

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka

Model on a Mission

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka has made it her life's work to create a community-driven ecosystem in her birth country of Democratic Republic of Congo - one that can be replicated globally to help other vulnerable communities. Here, she talks about her Malaika school and the graduation of its first student intake.

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Congolese-Cypriot model and philanthropist Noëlla Coursaris Musunka is a leading voice for female empowerment, committed to helping girls worldwide reach their full potential through education and community-led projects. Her non-profit organisation Malaika, which she founded in 2007, runs a free school for more than 400 female students in Kalebuka, a village in the southeastern Democratic Republic of Congo. It also operates a vibrant local community centre, which offers a range of life-changing programmes to more than 6000 adults and young people.

Through its unique ecosystem, Malaika is helping to transform the wider area by providing enhanced access to basic amenities such as clean water, electricity, roads, healthcare and the internet. It's a model that Coursaris Musunka believes can be replicated globally.

This year her charity celebrated a significant milestone with the graduation of its first intake of students. Seventeen young women, who arrived as five-year-olds with limited opportunities, will now go on to higher

education and, in turn, help to inspire the next generation.

The international model-turned-activist, who was named one of the BBC's 100 Most Influential & Inspirational Women in 2017, is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Muhammad Ali Foundation 'Daughters of Greatness' prize. She is also a member of the United Nations Conscious Fashion and Lifestyle Network, and lives in Cheltenham with her husband, James, and their two children.

The graduation was an incredible moment and very emotional for me because I've known the girls since they were five. When they first came to the school, they were poorly nourished and had little hope of an independent future. Now, I'm so happy because most of them are going to university or technical college to study subjects like law, journalism, business, IT and engineering. To see them grow into such accomplished, healthy and driven young women makes me very proud. It proves the power of education and shows the opportunities it creates for these young women to be Africa's



next generation of changemakers.

If the school hadn't existed, the students would have dropped out of education and either become pregnant or got married. Their opportunities would have been extremely limited. According to UNESCO, 49.5 million girls in Sub-Saharan Africa are out of school. In the Congo, all the schools are fee-paying, and if a family has money, they send the boys first. When we started, Kalebuka lacked access to electricity, clean water and educational facilities. We built the Malaika school one classroom at a time and opened it in 2011 with 104 girls. It now provides a free accredited primary and secondary education, plus two meals a day, to 430 students.

The ripple effect of our community-driven model has transformed the entire village. We are saving lives through our clean water programmes with 30 wells providing safe drinking water to more than 36,000 people. In the past, they were forced to fetch it from dirty rivers. We also pushed the government to make roads close to the community so now people can travel easily to the towns to sell their goods.

We're giving adults a space to reinvent and reimagine their lives, too. Thousands of adults and young people who have dropped out of school can learn about everything from entrepreneurship, literacy and coding, to sewing and family planning at our community centre. They can also train to become mechanics and electricians. We give the students and staff two healthy meals a day and all our programmes are free.

I don't take any salary. This is my way of giving back to my country and my continent. I don't have to prove myself as much, in terms of building people's trust, because I am from the Congo and I am there to listen to the needs of the community. It costs \$750,000 a year to run all our programmes, including the Malaika school, and it is a big responsibility for my team and myself, but I am very happy and proud that we are able to offer everything for free.

I believe in raising money with dignity, so we made the decision not to use "sob stories" to attract donors. That can be difficult, because it sometimes means making less money, but I have to take the foundation in the direction I want it to go. It's the same with projects – if an idea doesn't fit with what we've created, or I don't believe it will endure for the long term, I'll turn it down. We also consult our board of directors and the entire Malaika team when making any major strategy decisions.

There has been a big shift since COVID in the way that donors are giving to charity. They are donating to big organisations or to climate change initiatives, so you have to be very creative in the way you fundraise now. We have amazing partners, from the L'Oréal Fund for Women to the Caterpillar Foundation and the FIFA Foundation, as well as a number of health charities. Because of my background in fashion, we have a lot of associations with brands like Mytheresa and Paul Smith. We recently formed a partnership with sustainable diamond jeweller Vrai to provide drinking water to 1500 villagers. Of course, people don't donate because I am pretty; they donate because the work we are doing is impactful. I am very happy that people donate for Malaika and not for Noëlla!

