



## Successful trip to Guatemala for Rainbow World Fund volunteers

by Patrick Letellier

You can smell the dump in Guatemala City long before you actually see it. On a hot, dusty August morning there is no escaping the fetid stench; the air is thick with it. In this desolate corner of the city, the narrow, littered streets leading up to the dump are lined with shacks housing some of the country's poorest people. The locals call them guajeros, or "trashers," people who pick through the mountains of rotting garbage here to salvage food, plastic bottles, cardboard, and anything else that can be sold or bartered on the street. In a scene worthy of Dickens or Hitchcock, hundreds of vultures circle overhead, swooping down into the trash while crowds of people swarm around a convoy of battered yellow garbage trucks emptying their debris.

The massive Guatemala City garbage dump may seem an unlikely destination for a group of 14 lesbians and gay men from the United States, plus one straight woman from Canada, but most are pleased to be here. In fact, they have been planning the trip for months. They arrive, squinting in the sunshine, in two vans weighed down with supplies they have collected for the children and families who depend on the dump for survival.

The group is on an eight-day journey around Guatemala organized by the Rainbow World Fund, a San Francisco-based lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender humanitarian aid group, the first and only group of its kind in the world. Among its many projects, RWF makes an annual trek to Guatemala to disperse medical and school supplies to people living in grinding poverty in one of the Western Hemisphere's poorest nations.

"The survival of our entire planet depends on people helping each other," said RWF director Jeff Cotter, who has made the Guatemala trip three times. "I'm encouraging people to expand their charity and see beyond national boundaries."

For this trip, volunteers from San Francisco and Hayward in the Bay Area; San Diego; Atlanta, Georgia; Portland, Oregon; Austin, Texas; and Vancouver, British Columbia, collected a whopping \$250,000 in medical supplies, plus several thousand dollars in school and art supplies to dispense to clinics, schools, orphanages and rural villages around the country.

The group also delivered a giant duffel bag packed with 1,500 condoms and other safe-sex supplies to Oasis, one of Guatemala's few LGBT and HIV human rights organizations, and handed out almost 600 stuffed animals to children at the various projects. RWF also donated \$11,000 in cash to the projects it visited.

"It boils down to the basic human need people have for food, clothing, and

shelter. How do you turn your back on that, whether it's people in our own country or another country?" said Donna Narducci, director of Atlanta's LGBT Pride Committee. Narducci plied her luggage for the trip with Band-Aids, children's vitamins, cough syrup, aspirin, magic markers, and crayons donated by friends who wanted to help.

Although groups who receive RWF support do not have to adhere to any specific political or social agenda, or even understand gay issues, the fact that the supplies were collected and donated by LGBT people was important to many on the trip.

"I don't know that everybody [who received donations] fully understood what it was for people to be gay or lesbian, but that's okay. It was a first step," Narducci said.

The group's tour included a visit to a tiny Mayan village outside Chichicastenango, in the mountainous southwest region of the country. Because RWF helped fund a local water project there, the entire village of about 40 people turned out to greet RWF volunteers. After a welcoming ceremony, several RWF members trekked through a cornfield to visit villagers' homes. Surprisingly, a discussion of homosexuality followed.

"Walking back through the corn, this man asked me if I was married, and that was my opportunity to tell him I was gay and what that meant," said Yew-Hoe Tan, a San Francisco architect.

"Our presence there, just being alongside people in other cultures and recognizing our common humanity, was one of the most important parts of the trip," Tan said.

Back in Guatemala City, the group presented a \$5,000 gift, as well as the duffel bag of condoms, to Oasis director Jorge Lopez. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Lopez exclaimed when he saw the condoms.

Life in Guatemala for many LGBT people is extremely dangerous. "They kill us in the villages and kill us in the cities," Lopez said, citing statistics showing a sharp increase in anti-LGBT violence across Guatemala in recent years. At least 13 gay men and transgender women were murdered in Guatemala in 2005.

Lopez showed video footage from a June LGBT Pride event, called a "Parade of Mourning," in which marchers dressed in black and carried coffins to draw attention to the widespread violence.

Transgender activist Zulma Robles told the group about how four police officers surrounded her and a friend, Paulina Cartagena, on the street last December. After the officers surrounded the two women, one drew his gun and shot them, killing Cartagena and leaving Robles for dead.

Oasis staff now accompany Robles whenever she leaves her apartment or the Oasis office. Ironically, police officers now guard the office, standing vigil across the street allegedly to protect the staff.

"When I'm alone, or something reminds me of the attack, I'm very frightened," Robles said. "Without Oasis, my life would be much worse. Or I'd be dead."

Back at the dump, RWF is given a tour of Project Safe Passage, a group founded by an American woman that provides food, medicine, and education to 560 children whose parents work on the dump. Before Safe Passage, many of the kids had never seen a toothbrush, said program coordinator Fredy Maldonado.

"These people are poor. Nobody cares about them. Nobody wants to help. Without people like you," Maldonado said to the group, "these kids are dead."

In one Safe Passage warehouse facility, children are given the chance to bathe and change clothes. "Hola! Hola!" they shout, waving at RWF volunteers.

"People say charity begins at home with your family," RWF's Cotter said. "It's time to start looking at the world as one large family."

For more information, visit [www.rainbowworldfund.org](http://www.rainbowworldfund.org). Full disclosure: San Francisco writer Patrick Letellier accompanied the Rainbow World Fund to Guatemala. RWF paid Letellier's expenses.

08/17/2006