex and much more beautiful than they teach us at school. I actually thought that maths and science are elegant, and I wanted to keep doing it more and more and it became a hobby for me. I also started experimenting with it and there were times it got me hooked.

I feel that this passion for maths and science is the one thing that keeps me going, even in my dark days. Back in November of last year I set deadlines for myself and said I will finish one of my books in January of this year. I was, however, only half-way with the book when we reached January. I found my writing very boring, and it didn't really hook me, and I was a bit stressed about it. I decided to change it and I persevered. I do the same with maths and science — I push myself and set deadlines to ensure that I understand certain things by a certain time.

How do you feel about being recognised by the Da Vinci Institute?

I feel so honoured about this opportunity and to speak in front of people with all this experience and who have worked so much harder than me and received their PhDs. They are the ones who achieved the highest degrees in their fields for education. They are the people who have so much more life experience than me and who have persevered to be the best in their fields. I feel so honoured to be working with the Da Vinci Institute.

You were also honoured by former US President Barack Obama. Tell us more about that experience?

Even though I didn't get an opportunity



'This tiny guy': The self-effacing Soborno Isaac Bari, the youngest professor in the world, is a nine-year-old prodigy who recently came to South Africa to spread his message of love — and to receive a laureate from the Da Vinci Institute, of course. Photo: Andy Mkosi

nity to speak to him directly, I was so happy to know that the president of the US recognised me, this tiny guy. I was not as famous as I am now, but I was really surprised by his gesture. I can only describe it as a feeling of shock and disbelief.

What message do you have for parents and kids who are struggling with maths and science? What can parents and educators do to make these subjects more interesting for children?

School really dominates children's lives after the age of five. I, however, feel that parents should try to discover their children's passion for things in life, whether it's drawing, writing or whatever they are good at.

Parents and teachers play an important role when it comes to moulding children and helping them to find that passion. These adults can control a child's perspective and views on subjects like mathematics and science. The teacher needs to teach well, it's not a question of children listening well — it's the other way around.

A child must be allowed to use his or her imagination when learning mathematics and science, otherwise, the child just won't get anywhere. They won't be able to make any breakthrough.

Do you have a specific message for maths teachers to ensure children have less maths anxiety?

Mathematics anxiety is caused by the school system stigmatising mathematics and science. There is a perception that maths and science are only for geniuses, which leaves you as the learner with this feeling of defeat. They leave you with this perception that you cannot do mathematics, because teachers don't teach well or they over-complicate the subject.

I feel that the maths anxiety issue is most commonly caused by schools, and we need to fix that by showing people that it's not that difficult and that it's a place where you should be using your imagination as much as you use your facts.

Just because a teacher says you can't do it, does not mean you are not able to. Teachers need to nurture children's passion for mathematics.

'I would really like to ... show the world that love, peace and empathy ... have meaning'

What inspired your book *The Love*?

I saw a lot of examples and incidents of terrorism and unfortunately a lot of these religious terrorists come from my religion — sadly — Islam and this kind of terror is fuelled by their hate for other beliefs.

So, I wanted to write that book to show the world that empathy and peace is the way to go because peace will take us places that hate cannot. Hate draws more attention by making the front pages and headlines, but that's it. Hate doesn't advance humankind, but love does.

If we have love for each other, we won't kill each other over the smallest things like having a difference in belief or thinking there is one God or multiple gods. I feel it is extremely important to have your own belief, but it's equally important to respect other beliefs and perspectives because when we do that we show empathy and love for each other.

As a scientist how do you feel about space travel?

I think it's an extremely important thing especially because we haven't travelled to any celestial body since 1973 when we went to the moon. But we have more important things right now, a global pandemic, Covid-19. But if we can fix it

as fast as possible, we can focus on great possibilities like space travel. Because what if everything dies and we don't have the technology to fix it? So it would be good to have a colony somewhere and therefore we must pursue space travel in the future because I think it would help with the survival of humankind, but that is Elon Musk's job right now.

Are you working on a degree yet and what is next for you?

I'm not working on a degree yet, because I still haven't gone into university legally yet. I decided to go to eighth grade first, because I wasn't physically ready for 12th grade or university. I'm in the eighth grade because I wanted to take the spelling bee and stimulate my intellectual needs.

I could go to university next year if I wanted to, but I'm not physically ready for it. I'm really excited for my future and definitely want to get into one of the top five universities to do my PhD, become a mathematician and professor and if possible, governor or president of an organisation or state.

I would really like to lead and show the world that love, peace and empathy, including my ideas, have meaning.