

NOELLA COURSARIS: NOT JUST A PRETTY FACE

WE TALK TO NOELLA COURSARIS MUSUNKA, FOUNDER OF THE GEORGES MALAIKA FOUNDATION

It's an exciting year for Noella Coursaris Musunka and her team at the Georges Malaika Foundation in Kalebuka, in the south eastern reaches of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The year 2017 marks the 10th anniversary of the non-profit that empowers Congolese girls and their communities through education, health and football. "Malaika", as it is known for short, provides education to 252 girls, clean drinking water to more than 10,000 people and partnered with FIFA to build the Kalbuka Football for Hope Centre. In the month of April the foundation also celebrates its first anniversary of being a streetfootballworld network member. Having just returned from the DRC, we caught up with Noella in London. She tells us about her own personal journey that led to the foundation of Malaika, her hopes for the future, and how the beautiful game comes into play to kick start lasting change in the DRC.

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Noella Coursaris Musunka is perhaps best known as an internationally acclaimed model. But she is certainly "not just a pretty face". As she says herself: "I'm a mother, I'm a philanthropist, and I use my beauty for a

purpose." Being there for her two young children is a particular priority, not least owing to her own background. Having lost her father at the age of five, Noella was sent to relatives first in Belgium, then Switzerland, as her mother lacked the means to keep her. At 18, she was starting out as a model in London, but the curiosity about her roots wouldn't let her go. "It's time to see my mum," she said and boarded a plane to return to the place of her birth. It was the first time in 13 years that she would see her mother - an encounter of strangers that developed into a strong relationship: "My mum is my mum, even if I'm not with her for 13 years. I look like her a lot. I sit down the same way as her. I have a lot of similarity with her."

Even before the visit, Noella knew for a long time that she wanted to help her community in some way. Her dreams ranged from becoming a surgeon to starting her own NGO. "I like modelling, but I'm a "builder", I'm an entrepreneur, I like to build, I like to create," she smiles. Travelling to the DRC and spending time in her former community, Noella saw for herself some of the consequences of the civil war that was ravaging the country. An economic and political conflict fuelled by the DRC's vast mineral resources has claimed up to six million lives and left the remaining population fighting for survival. "It's a tragedy! Congo is one of the richest countries in the world, but unfortunately one of the poorest when it comes to the population and I think it's very important that we give back," she says. Noella states that she isn't someone who simply complains and enjoys spending hours talking about what could theoretically be done. So, she asked herself: "What can I do for my country?"



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Growing up in various affluent countries in Europe, she enjoyed an extensive education, her friends and relatives, particularly girls, in the DRC did not even have access to. "You need an educated population to take control of their own country. The biggest resource in the DRC is individual, it is every single person that is able to leave their mark and write their own history, their own story," Noella says. With education as "the key", the idea of building a school slowly took shape, as did the physical buildings and a curriculum after the establishment of the Georges Malaika Foundation in 2007. It took several more years of careful preparation and negotiating local red tape before the school was up and running, finally opening its doors in 2011 to a class of 104 kindergarten and first grade girls. "Every year, we're adding one more classroom," says Noella.

In the current school year of 2016-2017, Malaika is educating 252 girls with the aim of increasing its intake to 350 girls in the near future. The school curriculum is based on the Belgian and Congolese education systems and focuses on girls, as they are the ones who lack opportunities the most but who also – as educated women – reinvest 50% more of their later earnings into society than men. This strengthens the backbone of the community to the profit of all of its members. Other projects tackle the need for clean drinking water by building wells and aiding local hospitals by providing them with the essential medical supplies they are desperately in need of. It was the school that caught the attention of the football for good world. One day, FIFA called: "They said that they had been following the progress of the school and were so amazed by its success," Noella says smiling proudly. After a site visit and assessment, Malaika was granted the 19th Football for Hope Centre (FFH) in Africa, as part of the official campaign of the World Cup in South Africa: "20 Centres for 2010" to create centres of education, public health and education across Africa.

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"WE CAN COMPLAIN ABOUT THIS AND THAT BUT I THINK IT'S IMPORTANT THAT WE FIND SOLUTIONS AND DO THINGS. I'M NOT SOMEONE WHO LIKES TO HEAR PEOPLE TALKING TALKING TALKING. I JUST LIKE TO HELP PEOPLE, TAKE ACTION AND DO THINGS."



Not just because her own son is a committed football fan and has decorated their London home in Dele Alli and Tottenham Hotspur paraphernalia, Noella is convinced of the power of the beautiful game. "Everywhere in Africa and in Congo you see a lot of people playing football. Many villages don't have money, but if they have a goal, people can play anywhere."

The Football for Hope Centre in Kalebuka does more than just provide goals – it has a fully equipped pitch and building that serves as a community centre: "The Football for Hope centre is not only about sport and football, people go there to learn, to read, write, the mothers learn how to sew in classes," Noella says, adding that the school and the centre complete each other: "We have young girls playing football. Before, they were hiding, not playing. Now it is something that is accepted, we have tournaments for girls, for mothers and it's fantastic to see all of them. We have run programmes with Coaches across Continents. We did this partnership for three years where we talked about values and HIV, family planning, child rights etc." While the school and many programmes at the Football for Hope Centre are targeted at empowering the girls and women of the community, Noella stresses: "I celebrate women and girls every day but I think it's very important to celebrate the boys and the men, too. I think we all have to be together." Supporting the male members of the community aids the empowerment of women, but is, of course, a worthy cause in itself that Noella celebrates wholeheartedly: "I met a boy, Chris – I think he's 18 or 17 – when I was there two weeks ago and he just wanted to speak with me in English because he was learning English at the Football for Hope centre and he was so confident. He said that it gave him the chance to become someone in his life."

Noella is happy with all that she and her staff at the Georges Malaika Foundation have achieved so far and tells us that she looks forward to completing the school and to expanding the programmes at the Football for Hope Centre: "I would love to do vocational training where we can teach the youth about jobs and work." Another important item on the agenda for 2017 will, of course, be the celebration of the foundation's 10th anniversary: "We have a big event in New York and we'll have one in the Congo. The celebration in Congo will be with all the students and the community centre. Every time I go there, it's a celebration. It's a highlight of my trip, just going to be with all of them!"