RIP THEM UP AND START AGAIN?

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Asun Pantus on a new kind of hero
When her father passed away, five-year-old Noella Coursaris was sent to live with relatives in Europe. “My mother couldn’t afford to keep me so she made the difficult decision,” she says. Despite it being hard for her at the time, she had the opportunity to gain an education. “When I returned to the Congo at the age of 18, I realised what a gift this was as I saw many children out of school, especially girls. From that moment I wanted to do something to help my country and the dream of Malaika was planted in my heart,” she explains.

Coursaris returned to Europe and completed her business studies. At the same time, her modelling career took off after she won a competition to be the face of Agent Provocateur, leading to work in New York and London. “I realised, through my modelling, that I had a platform to speak about the need for girls to access education and so in 2007, I launched Malaika.”

While Coursaris is now based in the UK, Malaika’s roots are in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where its mission is to empower communities through education and health programmes. She explains: “We have a primary and secondary school that provides a holistic curriculum to more than 346 girls. We provide their uniforms, two meals a day and annual health checks. There is also a community centre that provides sport for development programmes and education for more than 5,000 youths and adults.”

In the wider community, the foundation has built and refurbished 20 wells that serve 35,000 people. It also has the use of agricultural tools that are used to teach organic farming and provide food for the school canteen. Coursaris tells me that the students and staff are currently supporting the community through the Covid-19 pandemic by making face shields with Malaika’s STEM team, using 3D printers. “We have made over 800 to give to local hospitals and nurses,” she says. “It is clear that she is also very proud of her team of Congolese staff and volunteers on the ground. “My role is to develop the programmes we have, support our incredible leaders, raise awareness, fundraise and advocate for the importance of education. Malaika is an ecosystem that can be duplicated in any context, globally,” she enthuses.

Despite being an inspiration herself for many women, Coursaris finds that the girls in the Congo and their dreams for the future motivate her in turn: “Ester, who is 11 years old, wants to be a businesswoman so she can provide for her family and her country. Audience has been inspired by her own education to give the same opportunities to others and so wants to become a teacher.”

Coursaris travels all over the world for modelling campaigns, speaking at events, working at Malaika and holding media interviews. She makes the time to look after her two children and still manages to fit in some exercise and time for herself. When I ask her about the skills she needs to do her job, it’s not surprising when she answers: “I need to be able to manage my time effectively and juggle various tasks. I also need people management, speaking and communication, and problem solving skills.”

I ask her what the future holds for her project and her reply is ambitious, but certainly not unrealistic: “I want to see our programmes strengthened and developed further. I would also love to see the Malaika model produced in other contexts around the world.”
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