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Doing God's work

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When he traveled from his hometown of San Francisco to Guatemala on a humanitarian aid trip in the spring of 2004 Jeff Cotter was struck by how often he ran into ordinary people doing extraordinary things. There was the Guatemalan woman concerned about the lack of healthcare in her community, so she recruited a group of local women to help found a clinic; an American teacher he met had visited the country and ended up staying for five years, eventually raising \$175,000 to help an impoverished community build a state-of-the-art school. Cotter speaks of such people with more than a hint of admiration: the clinic founder is "now a power broker" in her community; the schoolteacher has built "a medium-size American school in the middle of this squalid slum."



The funny thing is, those who have gotten to know Cotter through his work as the founder and president of Rainbow World Fund (RWF), a first-of-its-kind nonprofit that facilitates LGBT philanthropy on a variety of international humanitarian relief projects, say he's just the type of person he seems to admire most. "I'm really impressed by Jeff because he's just this regular guy - and I mean that in the nicest way - but to meet him, he's like this regular person who had this idea that he's executed so well and with such passion that his impact has been really extraordinary," says Michael Altshuler, the senior director of development in the western region for the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE).

One of the world's largest and oldest private international humanitarian organizations, CARE partnered with RWF to bring nearly \$250,000 ó money raised within the national and international LGBT community ó in aid to victims of the devastating South Asian tsunami that struck last December. The money provided necessities like food, temporary shelter and water purification to those who were displaced by the disaster.

Given that RWF is just five years old - Cotter, in fact, did not actually begin raising any funds for direct relief until last year - and had no reputation to speak of,

Altshuler says Cotter's ability to raise such a substantial sum of money is impressive. "I think that's a lot of money for an organization that has really just begun, to be able to have that kind of reach," he says. Altshuler credits RWF with raising awareness of international relief efforts within the LGBT community. "Lots of people would support lots of things if they knew about them," he observes. "Through Rainbow World Fund they know that they can make a significant impact or that they can participate in making a significant impact."

The partnership between the organizations, says Altshuler, continues to evolve. In May, RWF and CARE teamed up to lobby Congress on issues of global poverty. RWF is also raising money for CARE's women's and children's health and nutrition project in Haiti, a country hard hit by tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS and where political unrest has severely compromised the healthcare system. The long-term project aims to increase healthcare access specifically to women of childbearing age and children under age 5.

Creating partnerships with organizations like CARE is central to RWF's mission. It's not only a matter of practicality ó Cotter saw no need to "reinvent the wheel" - but the relationships also further RWF's mission of building bridges between the LGBT community and others that are trying to "heal the world," a phrase Cotter uses repeatedly during a recent interview. He emphasizes that although the organization also aims to help the LGBT community, it's not about buying access to push a political agenda. Nor is it about trying to change the beliefs about homosexuality of people in countries where they deliver aid. Rather it is Cotter's hope that the LGBT community's presence - financial and physical - speaks for itself in the international community when it comes to changing minds about LGBT people. RWF for instance, is currently conducting a fundraising drive for Africare, the largest African-American organization specializing in providing charitable aid to Africa. RWF is looking to raise \$12,000 to fund the yearly work of 20 HIV/AIDS peer educators in Africa. "That project is about the gay and lesbian community coming together with the African-American community to help heal the world," says Cotter. "That's another bridge that we're building." That's no small feat in a climate where segments of the African-American community are becoming increasingly vocal in their opposition to same-sex marriage, not to mention the history of tension between the African-American LGBT community and the mainstream gay rights movement.

RWF has also found other unlikely allies for its work: Catholic nuns. "I wanted Rainbow World Fund to be about forming partnerships and building bridges and connections," says Cotter. "And when I set out to do that I thought that one of the biggest areas that I want to focus on is building healthy connections between spiritual communities and the LGBT community because there's been a lot of hurt and a lot of division there." To that end, RWF is currently gearing up for a second trip to Guatemala Oct. 1-9 to deliver medical and school supplies to the impoverished country, which is still recovering from a 36-year civil war that began in 1960. The group, which may include as many as 23 LGBT people, will be guided on its journey by two nuns, Sisters Marie Des Jarlais, a Franciscan, and Jan Gregorcich, a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, from the organization Global Awareness Through Experience (GATE), a group that leads missionary trips to Latin America.

