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Born to Not Get Bullied

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

When she was in high school, Lady Gaga says, she was thrown into a trash can.

The culprits were boys down the block, she told me in an interview on Wednesday in which she spoke — a bit reluctantly — about the repeated cruelty of peers during her teenage years.

“I was called really horrible, profane names very loudly in front of huge crowds of people, and my schoolwork suffered at one point,” she said. “I didn’t want to go to class. And I was a straight-A student, so there was a certain point in my high school years where I just couldn’t even focus on class because I was so embarrassed all the time. I was so ashamed of who I was.”

Searching for ways to ease the trauma of adolescence for other kids, Lady Gaga came to Harvard University on Wednesday for the formal unveiling of her Born This Way Foundation, meant to empower kids and nurture a more congenial environment in and out of schools.

Lady Gaga is on to something important here. Experts from scholars to Education Secretary Arne Duncan are calling for more focus on bullying not only because it is linked to high rates of teen suicide, but also because it is an impediment to education.

A recent study from the University of Virginia suggests that when a school has a climate of bullying, it’s not just the targeted kids who suffer — the entire school lags academically. A British scholar found that children who simply witness bullying are more likely to skip school or abuse alcohol. American studies have found that children who are bullied are much more likely to contemplate suicide and to skip school.

The scars don’t go away, Lady Gaga says. “To this day,” she told me, “some of my closest friends say, ‘Gaga, you know, everything’s great. You’re a singer; your dreams have come true.’ But, still, when certain things are said to you over and over again as you’re growing up, it stays with you and you wonder if they’re true.”

Any self-doubt Lady Gaga harbors should have been erased by the huge throngs that greeted her at Harvard. “This might be one of the best days of my life,” she told the cheering crowd.

The event was an unusual partnership between Lady Gaga and Harvard University in trying to address teen cruelty. Oprah Winfrey showed up as well, along with Kathleen Sebelius, the secretary of health and human services.

Kathleen McCartney, dean of the Graduate School of Education here at Harvard, said that she and her colleagues invited Lady Gaga because they had been searching for ways to address bullying as a neglected area of education — and as a human rights issue. As many as one-fifth of children feel bullied, she said, adding: “If you don’t feel safe as a child, you can’t learn.”

Lady Gaga describes her foundation as her “new love affair,” and said that, initially, she thought about focusing on a top-down crackdown on bullying. But, over time, she said, she decided instead to use her followers to start a bottom-up movement to try to make it cooler for young people to be nice.

I asked Lady Gaga if people won’t be cynical about an agenda so simple and straightforward as kindling kindness. Exceptionally articulate, she seemed for the first time at a loss for words. “That cynicism is exactly what we’re trying to change,” she finally said.

Bullying isn’t, of course, just physical violence. Lady Gaga’s mother, Cynthia Germanotta, who will serve as president of the Born This Way Foundation, says that one of the most hurtful episodes in her daughter’s childhood came when schoolmates organized a party and deliberately excluded Lady Gaga.

Lady Gaga was reluctant to talk too much about her own experiences as a teenager for fear that her foundation would seem to be solely about bullying. Her aim is a far broader movement to change the culture and create a more supportive and tolerant environment. “It’s more of a hippie approach,” she explained.

“The Born This Way Foundation is not restitution or revenge for my experiences,” Lady Gaga told me. “I want to make that clear. This is: I am now a woman, I have a voice in the universe, and I want to do everything I can to become an expert in social justice and hope I can make a difference and mobilize young people to change the world.”

Yes, that sounds grandiose and utopian, but I’m reluctant to bet against one of the world’s top pop stars and the person with the most Twitter followers in the world. In any case, she’s indisputably right about one point: Bullying and teenage cruelty are human rights abuses that need to be higher on our agenda.