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## Sister Jeannine Fights the Vatican for LGBT Rights

By **Dennis McMillan**  
Published: September 13, 2007

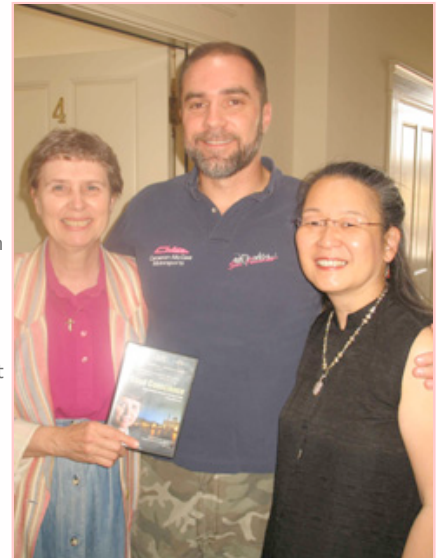
In a reception held on Sept. 9 at the Rainbow World Fund headquarters in the Castro, the public was invited to meet one of the most unlikely and fascinating gay rights activists of our time. Star of the documentary, *In Good Conscience*, and one of the few women in history to take on the Vatican and win, Sister Jeannine Gramick has been a beacon of light for the LGBT Community since 1977 when she co-founded New Ways Ministry, working tirelessly for the rights of all. When Sister Jeannine was "silenced" by the Pope in 2000, the Vatican unwittingly pumped up the volume. Although Sister Jeannine was officially ordered by the Vatican not to speak positively in public about homosexuality, she refused to give in. She has been very active for decades in advocating gay and lesbian causes within the Roman Catholic Church. Her response to the attempt to silence her was a written document, stating in part: "The Church has urged us to extend love and respect toward those who are alienated or who think or act differently than we do. The Church has asked us to understand their ways of thinking so that we may be able to enter into dialogue with them. I have tried to do this in my ministry to gay and lesbian people. The basic purpose of my pastoral ministry has been to serve as a bridge builder between them and the Church. I have tried to do this by listening to their experiences, by articulating their concerns, and by presenting the Church's teaching."

She continued, "In serving as a bridge with love and good will, we must also speak the truth. In this spirit, I offer ... corrections and clarifications in an attempt to overcome the dangerous and erroneous propositions perceived by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding the books, *Building Bridges* and *Voices of Hope*."

Founder and Executive Director of Rainbow World Fund, Jeff Cotter, welcomed everyone, explaining to those who had not heard of RWF's work what the organization does. He said RWF is an international relief agency based in the LGBT and friends community. "We have a lot of straight people who volunteer in the organization, and we're really happy about that," he said. RWF works within the community, educating people about issues of humanitarian aid and world need. As they raise consciousness in the community, they raise funds to support humanitarian relief efforts around the world.

They focus on land mine eradication, hunger, safe drinking water, global HIV, and disaster relief. It is a labor of love, because no one - including executive staff - is salaried. It is a fully volunteer-driven organization. Cotter introduced the two newest board members. First was Karen Kai, who began working with RWF last Christmas season, when they collaborated on the Tree of Hope Project with the Mayor. Kai is an attorney and former SF Human Rights Commissioner. "It's truly rare and truly wonderful to find so many people whose hearts are so open, such as with Rainbow World Fund," said Kai. She spoke of her first meeting with Cotter and his partner Paul Stankiewicz working on the Tree, folding paper and wiring up birds. She said at the time she was amazed at the scope of what RWF did. "The spirit that comes here is wonderful," she said. "You're welcomed, you're embraced, and then you're put to work!"

The second new board member is Sister Jeannine. "I have devoted a good part of my life to what I feel God has called me to - being a bridge of justice, understanding, and reconciliation between the institutional Catholic Church and the lesbian/gay community," she said. "Whether you're Catholic or not, we all acknowledge the impact that the Church has on our society - be it the institutional Church or the grassroots Catholic Church. We need to be concerned about what happens in the Catholic community." She said she loves her Church but gets embarrassed about some of the bad publicity it gets and deserves. She admires RWF as a good will ambassador



**Honoree Sister Jeannine Gramick, Rainbow World Fund ED Jeff Cotter and board member Karen Kai.**

to the world for the LGBT community. "I'd like to think that Jeff and Paul's Catholic roots have something to do with the wonderful work they are doing," she said. "I'd like to think that those values were inspired somewhere there by the nuns." Cotter blushed and nodded his head in affirmation. She summed up her message, saying, "I am here to give whatever I can - morally and financially - to the Rainbow World Fund." She gave her donation - which she laughingly called "my widow's mite" - and encouraged ("I ask, I beg, I plead, I'd get down on my knees - were it not for my arthritis") that people would consider donating as well.

Sister Jeannine works with New Ways Ministries to help shift the consciousness in the Catholic Church and other religious communities regarding people's beliefs and ideals about LGBT people. When she asked each person in the room to identify themselves one at a time to better know one another, it turned out there were quite a few former nuns, current nuns, monks, various members of the laity, lapsed Catholics, reformed Catholics, recovering Catholics, people of non-Catholic religions, nonreligious persons, Jewish people, activists, humanitarians, and various friends of Sister Jeannine. One former nun said she woke up one day and suddenly realized she was a lesbian, and now she has "never been so happy in my whole life."

She said, "Even if I'm single for the rest of my life - which I hope I won't be - even if I am, it doesn't matter, because that's who I am." Sister Jeannine agreed wholeheartedly, saying, "That's who you are, and that's to be celebrated."

Cotter encouraged anyone at that reception - and anyone who feels so led - to join up with Rainbow World Fund and volunteer their spare time.

Sister Jeannine said when she spent eleven days with RWF volunteers in Guatemala, she knew this was to be her humanitarian cause. Stankiewicz said that after working with RWF for almost two years now, he is humbled by the way some people live in impoverished areas with little to nothing in possessions or food or medicine. "It is so empowering to be able to help people, and so amazing how your own problems in comparison start to evaporate," he said. He quoted the ancient philosopher Plato who exhorted individuals to be kind, because everyone you meet is fighting their own battles. One Sister, who has been in the Order for over 15 years, called Sister Jeannine "the nun version of Michael Moore - but not fat, because she does Jane Fonda workouts." A former monk said he used to be frustrated that "everything is such a mess in the world," and that he couldn't do anything about that; but now RWF has given him a purpose that is tangible and is helping to change the world. If Bay Times readers would like to help change the world, they should contact rainbowfund.org or call (415) 431-1485. As Cotter states, "We are dedicated to providing aid where it is needed - regardless of race, religion, politics, gender identity, or sexual orientation."

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