

## Malaika: Angel of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

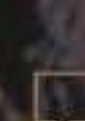
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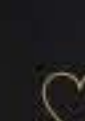
BY ARMAND ARTON



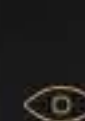
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Every so often you come across someone who is really making a difference in the world. When I first met Noella Coursaris Musunka she stood out from the crowd, and not just because she is a former model. Noella has devoted the past 10 years of her life to developing a foundation called Malaika, which she created in honour of her late father who died when Noella was only five years old.

Shortly after her father's death, Noella left the Democratic Republic of Congo to live with relatives in Europe, but she never forgot how difficult life was—and continues to be—for young women in the DRC. Upon her return to the country 13 years later to see her mother after her long absence, Noella vowed to give back, and knew the most effective way to do that would be through the gift of education.

Malaika comprises three distinct projects, all of which complement each other:

1. A school providing an education and two healthy meals to 252 young girls between the ages of 5 and 12, with future plans to accommodate the girls through age 18.
2. A community centre that provides health, education and sport programmes to an additional 7,000 people.
3. Water wells that supply clean water to more than 14,000 people in the immediate and surrounding areas.

Without a doubt, the girls' school is the jewel in Malaika's crown.

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*“It's great to see the impact we are having,” Noella told me recently. “The school has been open for six years, and we are really seeing the girls develop their own personalities and dream their own dreams.”*

Girls start lessons at the age of five and will stay in school until they are 18. Currently, there are only enough schoolrooms to accommodate students up to the grade 6 level. However, three other classrooms will soon be completed to house the girls as they continue their education. Noella also shared plans for a school infirmary, which will allow Malaika to care for its students' bodies just as much as their minds.

The Malaika community is situated in Kalebuka, a small village in south-eastern DRC. Originally, the town was without clean running water and electricity. But all that has changed, and Kalebuka now stands as a shining example of how access to education—as well as basic necessities such as clean water—can completely transform a community.

While Noella will always be the founder of and inspiration behind Malaika, she is adamant that none of this could be achieved without the help of an accomplished team of individuals, both in the DRC and abroad.

“I am wholly indebted to the amazing team of teachers, administrators and volunteers we have supporting us. Without their tireless hard work and commitment to our vision, Malaika would not be what it is today,” she said. Her gratitude also extends to the friends and families of the students, many of who take an active role in helping the girls succeed.

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*“There is a new generation coming out of Africa,” she explained. “These young women care about their contributions and their futures. They believe that the real natural resource of the Congo is its people and not oil, metals or timber.”*

Malaika's 10th anniversary celebration will be held in New York on May 17, and I am very excited to be attending. The cocktail gala aims to raise the funds to complete the final classrooms as well as the school infirmary. Some 400 guests from the world of fashion, media and philanthropy will be flying in from across the US, Europe and Africa. The night will consist of live musical performances, a fashion show, silent auction, art exhibit, and many surprises, including a performance by Eve, one of my favourite musicians. A highlight will undoubtedly be the night's special guests of honour: three Malaika students who have flown all the way from the DRC to speak to guests about their experiences.

I am very much looking forward to this special evening. It is important to note that neither Noella nor the international team is compensated in any way for their hard work. Indeed, an impressive 91 per cent of all funds generated by Malaika are reinvested into either the girls' education or community-building programs in Kalebuka. This the kind of initiative to which I am delighted to lend my support.

To learn more, please visit [www.malaika.org](http://www.malaika.org).

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