

Congo's angel

NOËLLA COURSARIS MUSUNKA GIVES SPEECHES AT DAVOS AND MODELS ON CATWALKS, BUT HER MAIN JOB IS EDUCATING GIRLS THROUGH HER MALAIKA FOUNDATION IN THE DRC. BY FRANCISCA KELLETT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACK JOHNSTONE

NOËLLA COURSARIS MUSUNKA'S life reads like a fairytale. Born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), her father died suddenly when she was five and her mother, left destitute, was forced to give her up. She was sent on her own to Belgium, then Switzerland, and spent a deeply unhappy childhood living with cruel, indifferent relatives. However, Musunka worked hard, excelled at school and moved to London to study business management, where she fell into modelling via an Agent Provocateur competition. Hey presto: a jet-setting life of catwalks and shoots, her long limbs and enormous eyes making the cut on the pages of *Vogue*, *Elle* and *Vanity Fair*. So far, so Cinderella.

Yet Musunka's story doesn't end there. In 2007 she launched Malaika ("Angel" in Swahili), a foundation to empower and educate girls in Africa. It was an idea that came to her after she returned home when she was 18. She had not seen her mother in 13 years, their contact limited to three or four stilted phone calls. When she finally returned to the DRC, she was horrified by what she found. "I wasn't prepared," she tells me in her soft French accent. "The conditions she was living in..."

Education, she realised, was the thing. Education had been her golden ticket out of her miserable early years with uncaring relatives, where, she says, she was treated more like a maid than a child. "It was a very tough childhood." Being in Europe, though, carried the advantage of a free education, something that wasn't available in the DRC. A proper education would have given her mother, for example, a very different life – one where she wouldn't have been forced to give up her child. "For many years I was upset with her," Musunka says. "I didn't understand. But even as I was upset with her, I wanted to make her proud. I wanted to give her a better life."

Malaika, she explains, is "the story of Africa. When a family can afford to, they send boys to school. Girls get married young, they get pregnant young. It is linked to my story, because if my mum had been educated she could have kept me." Musunka's first project was to sponsor girls in an orphanage, some of whom had suffered sexual abuse or been abandoned, paying for their school fees and uniforms. However, that wasn't enough. "I wanted to make a school that would be amazing, that I'd send my own children to," she says.

Musunka travelled around the DRC and came across Kalebuka, "a forgotten rural village" in the southeast that, she says, was "extremely poor". It had no water or electricity, let alone a school. She met with the chief and community leaders to find out what they needed most and they confirmed what she had thought: at the top of the list were infrastructure and a school. Musunka lobbied the government to build a road to the village, providing vital access, and raised money to build a well. Next came classrooms; today there is a fully fledged school, offering the chance of a life-changing education for 370 girls, aged five to 18, who otherwise would have had few opportunities outside marriage and motherhood. "They all have dreams. They want to be doctors, journalists..."

Malaika has built another 18 wells, serving 35,000 people, a sports centre with Fifa, and a community centre that teaches literacy, computer

10,000
ADULTS EDUCATED
in a community centre
built by Malaika

18
WELLS BUILT
servicing
35,000 people

5,000
PEOPLE REACHED BY
Malaika's emergency
food programme

70%
DROP IN DONATIONS
since the outbreak
of the Covid-19 pandemic

skills and sewing to almost 10,000 adults in the area. There is even an organic farm that serves the school and village. "Malaika is a community-driven ecosystem," Musunka says. It sounds busy. "I work six hours a day on Malaika," she says with a shrug.

Musunka lives in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, with her husband and two children, eight and five. When she is not working on Malaika or modelling for brands such as Crème de la Mer, Black Opal and Max Factor, she is giving speeches at Davos, Unicef, MIT, TED, the University of Oxford and the European parliament. "My personality is very strong, very focused," she says, which sounds about right. She is also an ambassador for the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Malaria and Tuberculosis, and squeezes in time to create fundraising partnerships with fashion brands. Last year Musunka worked with the designer Roksanda Ilincic on a collection for The Outnet, with a percentage of sales going to Malaika, and she is collaborating with Georgia Hardinge to create 200 dresses, with proceeds also funding the charity.

Musunka is bright, obviously, but is also really good at getting stuff done. She is working on a blueprint for how to run community-driven projects (all of Malaika's staff are local and all decisions are made with the community), which she plans to share with universities, the World Bank, corporations, or anyone that needs it. The fundraising team is based in the US and it relies on corporate support and donations from family foundations and individuals to raise the \$400,000 a year needed to run Malaika.

Musunka does not take a wage.

However, this year has been tough.

The school was forced to close because of Covid-19 and donations fell by 70 per cent. Although Covid itself hasn't hugely affected the area, malnutrition has. Malaika usually provides pupils and staff with two meals a day, often the only food they will have, and losing that has had a devastating effect on the community. "We lost three girls in the last four months," Musunka says quietly. She is close to tears when she tells me that a combination of malnutrition and disease killed them. The foundation responded to the school's closure with an emergency food programme, reaching about 5,000 people, but, she says, it is vital that the school reopens – hopefully by the time this interview has gone to press. "I don't want to keep burying girls," she says. In the meantime Musunka is keeping busy, planning two more classrooms and a new health clinic, which now seem more crucial than ever, as well as organising webinars for the students with her celebrity friends, including Thandie Newton, June Sarpong and Eve, the rapper.

She returns to the village every summer, taking her children to spend six weeks in the DRC. That, for her, is the real fairytale ending. "When I see the girls, when I talk to their families, that's a feeling money can't buy. That's what keeps me going." malaika.org

STYLIST: SIMONE KONU. HAIR: TOMIROPPONGI. MAKE-UP: MACHIKO YANO. SHOT FOR ALSO JOURNAL