Cotter also secured a \$5000 grant last year for RWF's administrative costs from the Baltimore Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. The money, Gregorcich explains, came from a fund for LGBT ministry that the Baltimore sisters created after Sister Jeannine Grammick was forced by the church hierarchy to leave the order because of her outreach work to LGBT Catholics. Cotter notes an added benefit of partnering with the Baltimore nuns. "They also pray for Rainbow World Fund and for me every single day. That's like, fantastic support," he laughs. "It is."

Gregorcich sees no irony in leading a group of gay folks to do humanitarian work in the poverty-stricken reaches of Guatemala, despite the fact that the Catholic Church has long been at odds with the movement for gay rights. "I think that's one of the surprises people have on this trip," says Gregorcich, who is based in Milwaukee. "A lot of people have stereotyped images of nuns and so they come away with a whole different idea of who sisters today are," says Gregorcich. "And sisters throughout the world are different. I think Marie and I are pretty unique in that we just really enjoy the kind of ministry that we're doing. And I think hopefully sisters today are trying to make a better world and we do that by sharing the vision. And when we find groups like Jeff's who want to share in the vision it just does help make a better world."

Cotter's decision to create RWF stems in part from his own upbringing in a Catholic family although the question of whether he's still practicing the faith prompts a rather long bout of laughter. "I was raised Catholic and so through that I was always exposed and taught about poverty and suffering in the world that other people were facing," says the 42-year-old. Having grown up in relative comfort in the United States and Europe, Cotter questioned his parents as to how there could be so much wealth disparity in the world and why people were allowed to go hungry. "And they weren't able to give me an answer."

When after nearly 16 years as a psychiatric social worker, Cotter began looking for a way to refocus his work:

those questions resurfaced. At the same time, he decided that he wanted to do something that was original, yet would have a positive social impact. Eventually he says, something akin to "an inner voice," told him to start a relief agency based in the gay and lesbian community. "I thought it was fantastic, a way to serve the world and help our community." He then spent three years setting up RWF infrastructure and raising start-up funds, with the goal being to have all of the administrative costs paid for through grants and private donations, ensuring that all of the money RWF raises goes directly to the causes it pledges to support. He also spent a good chunk of time meticulously researching the organizations with which RWF has chosen to partner, picking only those with a "flawless" history of relief and development work.

While he is not affiliated with any organized religion, Cotter wants RWF to be an example to religions he says have become over-politicized and too focused on social control. "I hope that Rainbow World Fund and some of the other great things that are happening in the world can help religion get back to its real core, its real power," he says, "which is in the heart and which is really all about love."

And he sees no tension in encouraging the LGBT community to expend resources to ease global suffering, despite the fact that there's currently plenty of work for the LGBT community to do on United States soil in the fight to protect itself. The LGBT community is an oppressed minority, he says, "and by doing this it's not about taking away from our own domestic political agenda ... it's a way again of being in solidarity with other oppressed people around the world." The gay community has much in common with the indigenous Mayan and Ladino populations in Guatemala, Cotter observes, noting that for a time Mayan weddings were invalidated by the country's government. They are now fighting for access to healthcare and other services in their country, he adds, just as LGBT Americans have historically had to do. "If you look at the histories there's a lot of connections that we as gay and lesbian people have in the United States with oppressed minorities all over the world," says Cotter. "And it's really important that we start to look at that, foster connections and develop some solidarity with these groups."

So just how far can RWF go in being a global LGBT ambassador? CARE's Altshuler is hesitant to speculate, but he suspects the potential is great. "I cannot help but think," he says, "when there's a picture on the front page of the newspaper - whether it's a gay and lesbian newspaper or whether it makes it into the major media - of the Rainbow World Fund, a gay and lesbian mechanism for charitable giving, giving a big check to an organization like CARE to do a significant amount of humanitarian relief work, that that has to have an impact on a community."

For more information on Rainbow World Fund visit www.rainbowfund.org

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Comments, criticism or praise regarding this article or writer -- or just about any other subject of interest to the lesbian and gay community -- are always welcome.

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