



Rainbow World Fund sets up shop in the Castro

by Jason Victor Serinus

After six years of operating out of a "virtual" office of home computers in living rooms, the Rainbow World Fund has just opened an office in San Francisco's Castro District. Located above Harvey's bar in the hub of the famed neighborhood at 18th and Castro streets, RWF is now positioned to further realize its mission as a humanitarian service agency that provides LGBT philanthropic assistance to people suffering from hunger, poverty, disease, oppression, and war.

Founded in 2000 by the openly gay Jeffrey A. Cotter, 43, RWF has increased its philanthropic activities from gifts totaling \$50,000 in its first year of fundraising to an impressive \$700,000 in 2005. Such growth has been possible because RWF is an all-volunteer organization. Neither Cotter, who works part-time as a psychiatric social worker at the city of San Francisco's Center for Special Problems, nor the other three members of RWF's board of directors, nor any of the fund's volunteers accepts a dime for their work. Rather, they devote a huge amount of time to RWF, whose total operating expenses for 2005 – an entire \$10,500 – were covered by a grant from the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

"As we've grown," Cotter explained in an interview last week, "I've realized that we need a dedicated physical location. My apartment was looking like a warehouse, and other people's apartments resembled storage bins. We also need a place where volunteers can assemble." ?

Cotter's idea to found RWF grew out of his deep concern for the people of the world. He'd been aiding local individuals on a micro-level for a good 15 years when he realized that he wanted to create a new vehicle that would have a broader impact on the world.

"I let the idea go, and created room for insight to come," he said. "A few months later, the idea came in a flash to start a world relief organization, based in the LGBT community, that would serve whoever was most in need around the world. I wanted to address the most pressing issues of life: hunger, war, water, natural disasters, and of course, global HIV."

Knowing that the LGBT community had already spent several decades dealing with issues of freedom and HIV, Cotter decided to build upon what community members had already learned about coming together to take care of each other.

"My first thought was that our community has become so strong that we are ready to help people around the world," he explained. "At the same time, we can advance our community's goals by changing public misconceptions of LGBT people. By making our contributions to society visible, we increase public support for our full civil rights."

"Rainbow World Fund allows us to take gay giving to the next level by dedicating our highest values of love, kindness, fraternity, and compassion to the service of others. In the process, it allows non-gay people to see us as engaged and contributing positively to the world."

Cotter forms partnerships with existing world relief organizations, utilizing their delivery systems for the benefit of all. In the process, he raises consciousness in those organizations concerning the depth of humanitarian concern and altruism in the gay community.

RWF also partners with spiritual and religious communities, including the Catholic Church, United Church of Canada, and the Lutheran Church. The \$10,000 grant RWF received from the School Sisters of Notre Dame, for example, came about after Cotter traveled to Guatemala with a relief contingent that included a nun who was a member of the same order as Sister Jeannine Gramick, who was silenced by Pope John Paul II for starting a lesbian and gay ministry. Cotter relishes the fact that, thanks to the pope, money raised for Gramick's LGBT ministry ended up supporting RWF.

Cotter also extols San Francisco's St. Francis Lutheran Church for underwriting a RWF fundraising concert with gay singer Mark Weigle and transgender chanteuse Veronica Klaus. Although the double whammy of the Southeast Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina put RWF's small staff into crisis mode, delaying preparation of a fundraising CD of the performance, Cotter expects that a recording will eventually become available.

Current projects

Two immediate projects loom on RWF's agenda. The first is a July 29-August 6 trip to Guatemala, in which a contingent of perhaps 20 people will deliver over 1,500 pounds of medicine and school supplies plus financial assistance to an orphanage, hospital, medical clinic, and school. (A similar contingent delivered 1,000 pounds of supplies in 2005). Those wishing to assist in the effort by either joining the group or donating supplies can e-mail supplies@rainbowfund.org. The journey includes meetings with civil rights workers, humanitarian aid organizations, the Mothers of the Disappeared, sweatshop workers, and people from various religious and spiritual orders including a native shaman. Visits to solar oven projects, water projects, and an organic farm, plus extra days for ecotourism, are also planned.

The second project is to raise the \$1,000 per month necessary to cover rent, utilities, and supplies for RWF's new Castro office. Because the organization earmarks 100 percent of funds raised for relief work directly to humanitarian projects, it relies on separate grants or specially designated donations to pay operating expenses.

RWF has just met its goal of raising \$19,000 to help complete a major water project in Honduras. Together with Water Partners International, the organization has installed a gravity-fed water system and latrines in every house in the village of Sosoal. Five hundred people now have access to safe drinking water without needing to send the women of the village on daily four-hour round trips to a mountaintop water source.

In addition, RWF recently gave \$350,000 in food aid to those affected by Hurricane Katrina, and \$250,000 in emergency aid to survivors of the Southeast Asian tsunami. RWF is also in the midst of raising funds for a joint project with Africare to fund the work of HIV/AIDS peer educators in rural South Africa. (It costs \$200 a month for salaries and supplies for each educator, including training, condoms, and bicycles for travel). Cotter underscores the need to save the next generation of young Africans by

supporting children from families where both parents may be infected, ill, or deceased.

Information on current and past Rainbow World Fund projects may be obtained at www.rainbowfund.org, via the Web site's e-mail response form, by calling/faxing (415) 431-1485, or writing Rainbow World Fund 4111 18th Street, Suite 5, San Francisco, CA 94114.

07/20/2006