Social Justice

Educating and Empowering Girls with Noella Coursaris Musunka

This International Women's Day, we spoke to someone who has dedicated her life to providing the girls in her home country with access to education. Noella Coursaris Musunka shares her experience starting a school for girls in the DRC.

A model, philanthropist, and founder of the Malaika school for girls, Noella Coursaris Musunka was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo to Congolese and Cypriot parents. After being sent to school with family in Europe, on her return she immediately saw the immediate value that educating girls could bring to the society of her home country.

Today, Noella is the mother of two children, an ambassador for The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis, and the founder of Malaika. Far from simply a school, Malaika is a non-profit based in Kalebuka in the Democratic Republic of Congo which includes a school for girls and a community centre for youth and adults in the community, providing education and health programmes. Alongside providing clean water to families and even teaching parents new entrepreneurial skills, the project has set a global precedent for how educating girls hold the potential to transform communities around the globe. We caught up with Noella about how the initiative came about, and her advice for other women and girls wanting to fulfil their potential to change the world.
Can you start by telling us a bit about the Malaika school?

It is run by an incredible team of staff on the ground but I donate a large chunk of my working week to leading it and ensuring it keeps growing and impacting more people in Kalebuka and beyond. and am immensely proud of my African heritage, which is reflected in my style. My trips out to the Congo and Africa are always the highlights of my year!

How has your upbringing influenced where you are today?

My upbringing was difficult, and my opportunities were significantly limited in the DRC. My father passed away when I was five and my mother didn’t have the financial means to support me and provide an education. She made the difficult decision to send me away to live with family in Europe and I didn’t see my mother until I returned to the DRC when I was 18. When I saw the difference between the lifestyle I used to have and the opportunities that were available in Europe compared with that of the DRC, specifically the difficult conditions my mother was living in, I was shocked and determined to try and do something about it. I think if I hadn’t had that experience growing up, I may never have realised that girls have different opportunities across the world and many are not accessing the education they deserve.
When did your passion for human rights begin to shape your career?

Very early on. I have always cared about different causes as a child and my mother inspired me as she is someone who is always thinking about others. Since returning to the DRC aged 18, I was living with this desire to do something about the lack of quality education provision, especially for girls, and the vulnerable living conditions of the whole community. When in Europe, I studied Business Management and then my friends encouraged me to enter a modelling competition for Agent Provocateur, which I entered and then won. I did their campaign and this led to other campaigns in New York and London and my modelling career took off from there. It wasn’t long before I realised the great opportunity my newfound platform gave me to be a positive influence in the DRC.
What led you to realise that working with and educating girls can make such a huge impact to our society?

I have experienced the power of education in my own life but since starting Malaika, I have seen the impact of education on our students. Educated girls are less likely to marry young and are more likely to be healthy and withstand sudden crises. We can see this in our students from when they arrive at five years old. They are changing and growing with each school year. They start to think differently and become physically healthier and stronger. They have hope, self-belief, and a desire to achieve and contribute positively to their society.

Nyekoso is twelve and arrived at Malaika when she was five. She is determined to help others because of what Malaika did for her and has aspirations to be a Computer Programmer. Anna also came to Malaika at age five. She dreams of becoming a pilot and recently at school she was introduced to a female pilot who had come from almost the same situation as her. She said that the pilot's story was a great encouragement to her and she started to believe that her dream was possible. We don’t just need to feed people, we need to educate them so they can earn a living and support themselves. Empowering people who have great potential is the key to bringing change to our society.

Why did you decide to start Malaika?

I believe that girls and women being educated has a significant positive impact on societies across the world. Not only is it their right to have quality education, it is essential that they do if we want countries to develop economically, socially, and culturally. I started Malaika as I was compelled by this belief and wanted to help change the prospects of the girls and women in my home country. Not only in relation to their education but in terms of the poor infrastructure of the village of Kalebuka. It is a rural village and there was no access to clean water, no electricity and no proper roads. I believed that I could do something to empower the people there if I worked hard and committed myself to the vision. I felt strongly that education was key to providing the community with the resources they needed to change their own future and be influencers in their nation. I see great potential in the people of Kalebuka, the DRC, and Africa as a whole.
Educating girls has been ranked as the sixth most effective method to lower the concentration of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere. Why do you think this is?

Part of a good education will include environmental studies and a growing awareness of the global environmental issues facing us today. At Malaika, we have made sustainability a priority and our students plants trees on the National Day of the Tree. We also clean the whole village once a month with all the students and members of the community. Educated girls are more likely to contribute to positive change in this area but will also be educated with regards to family planning, healthcare, and will be more economically prosperous.
What have been some of the main highlights from your journey with Malaika?

The day we opened the school was a big highlight. Seeing the first students come through the door on that first day was an incredibly proud moment for me and the rest of the team. Another highlight was opening our first well. Malaika has built and refurbished a total of 20 wells, providing clean water to over 35,000 people. This provision makes such a difference as it reduces the spread of water-borne illnesses and reduces one of the obstacles to the girls attending school as they no longer have to travel long distances to get clean water for their families.

What have been some of the main difficulties that you have had to overcome along the way?

Fundraising has been a consistent challenge. We have also faced challenges as we have worked to be a voice pushing all entities to invest in rural villages and to be a voice for young girls who are not accessing education, wherever they live. Locally, we have sought to address the belief amongst the people in Kalebuka that a girl belongs in the home doing domestic duties and only boys need to be provided with an education. Our team in the DRC have worked tirelessly over the years to encourage families to send their girls to our school and our community centre currently teaches the youth and adults about equality and social inclusion. The lack of infrastructure in the area has presented a myriad of challenges along the way but each time we have seen it as an opportunity to develop and change the area for the better.
Who are three women who inspire you every day?

My mother inspires me every day. She sacrificed so much to give me the opportunities I had. She is very strong and still looks to make a positive contribution to the people around her. I am inspired by the women of Kalebuka who work so hard for their families and continue to overcome many challenges just to provide for their loved ones. I am also inspired by Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize, who founded a movement that was focused on both environmental conservation and women's rights. She faced incredible challenges in her life but kept working to bring positive change.

What is the one thing you would say to young women and girls looking to make a difference in the world?

We need you so don’t discount yourself. The world needs you and your unique perspective, knowledge, talents, skills, and cultural background. It’s not always comfortable to be fighting for change but if you don’t do it, who will? Be brave and go for it!