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Sweet Charity

LESBIAN NOTIONS by Libby Post

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, my partner, Lynn, and I were transfixed by the images on television—the death and destruction, the despair and heartbreak. We knew we wanted to send money, but didn't want to use the traditional relief route of the American Red Cross. We still had questions about how the organization managed the massive amount of money it raised after 9/11.

Then, I received an e-mail from the Human Rights Campaign about helping, with a link to a group called the Rainbow World Fund (RWF). I clicked through, and, to my surprise, found the Web site for the GLBT community's only world-relief agency. We were all too happy to make our \$250 contribution through RWF. Right up front, it told us the money would go to America's Second Harvest to provide food for the folks in the Crescent City who lost everything. Luckily for us, we could go on with our lives.

A few weeks later, we received a handwritten thank-you note from Jeff Cotter, the fellow who thought up RWF. I was impressed—with today's technology and fast pace, handwritten thank-you notes from not-for-profits have gone by the wayside, except when they're to major donors. And one \$250 gift does not a major donor make.

So, I decided to check out RWF, and have a chat with the San Francisco-based Cotter. He related in a phone interview that he was a social worker for about 15 years, but just wasn't fulfilled professionally.

According to Cotter, "I wanted to do something I had never done before. I wanted to have a positive impact on the planet, and help people. I put those ideas out to the universe, and let them go."

A few months later, Cotter's own inner voice told him to start a world-relief agency based in the GLBT community. It was a good thing he listened.

In the past two years, RWF has raised more than \$1 million for humanitarian aid and medical supplies in this country and abroad, mostly from \$100 and \$200 contributions. In 2005, it took in \$390,000 for Katrina relief, and sent \$250,000 to the victims of the tsunami that hit Indonesia.

Cotter just returned from a relief trip to Guatemala with 15 RWF volunteers, plus two American nuns who served as their guides. The group brought \$250,000 worth of medical supplies—HIV and heart meds to hypodermic needles—to villages throughout the country. RWF distributed between 500 and 600 stuffed animals to brighten the lives of children. It made direct cash grants to an orphanage, a school, and a medical clinic, as well as OASIS, the country's only GLBT organization.

"We gave OASIS \$5,000, and we also brought down 2,000 condoms," Cotter said. "This was our third humanitarian trip to Guatemala. It's different from other Central American countries, because 50 percent of the population is indigenous, and it encapsulates the developing world."

Through its work, RWF also is presenting the GLBT community to the world.



Jeff Cotter (left); his boyfriend, Paul Stankiewicz; and his friend, Rico (on Cotter's shoulders), at an orphanage in Santa Apolonia, Guatemala.

One
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As Cotter stated, "Our first priority is to help those who need it, but a by-product is changing how people see the LGBT community. The fund is a way of putting our highest values—love, kindness, and compassion—to work, and of providing a platform for our concern and caring to be seen and heard around the world."

Cotter shared that when he approached America's Second Harvest, the group was thrilled to collaborate. He noted that it has quite a few gays and lesbians working at its Chicago headquarters. The same can't be said for some of RWF's other "straight" philanthropic partners. But those organizations understand that RWF helps them in more than one way.

In Cotter's words, "Making them more conscious, helping them explore LGBT issues, an area they haven't thought about before—well, that's also part of their mission in helping to heal the world. And now, the organizations we work with are out about working with the LGBT community, with us. They don't make a secret about it in any way."

Without ego, and with a pure desire to heal the world, Cotter and RWF are making a real difference in the lives of a lot of people, while at the same time opening up hearts and minds to the GLBT community. It's a tremendous combination.

But it's also a marvelous opportunity for each of us. Actions do speak louder than words. Visit www.rainbowfund.org, and give to the Rainbow World Fund. It will be your chance to help heal the world.

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