“Knowledge is Power!” Cyndi Lauper Shows her true colors on LGBTIQ youth homelessness

Blog, Homelessness, Youth

> “We need your help to change the lives of LGBTIQ homeless young people,” says superstar Cyndi Lauper in an exclusive interview about how her organisation, True Colors United, is teaming up with ILGA-Europe to tackle the unacceptable problem of LGBTIQ youth homelessness in Europe.

Since her string of mega-hits in the 80s, from ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’ to ‘I Drove All Night’, Cyndi Lauper has grown from pop ingénue to cultural legend, and along the way she’s secured her place as a timeless queer icon too. She fully became aware of what her music meant to the LGBTIQ community in the years following the release of her 1986 single, ‘True Colors’. The letters she received ever since, about the song helping LGBTIQ people come to terms with themselves, gave shape to her activism. Indeed the song provided the name for the foundation she co-created in 2008 to tackle the problem of LGBTIQ youth homelessness in America, True Colors United.

Now True Colors United is teaming up with ILGA-Europe to help tackle the growing problem of LGBTIQ youth homelessness in Europe and Central Asia, and the first step is to get the real picture from LGBTIQ organisations on their experiences in dealing with the issue.

Here, Cyndi tells us the reasons she’s so passionate about coming to a time when no young LGBTIQ person finds themselves without a home, and just why it’s so important that LGBTIQ organisations across Europe and Central Asia help lead the way.

Hi Cyndi, and thank you for joining us! It’s hard to believe that it’s 12 years since you co-founded True Colors United. What moved you to set the organisation up?

I am a friend and family of the LGBTIQ community and from where I come from you stand up for your family and friends when they are under attack. I am also a parent and someone who experienced homelessness when I was young. When I learned that up to 40 per cent of youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in America were LGBTIQ, I had to step up and do something. Having a safe and stable place to call home is a basic human right and to be denied that because of who you are is unacceptable. We are better than this, especially when youth homelessness is a fixable problem.

Do you work or volunteer for an LGBTI organisation in Europe or Central Asia? Please take 15 minutes to fill out our survey now, and help us make a difference for young LGBTIQ people who are vulnerable to homelessness.

What do LGBTIQ young people experiencing homelessness in the US and Europe have in common?

While we do know some things that young people have in common, we have more questions than answers about the experiences of LGBTIQ youth and homelessness in Europe. That is why this survey is so important. We do know that LGBTIQ youth in both the US and Europe experience homelessness at higher rates than non-LGBTIQ youth and that family conflict is a key factor… but there are still many questions about what the barriers are for LGBTIQ youth getting the help and support they need in Europe, why they are experiencing homelessness beyond family conflict, what their experiences are while they are homeless and seeking the support they need, and most importantly, what young people themselves say they need.

How do you think homelessness, and specifically homelessness in young LGBTIQ people, can be stopped?

First and foremost, we need to work with LGBTIQ+ young people who have experienced homelessness to come up with and put the solutions in place that will work. LGBTIQ+ youth are the experts of their own experiences, we need to listen to and work with them. It is essential. We also need to ensure that any support and help they seek is safe, welcoming and inclusive.

And, we need more data… we need information. We need to understand the scope of the problem and the barriers that keep service providers, communities, and countries from addressing the issue. Eight years ago in America, we had hardly any data. Then we did the same type of survey we are asking your members to fill out now. It fundamentally changed things… we finally had some strong information to convince communities and our government to put funding, programs and policies in place to really start fixing the problem and ensuring LGBTIQ youth get the help they deserve.

More research followed and we now have more data than we have ever had before and more support for youth experiencing homelessness. While we still have a long way to go, we have also come a long way and it all started

with having information.

Do you work or volunteer for an LGBTI organisation in Europe or Central Asia? Please take 15 minutes to fill out our survey now, and help us make a difference for young LGBTIQ people who are vulnerable to homelessness.

In what ways can the work of LGBTIQ organisations help young people experiencing homelessness?

LGBTIQ+ organisations are key drivers of change for the community around the globe and they are important leaders in ending LGBTIQ youth homelessness in Europe. Whether it is providing direct services, like housing and counseling, or advocating for policies, funding, and programs from their governments, LGBTIQ organisations play a crucial role.

Another way is through helping to train those programs serving youth who are experiencing homelessness in their countries (if they exist) to be safe and inclusive, and build partnerships with those organisations to ensure that LGBTIQ youth are getting the help they need. There is no shortage of things that LGBTIQ organisations can do and the survey will help identify some additional ways they can take part.

Why do you think research can change the lives of LGBTIQ homeless young people?

Knowledge is power! If we do not understand the true scope, causes, and impact of LGBTIQ+ youth homelessness, we cannot fully support young people and figure out what is working and what is not working in ending the problem.

What would you say to the organisations filling this survey?

I know you have so much you are dealing with right now, especially in light of the pandemic, but I can promise you that change will happen if you take the time to fill out the survey. We will all have the information we need to start making a greater difference. I speak from experience. If the 400 organisations in America did not fill out the survey we did in 2012, and again in 2015, we would not have been able to make the progress we have been able to make

so far there.