

GAUGE

The Rainbow Samaritan

Maryland native's GLBT relief group funneling gay charity globally

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The pleas for pink dollars are never ending, an annoying byproduct of the increasingly well-oiled machine of GLBT politicking. Whether it's to fight HIV/AIDS, gain basic civil rights, allow gays to serve in the military, secure residency for foreign partners, or any number of other issues directly affecting the GLBT community, there is ample opportunity to give till it hurts.

But one relative newcomer to the trough is not asking for support for the gay community, necessarily, but for the world.

The San Francisco-based Rainbow World Fund (RSW) is the brainchild of Jeffrey Cotter, a Maryland native, who says he saw need for a vehicle allowing the gay community to connect with the world in a way that could better illustrate what GLBT philanthropy means, whether it's helping to bring clean drinking water to poor villages in Central America, funding landmine removal from Cambodia to Croatia, or even helping here at home by working to feed victims of Hurricane Katrina.

"I'd been working as a social worker for 12 years. I'd been one-on-one at the micro level a long time, and I wanted to do something different," says Cotter, 44, who was raised in Severna Park, Md., but relocated to San Francisco after falling in love with the area during a vacation from graduate school in the late 1980s. With his somewhat New Age lexicon, there's no doubting that Cotter is at home in the Bay Area.

"I put it out to the universe that I wanted to do something different. I wanted it to be connected to the gay community, something with impact, and something that had never been done before. About two months later, lying in bed, my inner voice said, 'Start a world relief agency based in the GLBT community.'



Jeff Cotter

"With our struggles, we're so strong. We have so much to offer the world. The second thought was that this could help the community by showing the world that we're making a positive contribution, by showing who we really are. It's important people see who we are and see our contributions to society. A lot of the world still has a lot of misperceptions and prejudices about who we are -- sex, drugs and materialism. The Rainbow World Fund is able to provide a platform for our compassion."

Though his inner voice may have set things in motion, Cotter came to this mission in 2000 with no experience and little money. But Cotter says he had the determination to make the world a better place. Some could easily argue that working as a social worker in HIV/AIDS services already meant that Cotter was more than carrying his moral burden. His personal history as an adopted child -- both Cotter and his brother were put up for adoption by their birth mother in Ireland, and adopted by their American family -- compels him to help others, he says, particularly children in need. That compulsion was going to spawn the Rainbow World Fund, one way or another.

"I had no idea how to do it. There was a lot of fear. This was stepping out on a limb, going around presenting this idea to people. Learning to articulate it is still an ongoing process. At the beginning, I covered everything myself. And I don't have deep pockets. Initially, it was financially taxing. It still is. We're still operating on a shoestring."

That shoestring may also be a blessing. Cotter seems understandably proud to tout RWF's efficiency, making a point to include it on the group's Web site, which reads: "Of every \$1 RWF received (monetary donations, grants, interest

income and donated supplies) in 2005, 98.5 cents went to programs that serve those most in need."

That sort of frugality was illustrated in June when Cotter and other RWF members came to lobby on Capitol Hill with CARE, a leading organization working to alleviate global poverty. The tab for Cotter and another member traveling from San Francisco was less expensive than some D.C. dinners: \$400, including airfare. And, as president of RWF, Cotter takes no salary, keeping his job as a social worker on a part-time basis. Actually, RWF has no paid staff at all, though he adds that six years into this endeavor, it's probably time to apply for grants that may fund some full-time staff.

Meanwhile, the money tends to flow in the opposite direction. A case in point was this year's San Francisco Gay Pride parade on June 24, for which RWF was asked to serve as "organizational grand marshal." Cotter says he was thrilled at the invitation, but somewhat overwhelmed by the logistics. He has as much expertise in preparing parade floats as he did back in 2000 with starting a global-relief organization. Still, that New Age-y faith in the universe of his did not let him down. Serendipity had his back.

"I've seen a lot of go-go boys dancing on the back of a truck and that's great, but that's not who we are," Cotter says with a laugh. Instead, his boyfriend, Paul Stankiewicz, suggested a *Partridge Family*-esque school bus to play on RWF's "one family" tagline. Cotter agreed, but couldn't find an affordable bus in the Bay Area. He did hear of one in Oregon, however, for \$2,300, and tapped an "adventurous lesbian" to check it out. She phoned back to let him know he owned a bus. Quite by accident, a young man working in an accounting office down the hall from RWF was having a birthday shortly thereafter and Cotter was invited in for cake.

"He used to drive busses," says Cotter, the thrill of discovering the birthday boy's driving skills still coming through in his voice. He was also planning on visiting his mother in Portland. "He said, 'Get me a one-way Southwest ticket to Portland and I'll drive the bus down.' ... This guy, he's gay, now he's totally into driving it."

Groovy West Coast inflections or not, Cotter has enough stories of things falling wonderfully into place to grab even the most buttoned-up cynic's attention. It's other stories, like those of the annual RWF humanitarian-aid trips to Guatemala that may touch a cynic's heart.

"We've been able to learn what can happen when you come out in Guatemala," says Cotter, citing a visit to a grassroots GLBT group there. "You can be killed. A few hours before we arrived, a transgender person had been killed."

While Guatemala may not be as gay-friendly as some other countries, Cotter insists that the material contributions RWF brings on trips like these is coupled with what members contribute by being out.

"We always talk about [our sexual/gender orientation]. People will ask, 'Are you married?' They always ask that. I encourage people to speak for themselves, but to be truthful. We've had a lot of great conversations. A lot of people come up to us on the side and say, 'Oh, my uncle is like you.' Or that we're not like what they expected. It's like we're ambassadors."

For more information about the Rainbow World Fund and its various projects, visit www.rainbowfund.org.