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Fisher: Selfless Stanford grad, Miley Cyrus to share stage

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Miley Cyrus and Kjerstin Erickson definitely make an odd couple.

Cyrus - of "Hannah Montana" fame - is a 15-year-old pop diva whose favorite hobby is shopping, according to IMDb. She's already made millions and is on the cover of all the tabloids.

Erickson is a 25-year-old Bay Area Stanford grad and founder of FORGE, a non-profit that teaches

African refugees skills they need to help rebuild their countries. When she's not sleeping on the ground in a Zambian village or traveling through Congolese countryside still recovering from civil war, she's out raising money to keep FORGE's work going.

So what could these two young women possibly have in common?

They'll both be on the red carpet at the Fox Network's "Teen Choice Awards" in Hollywood on Aug. 4. Cyrus is hosting the show and is up for several awards. Erickson is a finalist for the "Do Something Award," a \$100,000 prize that goes to a young person who's doing something to change the planet. The winner will be announced on the show.

"It was a total surprise," Erickson said of her invitation to the awards show. "It's the kind of thing you read about in gossip magazines."

The "Do Something" folks will be putting Erickson up in a luxurious room at the Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood, with down-filled duvets and mini-bars. Not exactly what she's accustomed to.

"We're a bit simpler than that," said FORGE board president Nick Talarico, Erickson's fiance. "Our organization was built on a willingness to sleep on the ground - or a warm couch."

Erickson wasn't much older than Miley Cyrus when she discovered her life's work. It was the summer after her sophomore year at Stanford, and she was volunteering in a refugee camp in Botswana.

"I kind of developed a passion for working with refugees," she told me during a phone conversation from Zambia. "I realized this population presented a unique opportunity for rebuilding communities in their home countries."

After that, she took a leave from Stanford to create FORGE. Working with the United Nations, she organized student volunteers to work in refugee camps in Botswana and Zambia, creating preschools and teaching adults skills - including computers, business, basic health care, language and math - that they would need when they went back to their home countries.

FORGE also set up two repatriation centers to prepare returning refugees for the changes they would find at home.

Talarico, who had worked for other non-profits, signed on as FORGE's operations director. Romance blossomed in Africa. (What a movie this would make!) The couple were married in a ceremony at a refugee camp, though they haven't gotten around to making it legal over here.

Last year, Erickson turned her programs over to the refugees to run. Now FORGE is helping people readjust to life in the Democratic Republic of the Congo after years of bloody civil war.

"Congo needs the refugees back," she said. "There are no banks, no cell phone access. You can't rely on the government to rebuild anything. If people are going to rebuild the social structure, they are going to have to do it from the ground up."

Meanwhile, she returned to Stanford and picked up her degree this spring. Talarico, having burned through his savings, took a job with a Menlo Park start-up so Erickson could stay with FORGE. They've stepped up the fundraising effort, which is why Erickson applied for the "Do Something" award.

By making the finals, she already has won \$10,000. If you're a teenager, you can help her win the rest. Just go to www.teenchoiceawards.com and vote once a day until Aug. 1. If you're too old to vote, you still can help. Go to www.forgenow.org and find out how to donate.

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