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Noella Coursaris: The African beauty empowering women

December 21, 2010 | From Tom Hayes, CNN

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Her image may have appeared on billboards and magazines across the globe, but Noella Coursaris has passions that extend far beyond the glamorous world of fashion.

The internationally acclaimed model is now using her celebrity for the benefit of underprivileged children and women in her birthplace of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Passionate about the DRC, Coursaris is concentrating her efforts on empowering young girls through education and raising the literacy rate for Congolese women.

"I think it's very important that people have education, to stay in the country to make progress, to make the country progress," Coursaris says. "If everyone who has education leaves, the country will stay the same."

Coursaris has founded the Georges Malaika Foundation, named after her late Greek-Cypriot father.

The organization sponsors the education of young girls from the DRC who have been abandoned, sexually abused or accused of witchcraft. It pays for the girls' school, food, orphanage and uniform fees.

The foundation is also involved in a major project that will see the construction of an ecological school for 100 children in the Katanga province in the south of the DRC, the area where Coursaris was born and spent her early childhood.

"We believe that showing the culture and the creativity of the Congolese orphans and girls through education they will know how to manage themselves -- they will have an education, they will have work one day and they will be able to have a voice politically, economically, socially," she says.

Coursaris says it was her personal experience that prompted her to get passionately involved with improving educational opportunities for young Congolese girls.

After losing her father at the age of five, Coursaris was sent to Europe to live with relatives, since her Congolese mother lacked the resources to raise her. She didn't go back to the African country before turning 18, but now she returns three or four times a year to visit her mother and oversee the progress of the foundation's projects.

"I believe that if my mother had an education at the time my father died, she would have been able to support me and keep me," Coursaris says.

Coursaris was educated in Belgium and Switzerland before moving to London to learn English. It was there where she "unexpectedly" sprang to fame as a model after following her friends' suggestions that she enter a competition held by lingerie retailer Agent Provocateur.



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(Page 2 of 2)

She soon started appearing in international magazines like Vanity Fair and GQ, posing for brands such as Virgin and Apple.

Now, she spends less time in front of the camera and more time campaigning for the country she loves, using her modeling experience to stage fundraising events for her foundation.

Her hard work is starting to pay off. "Girls are less probable to reach in the streets, where they can be raped, they can become street children. Being at school completely covers that and, educated, they will have less chances of becoming pregnant at such a young age," she says.

Recently, Coursaris addressed UNICEF and the Congolese parliament about issues that confront underprivileged children in the country.

She believes there are still a lot of things that need to be done to help young girls in the DRC.

"At a young age they got pregnant, got married, so how do you resolve the problem of a girl being pregnant at 12 years, if she's at school, if she cuts her education?"

"If we give her power to have education I believe she won't be a mother at a young age."

Despite the DRC's well-documented problems, Coursaris remains upbeat about the country. She hopes her son Mapendo, whose name means "love" in Swahili, will experience the DRC as a very different country.

"When he is my age I want him to see a new Congo, with a strong leadership, with a lot of schools all over Congo," she says.

"In Congo it is important that we have infrastructure and that we are developed but it is very important that we keep our integrity, that we keep our identity. It's important that we keep our culture."

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