

MOJEH

*dare to
dream
again*

MAKING ANGELS

Model and humanitarian Noëlla Coursaris Musunka tells MOJEH how her dream to build a school for an impoverished village in Democratic Republic of Congo became a reality

Words by Rebecca Anne Proctor



Noëlla brought the first well to Kalebuka – there are now more than 20 providing fresh water to the village

The roads are filled with dirt and dust. Passers-by walk swiftly and with purpose as they shop amidst densely-compressed outdoor markets and shops. Men and women on motorcycles speed away in packs to their homes, bars, restaurants or recreational centres for a football match, surrounded by the lush landscape of Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This is the industrial mining city of Lubumbashi, which lies on the southeastern edge of the landlocked DRC. I've just been picked up from the city's airport, and we're on our way to the small village of Kalebuka where Malaika, an accredited all-girls school with a community centre, FIFA-built football field and a network of clean water wells, is situated. The journey ahead of us is long, and as we drive through the congested streets, I watch in awe at the scenes unfolding around me. Verdant, green-capped hills and mines frame Lubumbashi's city centre with its remnants of Belgium's colonial architecture. The road gets rougher and bumpier just as the tightly-packed one-level shops get closer and closer together, many perched on the very edge of the basic dirt roads. Chaos reigns as cars honk, people hustle to buy and trade their goods and women cook fresh corn on every corner. Then there's the churches and places of worship that seemingly occupy every street and alleyway. There's always a cross to be seen somewhere, signifying a moment of peace and faith, but also a reminder of Congo's brutal period of colonial rule.

The road gets narrower by the minute, and soon, the hustle and bustle and hoards of people are no more. Comforting palm trees surround our car, and miles of greenery stretch out before us. We've just about reached Malaika – which means "angle" in Swahili – the school for girls of Kalebuka, founded by Congolese-Cypriot model and humanitarian



Photography: courtesy of Malaika.org; portrait by Greg Adamski



Pictured with some of her students, Malaika's founder Noëlla is an Ambassador for The Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka. Since meeting on one of her many professional trips to the UAE, for months, Noëlla had urged me to come and visit the school and provide pupils with art and writing classes. Over the years, I'd grown to develop a great love for Africa, particularly after visiting so many of its nations and reporting on its wealth of artists, museums, galleries and rising cultural institutions. I truly believe that creativity is crucial to human spiritual and intellectual development – in itself, it is a human need. But without enough water and food, how can this creativity thrive? These are questions that have long haunted me in my work, and here I was in one of the poorest countries in the world, albeit one of the richest in natural resources and burgeoning talent.

Finally jumping out of my ride from the airport, I was taken to a long stretch of land with swings, football nets and a playground – and there, I saw them. All the pupils from Malaika, wearing their identical navy blue uniforms, had come to greet me. A young, smiling girl ran towards me with a drawing she had made to welcome me, while her fellow students started singing Hatuna Matata, dancing and chanting with such fervour it brought tears to my eyes. There's a mural of an angel with outstretched arms on one of the outside walls of the playground. It symbolises Noëlla's long-held dream to create a school for girls in DRC

where they could have opportunities that didn't exist when she was growing up in Lubumbashi. It was her own difficult childhood that led her to found the nonprofit Malaika that is providing free schooling to girls in the area. While today she lives in London with her husband and two children, like thousands of children in DRC, Noëlla grew up in poverty. When she was five-years-old her father died and, realising she could not afford to care for her anymore, her mother sent her to Europe to live with her aunt and uncle.

"I didn't see my mother for 13 years," Noëlla tells me. "When I returned to Lubumbashi, I saw the underprivileged conditions she was living in, and I wanted to do something to give back to the women and girls of DRC." Officially opened in 2007, Malaika originally started with just three classrooms and one well. "There was no water in the village, so we decided we were going to provide it for them. Now we have more than 20 wells," she explains. "We also just finished three classrooms at the community centre where we aim to teach more of the youth, parents and adults to come to read, write and study maths."

When Noëlla began the school in 2007, Kalebuka had no electricity, running water or education for its people. Many of the girls attending Malaika are the first in their families to ever go to school. The staff is 100 per cent Congolese, and classes are taught primarily in French.

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Noëlla Coursaris Musunka

The school now has 346 girls enrolled for free, an accredited primary and secondary school, a community centre and over 5,000 children, teens and adults that are receiving training in literacy, entrepreneurship, farming and community-building sports initiatives. Today, Malaika has built 20 wells, including the refurbishment of four existing ones – a system that now provides access to clean water for over 30,000 people every year.

I teach an art class to girls aged between four and six years old on my second day. I tell them to draw their home, and immediately, they pull out the brightly-coloured markers and crayons that I bought for them. They draw food, their mother and father, sisters and brothers. Sometimes the people they draw are smiling, other times there are frowns. The drawings bring out their reality at home, what they have and what they lack. Their laughter and innocent smiles bring immediate joy to the space. No matter what conditions they come from, Malaika has provided a new world for them where education and creativity foster hopes and dreams.

"I want to be a journalist! I want to be a doctor! I want to be a business woman! I want to travel the world! I want to serve my community!" said girls aged 14-16 after a writing class in which I asked them to reveal their hopes and dreams for the future. There were so many with so much determination to be female leaders for their families and communities.

It's now been just over three months since my trip to Lubumbashi, and in that short time, the world has changed dramatically. Covid-19 has halted the global economy, forced people to practice social distancing and stay inside. It has also resulted in massive anxiety and fear for millions. What will happen to the children at Malaika? It's certainly difficult to stay inside and not socialise, but these children and their families don't even have that luxury. Malaika is now closed, like all schools in DRC, and places for public congregation are following direct orders from the government under threat of Covid-19. "It's going to be even tougher now, because people in Africa live day to day," says Noëlla. "Most of them live together in one room, so how will they implement social distancing? I have no idea." Most of the houses the children live in don't even have water or soap. At school, Malaika's girls were taught about



The school has 346 pupils, and provides vital education and sports initiatives for 5,000 more children and adults

personal hygiene. "Food prices are also high for these people," she added. "It's a very challenging time for Africa and other nations that don't have access to basic necessities as we do in Europe and the US."

How will these girls and their families protect themselves against Covid-19? Malaika is raising awareness in the Kalebuka community and intends to send food packages to around 60 families a week. "We do need to raise funds and are in the midst of running a campaign for it," added Noëlla. "We also want to be loyal to our staff, so we are continuing to pay their salary."

Covid-19 will eventually pass in DRC as it will around the world, but everything will change. However, the challenge that DRC faces remains the same. The country's history has long been marked by disease, misery, violence and political tension – Covid-19 is just another problem to add to an already overflowing pot.

Spending a few days at Malaika is life-changing. Noëlla has made angels here on earth. "We want to create a student fund so that the girls can continue studying and doing what they want to do after Malaika," she added. "But right now, it will be a very, very tough time for everybody."

Signs of hope often come serendipitously and in small packages. Malaika is one of those. There's a potential here for many schools like Malaika throughout DRC and Africa – schools that give way to hope, to dreams and to new realities.