Meet Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: an International Model & Philanthropist advocating for girls’ education

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Congolese-Cypriot International Model, Noëlla Coursaris Musunka credits her first trip back home, at 18 after 13 years living in Europe, as the catalyst for her philanthropic endeavours. Beyond the catwalk, Noëlla is also the Founder & CEO of Malaika, a grassroots nonprofit that works to educate and empower girls and communities in her home country of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A unique, fearless, and elegant spokesperson, and the face of leading beauty and fashion campaigns across the globe, she is a voice for the power of girls’ education worldwide. Founded in 2007, Malaika’s education and health programs are today impacting thousands of lives and are all offered free of charge. Noëlla has shared her insight at a number of world-class forums spanning the Clinton Global Initiative and the World Economic Forum in Davos to the university halls of Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard, and MIT. In 2017, Noëlla was named one of the BBC’s 100 Most Influential & Inspirational Women of the Year, and in 2018, she received an award at the 100 Years of Mandela celebration.

My first job ever was… Supporting younger students with their homework. I had a few little jobs as I was doing my Business Management degree and they all taught me to value every person at every level.

The biggest lesson that I have learned from my career professional model has been… That every job is an opportunity to give back and raise the profile of important issues in society. I have always built in some sort of fundraising or support for Malaika in my work with brands.

One of the highlights of my modelling career has been… Working with some incredible brands that have excellent values and want to help make the world a better place through the way they produce their products and distribute them. Also working with some great people from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences.
I decided to become a philanthropist because… I saw a need and wanted to help. I felt it was important to raise awareness of the need for girls to have an education because it is their right and will benefit their community and society as a whole but I didn’t just want to speak about it. I wanted to act and make it happen in the DRC.

I got the idea to set up Malaika from… My first trip back to the Congo at the age of 18 having grown up in Europe. My father died when I was five and my mother sent me to live with family in Europe so I could obtain an education. When I returned I was shocked to see the poor living conditions my mother was living in and the number of girls not attending school. It was socially acceptable for boys to be given more opportunity when it comes to education. At that moment I thought something needed to be done and the idea grew as I spent the next few years studying and working.

My proudest accomplishment is… My children, JJ and Care, first and foremost. They remain my priority and I am already proud of who they are becoming. I am very proud of Malaika and so opening the school was a significant accomplishment in my life. Seeing the girls grow and develop year-on-year always makes me extremely grateful that I’ve been able to start something that then a team of international volunteers and staff, along with our generous and supportive donors, have grown and developed to be what it is today. Opening our first well and our 20th well was also a special moment due to the impact we knew it would have on the community by protecting them from waterborne illness and disease.

My boldest move to date was… The first time I went to New York for a modelling campaign.

I surprise people when I tell them… I don’t take a salary to run Malaika.

My biggest hope for the girls in my school is… That they are healthy and happy.

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My best advice from a mentor was… To stay focused on my mission and not get sidetracked by all the needs that present themselves but continue to strengthen what we have already.

My biggest setback was… Not having my parents around when I was growing up. My father died when I was five and my mother sent me to live with family in Europe as she knew it would open up more opportunities for me to gain an education. It was painful and challenging but it helped me to become self-sufficient and very driven.

I overcame it by… Choosing to make the best of the opportunities I had been given and not focusing on the loss.

One piece of advice that I often give but find it difficult to follow is… To sometimes say no.

The best thing about what I do is… Going to the Congo each year and seeing the difference that Malaika is making by empowering an entire community via our school, community centre.

The most challenging thing about what I do is… Balancing it all. Being a mother, leading a non-profit organization, being the ambassador for the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, doing various speaking engagements and events to raise awareness of girls’ education, as well as my modelling career. It all takes time and involves travel and time away from the family.

While social distancing, I’m spending my time… Homeschooling my children and enjoying the time with them. I spend so much time travelling and working away from home in normal circumstances that I relish the opportunity to spend time with them. Of course, I am still working to try and support the community in Kalebuka where we have had to close our school and our programs at the community centre. This is a huge challenge for our students and their families as the price of food has gone up in the area and they were receiving two meals a day from the school and from our agriculture where we grow food for the school canteen. We have launched an emergency fund to feed 60 families per week and are doing awareness-raising about hygiene through our 20 wells.

If you googled me, you still wouldn’t know… I am a very sensitive person and I was a tomboy when I was little.

The future excites me because… So much is happening to help elevate Africa and education for girls. We are also producing a
template to support others to duplicate Malaika as a community-based model that will suit any context. We will also see our first graduate students in the next few years and I can't wait to see how their lives unfold and also how the community develops and further reaches its potential. At our community centre, we also provide education to adults and youth. We teach literacy and math and also entrepreneurship and sewing. We already have a brand called Mama Ya Mapendo, which includes accessories and bags made by women who have been educated at our centre. Presently they are sewing masks that we are giving to people in the community to help protect them from getting COVID-19. I'm excited to see how other businesses will develop over the coming years and how they will give back to the community, as Mama Ya Mapendo is doing now in this current crisis.