



# From poverty in the Congo to award-winning philanthropist: Meet Noëlla Coursaris Musunka

Words by Devinder Bains

Public speaker, model, philanthropist, founder of an NGO and mother-of-two, Noëlla Coursaris Musunka is used to wearing many hats, and she does so without giving away an inch of the chaos that may be going on behind closed doors.

Travelling almost continuously between her homes in the UK and Dubai, as well as to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for her foundation Malaika, she remains a picture of chic composure, but the journey to get where she is now hasn't been without its struggles.

Noëlla's story starts in the Democratic Republic of Congo. An only child whose father passed away when she was just five years old, her mother was unable to support her financially. Just a few months later, Noëlla was sent to live with relatives in Belgium.

"It was a tough time," she recalls of leaving her mother and also adapting to a tricky relationship with new relatives. "I was entering the unknown, I had to learn to speak a new language, adapt to a new family, the different weather, and of course adapt to being without my mother."

She is honest about growing up in an environment where she felt no love, and it was at school that she found a respite from life at home. "I learnt that education is the gateway for young girls and women to take control of their futures, so I worked hard at school. I just studied and studied and studied."



The model and public speaker moved away from Belgium to study for a Business Management degree in Switzerland. It was around this time that Noëlla started thinking about visiting her mother, whom she'd had little contact with in the 13 years since she'd left the DRC - nothing more than a few letters and the odd phone call.

"I didn't remember anything from my time being a child there, so, I wanted to see where I was born, and get to know my mom," she recalls of making that first trip back, aged 18. "It was strange meeting her because you look the same, you have the same manners, but she was kind of a stranger, so you need to build back this bond."

She was shocked by her mother's living conditions, "she was so poor, she had a hard life," and Noëlla vowed to help.

"*Seeing the country, the potential, but seeing so many kids out of school, I told my mom; 'I will come back to help you, and one day I will do something for my country'.* I think that visit was one of the most crucial times in my life."

Little did Noëlla know, that her life would soon take an unexpected turn, one that would fund her dreams of helping her country. After graduating, she moved to London, where she won a competition to model for lingerie brand Agent Provocateur. "My friends saw this competition and entered me, I didn't actually think I would win - but I did," she laughs. A contract with a modelling agency quickly followed, as did a move to New York, where jobs came in thick and fast. "I was still thinking about my visit to see my mom all the time and now, maybe I could help her and my country in some way."

In 2007, Noëlla decided to set up Malaika, a non-profit organisation that started out by providing free education to girls in the DRC. "Initially, I wanted to sponsor girls in Congo to be able to go to school, but then I wanted to build a school, but it was difficult to get donations and funding because ultimately, nobody believed in it," she remembers of the long days spent contacting potential sponsors while also working around the clock. "For the first five years, we had no real outside funding. I put in my own money, and friends of mine helped me set up, but when companies saw the work that Malaika had achieved, they did start to get involved."



That was over 17 years ago, and although the work never stops for Noëlla, who has helped raise over \$10 million for the foundation, Malaika is now a well-established NGO. Their work has attracted funding from sponsors such as Unilever, L’Oreal Fund for Women and the FIFA Foundation. Many celebrity ambassadors and donors such as the rapper Eve and actor Thandie Newton also help to raise the \$800,000 needed a year to run what is now a much bigger project.

“As well as a school for over 430 girls, we also built a community centre that provides education, health, and sports programmes to over 5,000 youth and adults each year,” explains Noëlla, who still takes no salary from her role as founder of Malaika. “We have built and refurbished 31 wells and provide clean water for over 35,000 people each year, we also have an agriculture program, the food from which helps feed students and staff two meals each a day, as many of the children were eating only two meals a week.

“There are also vocational courses available for adults, and most recently, Malaika has opened two new buildings at the community centre to support vocations including art, dance, carpentry, dwelling, plumbers and more.”



She goes on to talk about some of her proudest moments: “Watching 17 of the girls from the school take part in the foundation’s inaugural graduation ceremony in 2023 was amazing, many of the students have gone on to universities abroad on scholarships,” she smiles. Another 25 students graduated this year and will go on to study courses in everything from the arts to STEM subjects, while Noëlla is currently

supporting the students who will make up the school’s third round of graduates.

“I want to show a different side of Africa, people just see corruption or war, and yes we have these problems, but I think as an individual, you can be a driving force in the community,” says Noëlla frankly. “And we’ve now become the blueprint for the standard of schools in Congo, when they want to build a school now, they come to see us.”

And what does her mother think of the work she’s doing in Congo? “She is extremely proud, and emotional, that I not only came back to look after her, but to also do something for my country,” explains Noëlla. “But she’s also scared at times, she can see the huge responsibility it is to have Malaika on the ground, and all the challenges that come with it, but overall she’s proud of me.”

Noëlla, who is also an Ambassador for [The Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis, and Malaria](#) and on the board for a number of charitable foundations, is considered an authority on philanthropy. She's given speeches all over the world including at DAVOS, WISE Summit, Harvard University and the UN, and she's been named one of the BBC's 100 Most Influential and Inspirational Women. She's received the 'Daughters of Greatness' prize from the Muhammad Ali Foundation and also won an award from the House of Mandela at the Nelson Mandela Centenary celebration for her work on Malaika.

She has some advice for young people thinking about getting involved in charity or community work: "Choose something that you are deeply, deeply passionate about, be that something health-based, climate change, education, something local or even abroad, whatever it is, make sure it's something you really care about," she says. "Then look for an organisation or charity within that field and think about donating or volunteering."

To find out more about the work being done by Malaika visit the [website](#) or [Instagram page](#).



## Charity Check In

At Smiley Movement, we like to elevate the work of charities across the world. Here are three UK charities that Noëlla and her family donate to.

**Alzheimer's Society.** This is the UK's leading dementia support and research charity, Find out more about their work [here](#).

**The Felix Project.** They rescue good, surplus food that cannot be sold (and would otherwise go to waste) and deliver it to food banks, charities and primary schools in London. Read more about the charity [here](#).

**Shelter.** The charity provides advice, information, and legal services to people experiencing homelessness or poor housing. Shelter also campaigns for better housing laws and policies. Find out more about them [here](#).

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