

SHE-FILES



MODEL AND EDUCATION ADVOCATE NOELLA COURSARIS MUSUNKA CELEBRATES A DECADE OF MALAIKA

NEW YORK—On an unseasonably warm Wednesday in May, laughter, voices and the raucous strains of African drums spilled from the entrance of an event space abutting the shores of New York City's Hudson River. Inside, a celebration was in full swing: Malaika, the small but accomplished non-profit, had chosen this particular spring evening to mark a successful first decade.

Among the usual coterie of donors and supporters, the evening's guests of honor stood out in their navy school tunics and checked button-downs: three young girls, plucked from a tiny, remote village in southeastern Congo and dropped into one of the world's most awe-inspiring cities. It proved to be a night that Lauriane, Mamie and Louise—and indeed everyone in attendance—would not forget.

Neither Malaika—which in Swahili means “angel”—nor its founder, model [Noella Coursaris Musunka](#), is yet a household name. But for the most part, neither is the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where Malaika executes its charitable mandate. Indeed, while the central African country is roughly the size of continental Europe, its exact location on a world map is not known to a vast majority of people.

But Ms. Coursaris Musunka and her team of staff (almost all of whom are unpaid volunteers) are doing their best to change that. Their hope is to bring worldwide awareness to a country that has the natural resources to feed and power an entire continent, but where the majority of people still lack access to basic health care, education and clean water.

For Ms. Coursaris Musunka, who was born in the DRC, Malaika is the culmination of a lifelong dream. When she was five, her father passed away unexpectedly. Her mother faced an excruciating decision: continue to raise her daughter alone in the Congo—appreciating the incredible limitations faced by women in sub-Saharan Africa—or send her off to live with relatives in Belgium and Switzerland. In the end, her mother decided she would have the best opportunities in Europe. It was there that Ms. Coursaris Musunka received, in her own words, “the greatest gift any individual can possess”: an education.

Ms. Coursaris Musunka's time in Europe was transformational, putting into stark contrast her tumultuous early years in the DRC. Receiving a high-quality education was two-fold—not only did it give her an informed view of the world and a developed sense of self, but it also afforded her opportunities that would have otherwise been out of reach. One of those opportunities was a career as a model, a career that she continues to work in today.



However, Ms. Coursaris Musunka considered modeling a means to a very important end. At almost the same time as her career took off, she returned to the DRC and became more acutely aware of the inequalities girls face there and across the world.

A recent study by the [United States Agency for International Development \(USAID\)](#) reports that approximately 3.5 million Congolese children of primary school age do not receive any kind of education. Unfortunately but not surprisingly, the majority of those children are female. Gender-based discrimination is rife in the DRC and young women are not only routinely denied the opportunity to go to school but also face forced early marriage, exclusion from the workforce and sexual violence.

“I knew that making a name for myself would help me bring greater awareness to the unique problems faced by the Congolese people,” Ms. Coursaris Musunka explained. “I also wanted to give back in a concrete way [on] the ground, with my sleeves rolled up.”

Thus the Malaika School was created in 2007, which provides free, quality education and two healthy meals to young girls in the small village of Kalebuka, very near to where she was born. What started as a one-room schoolhouse with only a handful of students is today a thriving network of classrooms and recreational facilities. Each day, the school welcomes 252 students in kindergarten through grade six and in the near future will add additional classrooms to accommodate the girls through to graduation. The school is revolutionary in that it boasts computing facilities and an extensive e-library.

The Malaika School was just the initial seed, however, and over the years a network of other resources have blossomed around it. The reason? Ms. Coursaris Musunka firmly believes that if young women are to succeed, their friends and family must be in a position to support them. To that end, Malaika's Kalebuka footprint now extends beyond the school to a constellation of facilities that anyone can access. Among its features are a community center, sports field, eight wells providing clean water to over 16,000 people and a sustainable agricultural project, the latter providing not only a food source but local employment opportunities as well. To date, there is nothing quite like Malaika anywhere else in DRC.



Back in New York, the festivities continued into the wee hours of the morning. Even with a glittering fashion show and big-name musical guests, the three Malaika students were the evening's undeniable stars. This journey to America marked the first time Lauriane, Mamie and Louise had ever left the DRC, let alone traveled halfway around the world. And what the audience didn't know is that the girls had been treated to a whirlwind tour of the Big Apple, highlights of which included a trip to the Statue of Liberty and tickets to “The Lion King” on Broadway.

Yet the three young women were remarkably poised in spite of jetlag and unbelievable culture shock. Their speeches and songs, delivered in perfect French, were insightful and full of gratitude. They talked of their career dreams in technology, law and journalism. Before the Malaika School, those futures were uncertain. Now anything is possible.

“I am very happy that I could travel to America and I want to thank the Malaika School for continuing to support our education in the Congo,” said Lauriane in her speech. “Upon my return, I can't wait to share my experiences with my friends. I will tell them all to work hard so we can become great ladies and achieve great things.”



During her own keynote address, Ms. Coursaris Musunka was overcome with emotion. “Malaika is the embodiment of so many things I hold dear—family, education, opportunity, positive change and hope for the future,” she said to the 450 guests, “In the faces of our students I see myself and my own children, and I want for each of these girls the same opportunities we have had”.

In closing, she shared an African saying that has inspired Malaika's philosophy from the very beginning: “if you want to go fast, go alone...but if you want to go far, go together.” With Ms. Coursaris Musunka's vision and strong work ethic winning Malaika an ever-growing first of donors, staff, volunteers and supporters, Malaika's first decade has been a strong example of teamwork. And if the decade at the event in New York was anything to go by, the future will continue to be bright for these schoolgirls, for the school and the community.

Jen Buchan is a freelance writer based in Toronto, Canada. She is an avid horsewoman but enjoys donating her spare time to help non-profits such as Malaika

Photos: 1) Noella Coursaris Musunka talks with schoolgirl; 2) In the classroom; 3) Girls outside of class; 4) A community well (all above Nislan Hughes); 5) Ms. Coursaris Musunka and students outside classroom (courtesy Malaika)

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