



COURTESY PHOTO OF SUE HYDE/NATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN TASK FORCE

A voice for the most vulnerable

Sue Hyde talks about the complicated pressures placed on homeless LGBT youths

BY BEATRICE BELL
STREET NEWS SERVICE

Sue Hyde, director of the Creating Change Conference for The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, has been a beacon in the world of LGBT rights, drawing fire, but also guiding countless advocates and activists on a new course for gay rights. She has been a leader in the fights to repeal sodomy laws, to end the military's ban on openly gay servicemembers, to defend non-discrimination laws in cities and states, and to preserve marriage rights for same-sex couples. Her book, "Come Out and Win," is a primer for the gay rights movement nationwide. Here Hyde talks about the challenges faced by homeless gay teens and what can be done to help them.

Beatrice Bell: Tell me a little bit about the National Lesbian & Gay Task Force.

Sue Hyde: The National Gay & Lesbian Task Force is a national advocacy organization that works to create a society in which lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender people will have full legal equality and absolute social acceptance. That's our mission, that's what we're working towards, that's our vision, that's our goal.

B.B.: What is the Task Force's relationship with the homeless population?

S.H.: Regarding homelessness, our advocacy and research work has focused most specifically on the situation of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender youth. It is not uncommon for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgendered youth to be shunned by their families and communities and rejected by their schools. As a result of that, they are either kicked out of their homes or become runaways to escape anti-LGBT environment

either at home, in the community they grew up in, or in the schools they're attending. The problems that face LGBT youth, in particular homeless LGBT youth, are many and varied.

B.B.: Are they any more varied than just regular teenagers on the streets?

S.H.: Yes! Not only are homeless LGBT youth grappling with what all homeless people grapple with (lack of housing, jobs, healthcare and educational opportunities), generally they also must grapple with the reality of homophobia. For transgender youth who are already not conforming to standard definitions of gender, they are dealing with a whole other set of issues from lesbian, gay and bi-sexual youths. Because (this population is) especially vulnerable to depression, loneliness, psychosomatic illness, withdrawn behavior, social problems, delinquency and certainly, for school age children, truancy.

B.B.: How does this population tend to cope with these problems?

S.H.: How can a kid keep up with school if she or he doesn't have a home? That's already a problem for kids who are homeless, but it's especially acute for LGBT youth. There is a particular vulnerability to becoming engaged with substance abuse and people who are on the street who are without community support and without family support are obviously more likely to become chemically dependent in order to cope with their depression, their loneliness, with their alienation and the lack of structure in their lives.

I think that's especially true for adolescent LGBT homeless youth. Adolescents themselves are already grappling with identity issues of all kinds,

but for LGBT youth who are homeless, the identity issues and the lack of support structures make them especially more likely to become involved with drugs and alcohol.

B.B.: Is substance abuse the only method of coping with the problems facing LGBT youth?

S.H.: LGBT youth are (also) vulnerable to

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engaging in risky sexual behaviors in order to get basic needs for food and shelter met. This is called "survival sex." Survival sex is the exchanging of sex for money, food, clothes, a place to stay or drugs. It's a last resort for LGBT homeless youth, but it is certainly something that happens. They are also particularly at risk for sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV.

B.B.: Are LGBT youth living on the street more likely to be victims of crimes than their heterosexual peers?

S.H.: Definitely. Young LGBT people on the street are more likely than their heterosexual peers to become victims of crime. Their ability to report crimes to police is reduced because they are

See VOICE, page 9