

Opening Ceremony - Welcome Speech for Nelfa

Dr. Lisa Green

Good afternoon! I am (the LSVD delegate to Nelfa and vice-president of NELfa, Lisa Green. I am) very honored to welcome you on behalf of NELFA to our 3rd biannual European Family Conference here in Cologne. NELFA is very grateful to LSVD and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung for hosting this event and all the great work they've already put into it!

I'm sure some of you are wondering, **what is NELFA?**

The Network of European LGBT Families Associations (NELFA) was created on 1st May 2009 to unite European associations of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents and their children under one umbrella organization representing Rainbow Families at the European level. LSVD was one of thirteen founding members when NELFA became incorporated as an NGO under Belgian law in 2012.

Today Nelfa's membership consists of 23 associations from 15 European countries thereby representing thousands of LGBT families in Europe.

What does NELFA do?

Nelfa works towards ensuring equality for LGBT families throughout Europe by raising awareness and supporting projects aimed at the support of rainbow families. We advise the LGBT Intergroup in Brussels on issues pertaining to families. In an international cooperation with LGBT organizations around the world, we created the annual – International Family Equality Day – which is celebrated the 1st Sunday in May, to increase visibility of rainbow families. At regular intervals we hold international rainbow family conferences, such as this one in Cologne, to bring families, experts, activists and policy makers together – to enhance rainbow family visibility, share our experience and expertise.

The EU has taken a clear stand on LGBT equality in Europe. Nonetheless, national laws are quite diverse across Europe. 22 European nations have legal recognition of same-sex couples either in the form of marriage-equality (9) or registered partnerships/civil unions and equally as many nations in Europe – mostly Eastern Europe and Baltic states - offering no legal recognition to same-sex couples. The picture is even more diverse when it comes to access to family building alternatives for lesbian and gays such as assisted reproduction/adoption/second-parent adoption. Nelfa's focus for next year will be continuing to support rainbow families in particular in Eastern Europe/Baltic states to form networks in their countries. We are very pleased to have been able to help support a family from Lithuania and Russia to join us here in Cologne.

Why Schools and Education?

The motto for this year's conference is "Different Families, Same Schools". Nelfa's aim was to 'Bring the rainbow into the schools of Europe'. Even in nations with most progressive laws and family equality, children with LGBT parents are confronted with schools, curriculum and teaching staff that have little to no knowledge about their families or their needs. Schools are amongst the most homophobic and heteronormative institutions in society – causing concern amongst LGBT parents for the well-being of their children. This has led to a patchwork quilt of initiatives and projects throughout Europe to fill the gap in order to educate the educators. Here, in Cologne, many experts will come together to share their knowledge and experience with rainbow families and activists from all over Europe.

When we chose this motto and Germany as the site of this conference 2 years ago, we could not know that today there would be a very current debate in the state of Baden-Württemberg in southern Germany on exactly this issue. The government would like to anchor diversity, including sexual identity and rainbow families, in the new school curriculum – a step that will not only benefit children in rainbow families but all children. Sadly, too many homophobic voices have since been raised. Nonetheless, human rights and a commitment to valuing diversity has succeeded and will be implemented in the 2015 school curriculum.

On behalf of Nelfa, I wish us all an exciting and enriching and unforgettable experience over the next four days!

Thank you.