We have created a blueprint for other organisations. As a community-driven model Malaika has become an ecosystem that can be replicated globally to help other vulnerable communities. We launched our toolkit during UN General Assembly week in New York in 2022 to show what is needed and how important it is to involve the community and local government. During this year's UNGA week, we launched our impact report outlining our contributions to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the DRC. Through our SDG localisation model, we're directly impacting a total of six SDGs, creating pathways that go beyond girls' education and reach the entire community.

We have so many people saying they want to create their own foundation but you cannot start without a vision and a budget plan for at least the first five years. My advice is to start small.

There were many challenges when we first opened the

school. I chose Kalebuka because I felt it was a forgotten village. But it was hard to find teachers because it was such a remote area. We also wanted to attract more women teachers, so we had to make sure the working conditions were good, such as being able to offer free meals. We faced challenges relating to infrastructure, but the villagers wanted our programmes and promised to help in any way they could, and many of them are still volunteering with us today. One of the biggest challenges we faced – and continue to face today – is losing students to illnesses like malaria. It affects me and our team so much. While we do everything we possibly can to support them with treatment and care, as well as putting preventative measures in place like mosquito nets, when this tragedy happens it has a huge impact on us all.

I was born in the Congo. My father died when I was five and my mother didn't have the money to keep me. She sent me to live with relatives in Belgium and Switzerland and I didn't see her again until I went back to visit 13 years later when I was 18. It was incredibly moving and emotional to see my mother after all that time. She made a huge sacrifice to give me access to an education and to opportunity, and I'll forever remain grateful to her. It was also an awakening for me to see the level of poverty and to hear so many stories from girls that could have been me. But I also discovered my origins and my culture – the Congo is a beautiful country and I knew that if I could give back, I would.

In African culture, when you earn money, you automatically help your family. It was the same for me. I helped my own mama. She is still in the Congo and occasionally comes to visit the school. She is very proud of what I have achieved, but she is scared too, because she knows there is a big pressure on me; that this is a big responsibility in my life.

All the mothers at Malaika are supportive of their daughters' education. Many of them are involved with our school and community centre through our Mama Ya Mapendo initiative, which teaches mothers things like sewing, embroidery and financial literacy. The women even make our students' uniforms and create other products. Although they have not had the same opportunities as their daughters, they are able to participate in Malaika in a range of different ways and play a crucial role in encouraging their daughters and keeping them in school.

We don't do anything without the approval of the village. We have had many conversations with the village chief and the community over the years and they are always very supportive, including the men, because we are helping to break the cycle of unemployment and poverty. We're bringing opportunities that help to empower people economically and this is something that is felt across the entire community.

There are many issues we deal with that you won't see on social media and that go way beyond education. Like when a father or a sibling dies or a student suffers from malaria or any other health issue. We will contribute in any way we can – we will take the girl to hospital and pay for her treatment. When the students have their periods, we give them sanitary pads. We are there to support them as much as we possibly can.

My own children are very aware of their African heritage. My son is 13 and my daughter is nine and they spend every summer in the Congo. They understand what we are doing at Malaika and are very proud. I grew up in Europe, and spent many years in New York and London, and am a citizen of the world. I embrace every culture. I have the diplomacy of an African person, but the drive of an American.

What I have learned through running Malaika is to never take no for an answer. It has been very tough raising money to build a school in a village in the southeast of the Congo, but I've made it work because I really believed in what I wanted to do. It's important to put passion into everything you do. It also would not be possible without the incredible team around me – employees, volunteers, supporters, friends and family. So, thank you to this amazing group of individuals for helping to realise our dream!

Find out more about Malaika at malaika.org and @malaikadrc on social media.

