



ELLE
WOMEN *in*
SOCIETY

model citizen

Education shaped Noella Coursaris Musunka's life, and today the model-turned-philanthropist is paying it forward by bringing education to young Congolese girls.

Tidi Benbenisti gets to know Noella, and learns more about her foundation, Malaika

A Skype video call away brings me closer to the beautiful Noella Coursaris Musunka, even though we are continents apart. She is living in England, 'out in the countryside,' she tells me, where winter has set in, and I am in an air-conditioned office in the midst of a Joburg heatwave. Born in Lubumbashi, in the southeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the second-largest city after the capital of Kinshasa, her uncompromising belief that education transforms lives is the reason she began her non-governmental foundation, Malaika, in Kalebuka – a 40-minute drive away.

A natural beauty, with almond-shaped eyes, a perfectly symmetrical face, hair worn loosely just below her shoulders, she is tall, regal and soft spoken. Her strong demeanour is softened by her smile, and French accent. Dressed in an ivory-coloured

blouse, with a flawless complexion and no make-up to the visible eye, she takes pride in her primary role, being a mother. ‘I want my kids to grow up knowing that the world is their playground, and that they can pursue anything, and I will be here for them – always. It’s important they have stability,’ she says.

Stability and consistency are key in any child’s existence; it’s a solid foundation on which a healthy and enriched life is built alongside a parent, or both. Ironically for Noella, stability and consistency came at a high price of growing up on a different continent away from her mum, who was unable to provide for her after her father, Georges, passed away when she was five years old. ‘I don’t have many memories of my father, and I regret that I never got to know him. I met with some of his friends later and they told me so many wonderful stories about him, they gave me photos of him that were taken 10 days before he died; losing him made me a stronger woman,’ she says.

Her mum made the tough decision to send Noella to Belgium to live with one of her aunts, giving her daughter greater access to education. She later moved to Switzerland to live with another family member. ‘Switzerland was truly wonderful; the quality of life is fantastic, and there is the feeling of balance that has stayed with me since. It meant a strong education, which formed the backbone for the work I ended up doing,’ she notes.

Fluent in French and English, a graduate in business management, Noella moved to London and landed a campaign with lingerie brand Agent Provocateur. ‘My friends encouraged me to enter [a competition], and I did. Out of thousands of hopefuls, I landed the campaign, and things took off from there,’ she says. Splitting her time between London and New York, her lookbook included editorials in

GQ, Arena, Essence, and many more magazines, international billboards, and a campaign for Virgin.

A global citizen, armed with an education, it wasn’t until her first visit back to the DRC as an adult that she realised just how fortunate she was. ‘I was shocked to learn of the education crisis, where seven million children are not in school. It made me appreciate how lucky I was to have received a good education in Europe, and made me want to get involved and have a direct impact on this issue.’ Understanding that education is the catalyst for change, and that there is little value placed on education in the DRC, she founded Malaika in 2007 (originally Georges Malaika Foundation, in honour of her late Cypriot father).

Education should not be deemed a privilege. It is a basic human right, one which many girls in Africa, and around the world, have no access to, and this is something Noella wants to change. ‘When we were scouting possible locations for the Malaika School, we looked at different villages in the area around Lubumbashi, and Kalebuka was the one that was most committed to the project. The local community pursued us and really showed us that they wanted this school to be a part of their lives. Kalebuka has only five educational centres for a population of 42 000, and none of these are free. The literacy rates are abysmal. The need for a good school, along with the



community’s strong support for our mission, led us to Kalebuka,’ she adds.

Her first task was finding funding through her personal network of friends and family. Little by little, word began to spread, and the foundation’s donor base grew.

‘As the school expanded and we had more of a track record, we were able to show donors the impact their contributions were having, which in turn enabled us to bring in new donors, including corporations and foundations,’ says Noella. Yet, there were some challenges. ‘We wanted to ensure that people from Kalebuka built the school, as this would give them a sense of ownership, and would create local jobs. In order to do this, we realised that we would need a well on site that would provide water to make the bricks. We partnered with Voss Foundation in 2010 to solve this



challenge by building our first hand-pump at the school.’

Most of the foundation’s work centres on education and health initiatives, as these form the backbone of a robust community. ‘We view our role as providing Congolese people with tools and opportunities that they can use to bring about positive results for themselves. Our primary aim is to empower Congolese communities.’ It’s a three-tiered process with the Malaika School, which is a free, accredited school providing quality education to 231 girls, offering classes in French and English, where mathematics, science, health and civic education are taught daily. ‘The goal is to build the leadership capacity of each student so that she gives back to her community and has a positive, long-term impact on the future of the DRC,’ Noella says.

Engaging and profoundly passionate about the subject, she adds that all leaders need to place a premium on education as it is the best way to break the cycle of poverty. ‘Educating girls, in particular, has an exponential impact. An educated woman is less likely to die in childbirth, and she has healthier children; she is less vulnerable to diseases like HIV/Aids; she will increase her future earnings by approximately 10-20% for each

additional year of schooling and will reinvest most of it back into her family and community. Educating girls has positive benefits in all sectors of society. The World Bank has even stated that educating girls yields a higher rate of return than any other investment,’ she says.

EDUCATING GIRLS

According to a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report published in October 2013, 31 million girls of primary school age were out of school, and of these 17 million were expected never to enter school. Three countries have over a million girls not in school: in Nigeria there are almost five-and-a-half million, Pakistan, over three million, and in Ethiopia, over one million girls are out of school. An even more frightening reality is that two-thirds of the 774 million illiterate people in the world are female. And nine of the 10 bottom countries for female education in the world are here in Africa.

her work with the foundation. ‘Most people only hear about the negative aspects of the DRC, they don’t hear about its amazing people and enormous potential. We always read about the minerals that come from the DRC, but the country’s richest asset is its people. We see that all the time through our community centre, how driven they are to create better lives for themselves. It is very important for me to be able to show people a different side of the DRC and Africa.’

But the work is far from over. Unreliable electricity supply has

resulted in the installation of solar panels at the school, which will in turn allow for a computer room to be set up. Another challenge is making sure they have the most skilled staff possible. ‘The education we provide can only be as good as the staff who teach it, so we place a high priority on training our staff. We regularly run workshops on innovative teaching methods, leadership skills, and many other topics. Over and above that we need to raise additional funds to finish building the school. Ultimately we would like to have 340 girls enrolled, but to do this we need to keep building more classrooms, and expanding areas like the cafeteria and the playground. An infirmary is essential so that we have a space dedicated to our girls’ health and safety. Donors prefer to contribute to operational expenses, like the meals programme or school supplies, so it is always a challenge to find funds for these other areas, which are just as important,’ says Noella.

Creating opportunities for the next generation is crucial so that they can break that cycle, and grow to see their full potential. Much like having access to education has impacted positively on Noella’s life.

‘Things are always hectic, alongside Malaika and my modelling, I also have two young children, but I am so lucky to have a wonderful support system in my husband, and the entire Malaika team. I am glad that my children have both parents. My son is now the age I was when my father died, and I am happy that he has a strong role model in my husband,’ she says. Former president and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nelson Mandela said, ‘Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world,’ and so Malaika – with Noella as its founder and CEO – is helping shape the way forward. □



For more info on Malaika, visit malaika.org; facebook.com/MalaikaDRC; @MalaikaDRC

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