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Making a difference

If making charitable donations is a part of your holiday tradition, then Jeff Cotter wants your money.

Cotter is the founder and president of the San Francisco-based Rainbow World Fund (RWF) a one-of-a-kind nonprofit that facilitates LGBT philanthropy on a variety of international humanitarian relief projects (see "Doing God's Work," July 28). The organization sprang into action two days after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in September, raising more than \$300,000 within the LGBT community to provide food to victims of the Gulf Coast disaster. In October, RWF brought a dozen mostly gay and lesbian people to Guatemala, where they spent 10 days delivering cash and more than 1000 pounds of medical and school supplies to some of the country's most impoverished regions, all while dealing with the torrential rains and mudslides wrought by Hurricane Stan. RWF is now in the midst of a campaign to aid victims of the October earthquake that devastated parts of India and Pakistan. That's all in addition to RWF's work on long-term projects like the construction of a water system in a rural Honduran village and clearing minefields in Cambodia.

Not surprisingly, *Out* magazine put the tireless Cotter, who runs RWF in addition to his full-time job as a psychiatric social worker, on its list of 2005's 100 "most interesting, influential and newsworthy LGBT people." Cotter stopped in Boston last month after attending an NYC bash thrown by *Out* for this year's honorees to talk up some of RWF's recent work.

Topping Cotter's to-do list is raising cash for medical supplies, food, clean water and winterized tents for earthquake survivors in India and Pakistan, where the 7.6-on-the-Richter-scale quake rocked the lives of five million people. Three million have been left homeless, Cotter says, tens of thousands of whom are now facing a harsh Himalayan winter. Despite that, he adds, "the response of the world hasn't really been there." RWF, for instance, has raised just about \$15,000, though Cotter would like to see that figure top \$100,000.

"I'm not sure exactly what's going on," he says of the overall lack of aid for earthquake relief. He suspects "donor fatigue," the result of the massive outpouring of giving after the devastating South Asian tsunami a year ago and more recently Katrina, and an absence of ongoing media attention. "There was some media coverage but 18,000 people died within the first few days of that earthquake," Cotter says. "And the media coverage was nothing like it was for the tsunami or Hurricane Katrina. So it slipped out of our consciousness very, very quickly."

The money RWF raises will be administered by CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere), one of the world's oldest and largest private international humanitarian organizations. RWF also partnered with CARE to deliver \$250,000 in aid after the South Asian tsunami. Such partnerships are central to RWF's mission to bridge the gap between the LGBT community and established, mainstream institutions committed to making the world a more livable place for all people.

RWF's October trip to Guatemala was yet another chance to build bridges, despite the treacherous weather. Loaded down with duffel bags stuffed with antibiotics, antifungals, intravenous medications, bandages and all manner of pencils, pens, paper, rulers, art stuff and other school supplies, the RWF crew touched down in Guatemala City one day before Hurricane Stan blew into the region, causing floods and a deadly mudslide that wiped out a Mayan village near Santiago Atitlan, just hours after RWF had left it. The group endured constant downpours, two days without running water, and impassable, crumbling roads that forced long travel delays or prevented them from reaching some remote destinations on their itinerary.

But they were greeted effusively in the Mayan and Ladino villages they visited. "They were just so happy that we traveled through such difficult circumstances, six days into the storm to reach them in some remote mountain village," says Cotter. With few exceptions, they identified themselves as a gay organization wherever they went, a risky move in a country where just this week authorities began investigating whether Guatemala City police officers were behind the shootings of two transgender women, one of whom died from her injuries. "We would talk to people about, what are their impressions of gay people in the country and all of that," says Cotter. "And people were — sometimes they were a little surprised." Though the group didn't encounter any negative reactions, says Cotter, "of course we're lucky. We're not living there. We didn't put ourselves in a place where we were vulnerable either."

They also visited with and gave a cash donation to the LGBT organization Oasis. Based in Guatemala City, Oasis is one of the country's most visible gay organizations. Sadly, Oasis members were mourning the murder of a local drag queen, also allegedly at the hands of a police officer. "We spent a lot of time talking about what it's like to be a gay person in Guatemala, the risks that they take in their society," Cotter recalls. "And of course that made all of us feel for them and of course realize how much progress we've made in the United States and how fortunate we are and actually how much power that we have as gay people here."

Guatemala is a country still recovering from the ravages of a 30-year civil war that finally ended in 1996. Cotter says that the level of extreme poverty, the lack of basic healthcare or even clean water and the political oppression that pervades much of the country was shocking to some members of the RWF group. But at least one traveler found reasons to be hopeful. Michael Thomas, a bank employee from San Francisco, called his experience in Guatemala "amazing."

"It was an incredible opportunity to meet people who are doing really important work, you know, healthcare, education, safe water — all kinds of really important work — and we got to meet these people," says Thomas. "Plus we got to see a beautiful country."

Of the many people and places he experienced in Guatemala, Thomas was most moved by a meeting with a group of women in a small village in the Quiche Islands, who succeeded against difficult odds in bringing clean drinking water to their village. "They were so thrilled to meet us and they were so thrilled to have succeeded in this very macho, traditional culture despite the men in their village kind of poo poo-ing the idea, despite the local politicians giving them lip service but not doing anything, they got it done," says Thomas. "They had just an amazing spirit. And I couldn't help but think that if they had access to education, if they had access to opportunity ... they really could do things in this world."

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