

Noella Coursaris Musunka on the power of mentorship in Africa

By  Sindy Peters

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International model, philanthropist and advocate for women and children empowerment Noella Coursaris Musunka was recently in South Africa to accept an award in recognition of her humanitarian work in Africa.



She received the award during the inaugural Forever Young Ball and Gala Dinner hosted by Enhle Mbali's Enhle Cares Foundation, House of Mandela, Africa Rising Foundation and their supporting partners, Global Citizen and The Nozala Trust, in celebration of Nelson Mandela's centenary.

“ Thanks so much to the Mandela family for this award in recognition of our work [@malaikadrc](#) at the [#houseofmandela](#) celebration of Nelson Mandela's 100 year centenary. [#nelsonmandela](#) [#africa](#) [#philanthropy](#) [#malaika](#) [#DRC](#) pic.twitter.com/MKN0aY88cy— Noëlla Coursaris (@Noellacc) [December 1, 2018](#) ”

Born in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Musunka was sent to Europe at the age of five, following her father's passing, and went on to graduate with a degree in Business Management before pursuing her career in modelling with much success. At 18, she returned to the DRC where she reunited with her mother, while at the same time witnessing the extreme poverty and minimal educational facilities available to young girls and women in her community. Acutely aware of how education shaped the opportunities and successes in her young life, Musunka was determined to make a difference.

Malaika

In 2007, she founded [Malaika](#) (Swahili for 'angel'), a non-profit organisation that seeks to empower Congolese girls, young women and their communities through education and other local projects. Malaika operates in the village of Kalebuka, in the Southeastern region of the DRC. Since then, the organisation has grown from a one-room schoolhouse to accommodating 314 students of all ages at the Malaika School campus. It also operates a community learning centre, recreational facilities, 17 water wells and farm land.



Some of Musunka's accolades include being named among the BBC's 100 Influential and Inspirational Women (2017), *ELLE* magazine's The Incredibles: 50 Women Shaping Africa (2016), and *New African* magazine's 100 Most Influential Africans (2017, 2014), among many others.

As part of our [#RecruitmentFocus](#), Bizcommunity interviewed Musunka to find out more about the link between education and empowerment, how she's embraced her role as a mentor to young girls and women from Africa in particular, and how important mentorship is in Africa for cultivating women in leadership.

■ ***Growing up in Europe, how did you maintain your connection to Africa, and what inspired your eventual founding of the nonprofit Malaika in the DRC?***

Musunka: I left the DRC when I was five, shortly after my father died and when my mother could no longer care for me on her own. I spent thirteen years in Europe before I returned to my native country, and when I finally returned I was overwhelmed by both the conditions of the Congo and the large number of girls who weren't receiving an education. Once I reconnected with the Congo, I made sure to not only maintain it, but to make an impact. The young girls who were kept at home and refused a quality education could have easily been me had I stayed, and so I felt a strong desire to provide them with opportunities similar to those presented to me abroad.

I firmly believe that education can change the course of one's life in all aspects, from health to vocation. An educated young woman is less likely to become a mother sooner than she planned, less likely to contract HIV and less likely to depend on others for her livelihood — which can often translate to abusive situations. On a grander scale, an educated young woman contributes to the work force and has a stronger voice in domestic affairs, healthcare and all other areas of national wellbeing. And I founded Malaika on this premise. Malaika is dedicated to teaching girls to question and engage, and provides a constructive space for them to evolve into progressive thinkers and leaders who can positively affect their villages, their country, and have a far-reaching impact on a global scale.



■ As a globally recognised philanthropist in humanitarian work, you serve as a role model for many young women across the world, but particularly in Africa. How have you embraced this role?

I aim to inspire by example and through action. Through steadfast commitment and respect for others I hope that young girls and women who look to me for motivation see how they can grow ideas to make an impact and become global citizens who work to uplift others through action. It's also been immensely important for me to have my own great role models, too. I encounter people from all walks of life on a daily basis, and I'm lucky to have come into contact with some incredibly inspiring and motivational individuals.

■ How important is mentorship in Africa, especially for cultivating female leadership?

Mentorship has a profound impact on strengthening agency. A mentor offering tangible advice proven to be successful can reaffirm the value of education, dedication and ambition to even the most sceptical young girl. It's one thing to hear you can achieve anything you set your mind to, but it's another thing altogether to see it embodied in a fellow African woman. At our Malaika School, we bring in Congolese mentors and women from all over the world across every aspect of society — recently, we welcomed a female pilot, for example. We have even had students mentoring others so that they have support right on campus.

■ How do you encourage young women to reach beyond the glass ceiling?

By encouraging them to dismiss the notion of a glass ceiling and focus solely on soaring as high as they can. Glass ceilings have deterred and minimised the dreams of too many women in the past, and though society can often attempt to block a woman from rising too high, acknowledging that it can restrict one's opportunities is not to acknowledge that there are always examples of women who have surpassed it. We are educating future female leaders at Malaika who will go on to become agents of change, and you can't make changes if you're trapped under a ceiling.

■ How important is it for women to support other women in the empowerment space?

Incredibly important. We're connected by shared experiences, triumphs and setbacks, and if we can't truly support one another, what are we doing? The patriarchal world will try and dictate our place, but we must dismiss such harmful narratives, and when we're working together to do so, we often achieve important steps toward gender equality in all aspects of life.



Image by David Reiss

Beyond human rights, empowering women and girls is also an economic imperative. How has Malaika made sure economic inclusion, particularly in terms of closing the gender gap, is embedded in its programmes?

We strive to empower both women and girls. At our school we provide 314 students with free, quality education so that they can join the workforce in the future and change the current economic state of the DRC, but we also provide workshops for women in the village. They learn to sew so that they can earn money without relying on their husbands or families, they take computer classes, and they farm through our agricultural programme. All of these vocations offer women opportunities outside of the home and a sense of independence, which translates directly into a narrowing of the gender gap in Kalebuka, and at a grander scale in the future!

Who do you look up to for leadership guidance in driving positive change

through the work you currently do?

I have consistent discussions with our local team in Kalebuka and I have extraordinary friends and mentors throughout the world who are leaders in their field. By understanding the realities on both a local and international level, I'm able to promote a world-class education in a Congolese village.

▣ ***What are your long-term goals for the foundation?***

As our students get older, we're hopeful that they will go on to study at schools, colleges or universities both in Africa and abroad, succeed as the bright, compassionate people they already are, and work to empower their families and, ultimately, their communities. The most important thing, though, is that we see them happy and healthy — the foundations that will enable them to succeed.

For more info on Malaika, go to www.malaika.org.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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