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Gay group helps tsunami relief efforts

Larry Buhl, PlanetOut Network

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As the death toll from Sunday's earthquake and tsunamis rockets past 100,000, dozens of relief organizations are working overtime to provide immediate and long-term relief to survivors. One of the organizations raising money is the Rainbow World Fund (www.rainbowfund.org), the first LGBT world relief agency.

Jeff Cotter, a San Francisco psychiatric social worker, says he started Rainbow World Fund (RWF) four years ago because none of the traditional relief organizations were developing philanthropy and consciousness in the LGBT community. It is that dual mission -- direct relief hand in hand with changing opinions and beliefs -- that moves RWF. Cotter calls it a solidarity model, rather than a charity model.

"As with our community's response to HIV, we can't wait for the rest of the world to take leadership," Cotter said. "And as a gay man, I thought, if I want to change the world, I should start where I'm at, in the community I live in. And the gay and lesbian community was a huge untapped market."

In the past year, RWF has teamed up with relief organizations to increase access to safe drinking water in Central America, eradicate land mines in Cambodia, provide food for victims of hurricane Jeanne in Haiti and save the next generation of Africans from HIV/AIDS. The group works closely with larger charity organizations (such as CARE) to give aid immediately, where it's needed.

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Cotter balances his time between Rainbow and his "day job": counseling rape victims and gunshot wound survivors for the city of San Francisco. He has spent the past three years building the infrastructure for RWF, and has begun helping victims around the world this year.

Because administrative costs are covered by the board of directors and grants from various organizations (including the Catholic Church), RWF can ensure that 100 percent of every charitable dollar goes directly to field service work overseas. In the case of Sunday's quake and tsunami survivors, aid will go to food, water, vitamins and medical supplies for many months, and possibly years, to come.

But why doesn't an LGBT relief organization give to LGBT causes? Why enlist gays and lesbians to help victims they know nothing about? The question, Cotter says, should really be: why not?

"Suffering is universal, and the LGBT community knows more than a little bit about that," Cotter says. "When we took the aid trip to Guatemala earlier this year, it was clear that we (the LGBT community) had a shared history of oppression with the Mayan population there. There was a systematic genocide there, and the government invalidated their marriage relationships, among other atrocities."

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The excursion to Guatemala had another benefit as well. In the primarily Catholic and socially conservative country, Rainbow's outreach was the first contact most citizens had with gays or lesbians. Promoting tolerance and understanding of differences among people and cultures, and at the same time providing much-needed assistance to impoverished and developing areas, is a win-win, according to Cotter.

"We're about changing attitudes toward gays and lesbians," Cotter said. "Many of the places we visit and help have very little LGBT presence. Everyone we've worked with has been surprised by our commitment, and very open and accepting to our presence."

Conversely, the organization, by encouraging "closet philanthropists" to move into action, is helping LGBT people see themselves in a different light, Cotter said.

"We have tended to define ourselves too narrowly in the LGBT community. The very act of giving helps reinforce the idea that we're not just about sex or partying, or Madonna. We are a community that cares about human suffering anywhere, and does something about it." ■

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