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## NOELLA COURSARIS MUSUNKA

Interview with Phadria Prendergast

*Philanthropist. Model. Leader. Mother. She's the ultimate package, channelling her influence into being a voice and the way out for hundreds of thousands of youth and adults in Kalebuka, DRC.*

Noella and I had originally spoken pre COVID-19 where we discussed women in power, how she balances being a mother and a leader and her amazing foundation Malaika. Amid Coronavirus and following the new lockdown procedures, I managed to get the striking philanthropist and super mum on a call right after she had finished doing homework with her son and daughter and rather annoyingly, just as the cleaners had arrived to do the weekly clean of my apartment.



Greg Adamski





Greg Adamski

"There were a lot of people in the beginning who didn't believe it would be possible to work in such a challenging country" Noella explains, as she describes what it was like when she first decided to build Malaika school. The school opened in September 2011 within the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and provides primary and secondary education to female children and youth, whilst the non-profit foundation itself was founded in 2007. When Noella first began to build the school, there was no water within the village of Kalebuka therefore, wells needed to be built in order to make the bricks. As the wells were being built, hundreds of people within the village were arriving daily to collect water from them. "I was thinking, oh my God, I just want to do a school, but it's not possible because these people don't even have water". Noella then decided that she would begin to build 2-3 wells per year. 12 years later, the village of Kalebuka has 20 wells in total. Each well is located all around the village so that it can be accessed by those that live there and not just by the students who attend Malaika school. "Even just the lack of infrastructure when working in a rural village like Kalebuka posed many challenges". Alongside there being no water, there was also no electricity and no decent roads. "We have built and refurbished a total of 20 wells in the area that serve an entire community and I think that represents our approach; we face challenges head on and try to find a solution so that nothing stands in the way of people receiving the education, health and sports programs we are offering. I am a very focused person and I worked hard to get key people to support us and make it happen. There were moments where it was hard, but I kept picking myself up and deep down I felt confident I could do what needed to be done".

Once Malaika school officially opened, Noella put a nutrition program in place to provide students with free breakfast and lunch. She also enforced health programs where the young girls were regularly checked. Just 3 years into the operation of the Malika foundation, Noella was offered the opportunity for a community centre to be built as part of FIFA's '20 Centres for 2010'. The Kalebuka Football for Hope Center currently has 5000 people from the community who visit per year for free, where youth as well as adults are taught literacy, IT, sewing, mathematics and agriculture. In sewing classes, attendees are taught how to make bags which are then sold. "Many people call wanting to duplicate the model. The success of Malaika is because it's all community driven. The program belongs to the community. It's not about creating programs, it's about strengthening the programs that we have on ground". Noella and her team look to focus on further training the teachers and continuously working towards improving the curriculum that is offered at the school. "I didn't want to just build a school because it's Africa. I wanted to build a school, you know, where I can send my own kids. That's what makes Malaika different".



Malaika

become a banker". When Noella invites leaders to speak at the school, she always asks them to speak about their career and any challenges they have faced.



Malaika

The girls at Malaika begin learning to use the computer and have IT classes from the age of 6 years old. Noella classes Malaika as a leadership school and this is how every young girl who attends the school is viewed – as a leader. The school also has a tennis court which some of the young girls have been selected to play for the national team in Congo – a dream come true for many of the girls. Malaika has a number of great role models that visit the school from all over the world which include presidents. "They have more role models in this school (Malaika) than the school my kids go to here" states Noella. When leaders of the world visit Congo, they also visit Malaika. "The girls have dreams. They often say, 'I want to become the president, I want to become an ambassador, I want to



Malaika

It comes as no shock that Coronavirus has had a major impact in the village of Kalebuka where Malaika school and the Football for Hope Center are located. "When I look now, a lot of countries in Africa have shut down, it's even more terrible than here (the UK)". Noella explains how many of the residents relied on the ability to travel into town and sell vegetables or wood to make money however, with lockdown procedures now in place, this is not possible meaning they no longer have any income. Many businesses have also been forced to increase their pricing, which then puts countries at even more of a disadvantage as residents in those cities or villages are not able to afford the price increase. "They don't have soap, they don't have television, they don't have electricity. So, it's a big challenge for Africa. Some people will not only die of this virus, they will die from the lack of basic things".



Malaika

Kalebuka is a village that has been drastically developed as a result of the work and changes Noella and her team have pushed the government to enforce over the last 12 years. "They don't have smartphones. Only 1 or 2 people do in the village, if that and maybe those 1 or 2 people are our staff" she declares. It wasn't until Noella and her members of staff explained to the students at the school that they had to close for a month that they were aware of the virus.

Some of the young girls in attendance at the school often only eat twice a week at their own homes because food simply cannot be afforded. Noella expressed her grief towards having to close the school for a month, knowing that many of her students relied on the meals they received at the school to be able to get through the week. "When we had holidays, they (the students) were coming



back so skinny" she explains. "We decided to do a camp. Every holiday, there is a camp. This way, they can have at least one meal a day". Sadly, as the country is currently on lockdown, the students are not able to enter the school grounds. Noella and her team have already begun planning ahead and will collect and gather as much food as possible and distribute the food across the families of each student.

