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Rainbow World Fund Accomplishes Much in '05

By Dennis McMillan
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Rainbow World Fund and other like-minded organizations are reaching out to share what HIV/AIDS and the civil rights struggle have taught queers about caring, giving, and loving. RWF is changing how the world sees LGBT people through their giving time, energy, and money to devastated parts of the planet.

"We're coming to the end of an extraordinary year for gay philanthropy," Jeff Cotter, executive director of Rainbow World Fund, a queer humanitarian organization, told Bay Times. "As I reflect back on the LGBT community's response to the terrible tragedies of the past 12 months—the Asian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, the Guatemalan mudslides, the Kashmir earthquake, and so many others—I am filled with pride and gratitude." He added, "We're educating ourselves, our families, and our friends about world need and how we, as powerful individuals in a united community, can work together to heal the world."



Jeff Cotter in Guatemala visiting with some school children.

Cotter listed the many good deeds RWF has accomplished. He pointed out that for every dollar donated, 100 percent went to aid needy states and countries. So far \$650,000 in aid has been delivered. For the tsunami relief effort, \$235,000 in food, shelter, and medical aid was distributed. For hurricanes Katrina and Rita, \$345,000 in food was delivered. Guatemala received \$50,000 in medical supplies, school supplies, and monetary aid. Rural Honduras was provided with safe water and sanitation for 500 people through RWF's \$20,000 water project. Global Awareness Journey led a group of 12 LGBT people on a humanitarian aid tour of Guatemala. There was extensive media coverage in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Asia, and Australia. RWF was named on the 2005 Out magazine 100 list and named on the PlanetOut People of the Year list.

Cotter said there are many goals ahead for the coming year. They plan to continue to fund ongoing aid projects in Haiti, Guatemala, and Honduras. They will send \$100,000 for the South African HIV/AIDS education/linkage program to fund the work of 100 educators. Pakistan Earthquake Relief will receive \$100,000. As will the Malaria Prevention Project. Hunger Relief will receive \$50,000. They will provide \$35,000 for Cambodian minefield clearance. Plans are in the making for a humanitarian aid tour of Guatemala, July 29 to August 6, 2006. They hope to expand the board of directors and staffing. And they plan to establish a RWF chapter in New York City. "When the Asian tsunami struck last December, queers mobilized," said Cotter. "LGBT people boarded planes for Asia to nurse the sick and injured,

build homes for the survivors, deliver supplies and take care of children. At home we threw beer busts, art auctions, concerts, and black-tie galas to raise relief funds." He said that in September, while America watched thousands of its fellow citizens suffer in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the LGBT community kicked into high gear, taking refugees into their homes. Metropolitan Community Churches transformed overnight into command centers delivering aid, offering counseling, and coordinating help. In Ovett, Miss., the lesbian-run Camp Sister Spirit, although severely damaged, served as a center of aid for the surrounding community. "Our efforts are demonstrating, in a very real, tangible way, that the LGBT community is committed to improving the lives of those less fortunate around the globe," Cotter said. "As a gay man born in the '60s, I've witnessed our community mature over the years. If the 1969 Stonewall riot and the years following represented our community's painful birth and rapid development, then the 1970s represented our wild, celebratory teenage years. The crisis of HIV/AIDS pushed us harshly into our early adulthood and taught us a tremendous amount about giving, growing, and coming together as a community for survival and support." He added, "We're now coming into our true adulthood, which brings both power and responsibility. We're fully realizing we can no longer rely on 'mom and dad' to fix things, nor can we blame them when life isn't turning out the way we wanted it to. It's up to us to create the world we want."

He said that this year is a turning point in queer history. Equally important, he said, RWF is also building connections with other historically oppressed minorities around the world, supporting each other in solidarity. During the Guatemalan mudslides following Hurricane Stan in October, RWF delivered 1,000 pounds of much-needed medical supplies and financial assistance. They met with civil rights activists, health-care providers, and aid workers, and built connections with the indigenous Mayan population, exploring their common ground. Historically, Guatemala's Mayans have been subjected to genocide by their government, had their marriages invalidated, and been denied a voice in the political process. This probably sounds all too familiar in our own homeland. "We have a lot more in common than we realize," said Cotter. "Establishing these relationships is important for the survival of all of us."

We've overturned arcane and oppressive laws, he said. We've successfully worked to ensure legal protections for our homes, jobs, and access to health care. He pointed out that queers have marched on Washington and developed a political voice that can't be ignored. "We've stood in the face of extreme prejudice and have risen to meet the challenge of one of the worst epidemics in recorded history," he said. "We have changed the consciousness of the world." Cotter exhorted, "It is time to fully assume our authority as partners in global healing. The opportunity is here. You can be the source. You can be the inspiration. Together we can change the world."

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