



L-R: Noella Coursaris Musanka and American rap artist Eve at the opening of a new library in Malaika's school project in the Congo

CREATING FUTURE LEADERS

Noella Coursaris Musanka's own difficult childhood led her to found the non-profit organisation Malaika, which provides free schooling to girls in Africa

Noella Coursaris Musanka knows firsthand the power of a good education. Today the model and philanthropist lives in London with her financier husband and two young children but like the hundreds of girls whose lives she is helping transform, she was born into poverty in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

However, Musanka's childhood was a world away from other Congolese children, who typically live below the poverty line and have a one in five chance of seeing their fifth birthday. At the age of five, Musanka, who was a only child, was sent to live in Europe with her aunt and uncle shortly after her father died and her mother realised she could not afford to care for her anymore.

After being separated from her mother for more than a decade with only a few phone calls in between, Musanka went back to the Congo when she was 18. She described the meeting with her mother as "emotionally tough".

"You are meeting someone who is like a stranger to you but at the same time, she is your mum," she says.

"Being a mum now myself, I know how important that bond is between a mother and child. No one can replace a mum or dad."

While the separation from her mother at such a young age was traumatic for both mother and daughter, mother-of-two Musanka admits her mother made the "right choice" as growing up in Belgium and later moving to Switzerland in her early teens afforded her opportunities she would never have had otherwise.

She was a latecomer to modelling, preferring instead to finish her studies. "I was about 23 or 24 and my friends pushed me to enter a competition for Agent Provocateur in London where I was living at the time. I began modelling then in other campaigns and spent 10 years going between London and New York for work."

In 2007, with the help of a handful of wealthy friends,

Malaika school in Kalebuka provides free schooling to over 230 local girls



Musanka founded her own non-profit organisation Malaika in New York, to ensure that new generations of Congolese girls are educated for free at home and parents do not have to make the same tough choices as hers.

“Through our charity, we are creating an entire generation of agents of change, the leaders of tomorrow who will have a positive impact on the future of the Democratic Republic of Congo,” she says.

The Malaika School opened in 2011 in the town of Kalebuka, not far from where Musanka was born in Lubumbashi in the southeastern region of DRC. Before that, Kalebuka had only five educational centres for a population of 42,000 and none were free, which explains why the average girl in DRC only stays in school until the age of nine.

Today Malaika’s school has 231 local girls enrolled with modern facilities including a community football pitch, art and theatre classes and solar panel roofs sponsored by the Global Citizen Foundation, which allow the school to save money by generating their own reliable source of electricity. They also help power the school’s computers.

“I believe if my mother had been educated when my father [died], she could have kept me and supported herself without having to rely on a man,” says Musanka.

“My message is really to empower women by giving them an education. Traditionally, if a family had money they would send the boys to school first, so we want to provide these girls

“We want to provide these girls with a quality education for free so they can become independent women and, if they want, the future leaders of our country”

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“In a country like DRC, which is one of the richest countries in the world yet one of the poorest in terms of its healthcare system, infrastructure and education, we hope to help a generation to take control of their own country, their own destiny and the best way to do that is to give them an education.”

In March, American rap star and actress Eve visited the school with Musanka to open a new library after she read about the charity project in an online newsletter and contacted the foundation through Instagram.

Eve says: “I am hugely supportive of anything that helps young girls, whether it is going to talk to young girls or donating, I think a lot of our young women do not have an outlet to express themselves and I feel sometimes they can be looked over.”

Like Musanka, Eve is convinced the school project can contribute to real change in the country.

“I had great conversations with lots of people—some Congolese, some from other places, from all different backgrounds, political and business men and women—and they all felt strongly that supporting projects like Malaika and supporting these girls is the road to change. It will obviously take time but as long as people are dedicated then I’m sure it can happen.”

For more information visit malaika.org