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Rainbow of help

In the first 10 days after a devastating tsunami hit southeast Asia on December 26, killing at least 150,000 people, Jeff Cotter's Rainbow World Fund raised over \$150,000 for relief from within the gay and lesbian community

By Patrick Letellier

An Advocate.com exclusive posted January 20, 2005

As the death toll from the South Asian tsunami reaches past 150,000, the international outpouring of aid to the region is setting records as the world's largest peacetime relief effort. To date, over \$310 million has been donated by U.S. citizens alone, and gay San Francisco philanthropist Jeff Cotter wants to make sure that the contributions of gays and lesbians are recognized.

Cotter is president and founder of the Rainbow World Fund, a first-of-its-kind international humanitarian relief organization that solicits funds from gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people and funnels them into projects around the globe that combat hunger, disease, and the ravages of natural disasters. Launched in 2000, RWF is already helping to clear land mines in Cambodia, provide clean drinking water in Honduras and Guatemala, and feed people in Haiti left destitute by a massive hurricane in September.

With its focus now on tsunami relief, funds have poured into the agency at a record pace. This week the Human Rights Campaign Foundation donated \$100,000, the single largest donation in RWF's short history. Advocate.com spoke to the 42-year-old Cotter, who works as a psychiatric social worker for the city of San Francisco, on January 6 about RWF and the gay community's response to the tragedy.

What has been the response to RWF since the tsunami hit?

So far we've collected \$152,000, at least \$10,000 a day. And we've had dozens and dozens of donations in the last two days that we haven't added to that total yet. Fifty thousand dollars came in from our Web site and from fund-raising events at clubs in San Francisco. It's mainly through donations of a hundred dollars or less. A hundred percent of these



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donations are passed on to help; we don't take anything out.

Where are the donations coming from?

A lot of the money is coming from inside California, but we're getting donations from all over the nation. People from Australia, Canada, from all over the world have contacted me wanting to donate. A board member at HRC donated \$100,000.

What will these funds do?

The funds go to CARE, one of the absolute best, oldest, and most established humanitarian relief agencies. CARE's focus right now is keeping people alive. The money goes for water, basic medical supplies, rehydration tablets, and plastic for shelters.

Why should gay people give to RWF instead of giving directly to, say, CARE, or Doctors Without Borders?

Because we're able to identify those donations as gay dollars. We're able to say, "Here's \$150,000," and it's clearly identified as coming from the LGBT community. This way we're able to change how the world sees LGBT people. Much of the world still sees gay people as caring only about sex, drugs, and materialism. And there's a lot more to us than that. RWF is a way to put our highest values—love, compassion, and kindness—into action. We're able to provide a visible presence and a structure to deliver LGBT charitable dollars for humanitarian relief.

Why did you start RWF?

There is a great concern for humanitarian relief in the gay community, but traditional relief agencies weren't focusing on our community. And I had always been interested in overseas relief efforts. I decided to start where I'm at in my own community and start an agency to develop philanthropy focused on world humanitarian relief. Our civil rights struggle and HIV/AIDS have taught us that we need to come together as a community to help make a difference. As an oppressed minority, gay people have been on the outside for a long time. So it's easy for us to make connections with other people who are struggling across the world. At RWF we also want to raise the level of consciousness in the gay community about humanitarian relief. We provide a link for the gay community to take practical steps to help people in need around the world. At the same time, we serve the gay community by giving it an undeniable visible presence in humanitarian aid globally.

What do you do when you're not organizing international relief?

I work for the city in the mental health system. I work in a trauma program with people who have abuse in their backgrounds—adult survivors of child abuse, victims of violent crimes, rape, and domestic violence. And I work with a lot of HIV-positive people. I love what I do.

Is there a connection between your day job and the Rainbow World Fund?

I've been a social worker for 14 years, and I work on a micro level, one-on-one and with small groups of people. I want to shift my focus and take what I've learned and apply it on a macro level, a global level. RWF is a

kind of social work at an international level.

RWF has provided relief in Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, and now Asia. What are you most proud of?

I'm proud of our community's response to the tsunami. It's a huge outpouring. In the first 10 days after the disaster we've received over \$150,000 in contributions. It's amazing. I've had people call from all over the country asking, "How can I help? How can I serve? What can I do?" I say, "Wouldn't it be great if we could give CARE a check for \$250,000 at the end of this month?" I encourage people to go to the Web site and donate. Have a bake sale, tell your friends, and get involved. Challenge yourself to do more than you think you can. This is a fantastic opportunity for us to serve the world. There's ongoing need. It will take years to recover [from this tsunami]. Think about this as part of your charitable life.

The Rainbow World Fund can be found at www.rainbowfund.org.

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