"When I called the girls, oh my God, they were crying, and I was crying too. I'm used to receiving WhatsApp pictures on everything happening at the school daily. It's my first baby. It was a tough time. I know that all of them live at home with no water, without anything. How can you say social distancing? There are 5-6 people in a small house, it's the only thing they know".

Noella boldly states that the tough time many of us think we are having or believe that we will have during this time, will be nothing compared to those living in underdeveloped countries. "They will go through hell" she states. Due to the new announcements made on Monday 23rd March, regarding the lockdown procedures, staff members cannot be present at the school. Noella usually ensures that at least one member of staff remains at the school in case any of the students need assistance. Noella is hoping that within the coming week, the lockdown rules will change so that Malaika can begin to invite the young girls back in groups of 10 or so to eat.

"I'm good, I'm positive. I work a lot, constantly travelling non-stop, always speaking and engaging. I'm always in front of and around people – so for me it's a blessing to be home. I don't have to get dressed, it's a dream for me" she chuckles. Noella thinks this time in isolation will be paramount in resetting our minds and ourselves. "The industry of fashion has changed, who now cares to buy Chanel or Burberry? The most important thing now is to have the freedom to get out of your house".



Malaika



Malaika

Noella's son JJ and daughter Cara, often accompany her on her visits to Congo. "My kids and I will go 6-7 weeks a year. My kids come every day with me to the village. My son has best friends in the village who he enjoys playing with. It's great because at that age, they don't look at social background, they just want to have fun". Noella goes to Congo 2 more additional months a year by herself. On her visits, alongside ensuring that everything is in order, Noella enjoys meeting the parents of the students. She also spends a lot of her time meeting with the local donors and the chief of development. Malaika is Noella's way of giving back to her country.

Noella explains that whilst she knows that she could easily attract more donors and finances, she doesn't agree with and stays away from displaying images of sadness. With Africa usually being portrayed as a miserable and corrupted continent, Noella only wants to publicise images that she is proud of. She doesn't want to sell or portray Malaika in a way that raises money – she wants money raised for the right purpose and under the right vision. "It's about positivity. It's about the new generation that wants to change the country".

"There are lots of opportunities for women to network and support each other, whether that's in person or via online forums. I think it's important for women to see themselves as the mentors and teachers of the next generation" Noella states when asked how she thinks that more women can come together to make a difference to the next generation of female leaders. "We need to release and empower women in our organisations to lead and make sure we give them the support they need to learn and grow. We also need to look outside of our immediate contexts and see what we can do for women who are still marginalised in their societies. I am so proud that this year we have been able to launch our brand, Mama Ya Mapendo. Mothers in the community have come to our community centre, where they learn to read and write and then learn sewing and entrepreneurship. The bags and accessories they have made are now for sale in our school and community centre and also the Hyper Psaro supermarket in Kalebuka".

"Malaika is a community-driven non-profit with a school for 346 girls, a community centre that provides sport and education programs for youth and adults in the community, as well as agriculture and 20 wells that provide clean water to over 30,000 people. It is a model that can be duplicated in any context and this is what I'd love to see happen in the next 10 years". During the next decade, the school will see its first students graduate.



Malaika

"There are so many aspects of life we can't control but we can control how we respond. I choose to stay positive and learn from everything that doesn't go well". Noella wants to celebrate her successes and not allow the challenges to be the only thing that she thinks or talks about.

Alongside Malaika, Noella and her team also sponsor a group of girls that live in an orphanage called Maison Magone. These are young girls that were abandoned and sexually abused. Noella began supporting them by paying for their uniform and still continues to support this orphanage by paying for their living expenses and school fees. "When we have children and youth who live in underprivileged areas that come to the community centre and are keen to learn and have a passion to study, we sponsor them to attend a local school. We have 22 children whose education we are sponsoring through our New Beginnings project".

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## HELP CHANGE HER WORLD

AT MALAIKA, WE EMPOWER 346 GIRLS BY GIVING THEM FREE ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY EDUCATION, HEALTHCARE AND TWO HEALTHY MEALS PER DAY.

These girls will marry later, have healthier children, and will reinvest their success back in their community.

Beyond our school, Malaika runs a thriving community center and a clean water program to support healthy living in the surrounding Kalebuka village. In partnership with FIFA, our community center – the Kalebuka Football for Hope Center – offers education, health, IT training, agriculture and sport programs to 7,000 local youth and adults. Our water program has successfully built and refurbished 20 wells to supply clean, accessible water to over 30,000 community members each year.

Malaika's comprehensive model is strengthened through partnerships and can be adopted in other villages, empowering not only students – but entire communities.



Malaika is a 501(c)(3) and 100% of your donation is tax deductible.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MALAIKA, READ STORIES FROM OUR WORK AT [MALAIKA.ORG](#).