

Small Business Profile

Rainbow World Fund – the Castro's International Relief Agency

Every month, the *Castro Courier* will profile a local small business to illustrate the great commercial life of the neighborhood. This month, we profile a nonprofit.

By Christine Lias

In between various projects, the Castro's own Rainbow World Fund (RWF) was recently voted organization grand marshal for the 2007 LGBT Pride Parade. It is a high honor for the LGBT nonprofit that is less than a decade old.

Jeff Cotter started RWF out of his home in 2000. The idea came to him in a "flash" one day when he realized he wanted to start an international relief agency within the San Francisco gay and lesbian community where he had settled. As a child, he always wondered about other children's sufferings abroad. This led him to pursue a career in social work as an adult.

"As a gay man, I wanted to start where I was living, in the Castro," he said. "I wanted to do something different, something with a broad impact."

Cotter, who was adopted from the United Kingdom and grew up in Maryland and Germany, immediately began writing out his ideas for how his organization would work. He began networking to make it happen. Rainbow World Fund has since grown to six staff members in an office overlooking 18th Street near Castro. At times there have been up to 40 volunteers working on events.

He said the first several years were necessary to build infra-

structure. The past three years have seen more humanitarian aid develop and international projects come forth.

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in late August 2005, RWF used the Internet, its e-mail and mailing lists to raise a total of \$400,000 in humanitarian aid for Second Harvest food banks.

Ross Fraser, spokesman for Second Harvest headquarters in Chicago, said RWF contacted his organization immediately after Hurricane Katrina hit. The Chicago office oversees 200 food banks, including the San Francisco location.

"I said, 'We need money.' Everyone wanted to donate food," Fraser said.

"Those poor people in New Orleans. They needed every penny they could get," Fraser said. For every dollar that RWF donated, Second Harvest was able to buy 20 pounds of food. "It was a significant donation."

Rainbow World Fund has raised a total of \$1.1 million in humanitarian aid, including \$400,000 for Hurricane Katrina and \$250,000 for tsunami relief, partnering with CARE humanitarian agency. CARE has an office in San Francisco and first teamed up with RWF to offer support for victims of Hurricane Jeanne in Haiti.

"What makes our partnership unique with Rainbow World Fund is just the support level and the outreach they have with their donors," said Fairuz Taqi-Eddin, associate director of development for CARE in San Francisco.

"Rainbow World Fund is re-



Photo: Bill Sywak

Rainbow World Fund founder Jeff Cotter sits in front of a painting in his office depicting a mud slide that resulted from Hurricane Stan which struck Guatemala in 2005. Cotter's group distributed medicine and relief supplies in the aftermath of the catastrophe.

ally reaching and targeting a certain demographic that our organization may not have." She applauded its fund-raising efforts and ability to interest a new cross-section of individuals in further humanitarian aid and issues.

Rainbow World Fund has worked with Catholic Relief Services on a water purification project in a rural village of 500 people in Honduras. On another project, RWF sponsors HIV peer education training in South Africa to give youths bicycles, condoms and education so they can dispense knowledge and hopefully stem the spread of HIV and AIDS.

"Our most powerful weapon is education," Cotter said.

From July 21 to 30, the group will travel to Guatemala on its fourth humanitarian trip to deliver medical and educational supplies. On June 13 and 14, RWF and CARE will be in Washington for a National Advocacy Conference to discuss global poverty, HIV-AIDS and other issues.



Photo provided by Jeff Cotter

Four Guatemalan children pose for the camera with toys given to them by the Rainbow World Fund.

Rainbow World Fund has five basic areas of focus: hunger, safe drinking water, global HIV, land mine eradication and disaster relief. Though largely an organization with an international orientation, some focal points can be domestic – as was the case with Hurricane Katrina.

"When people ask us, 'Why

not just give it to all of us? Charity starts at home.' I encourage them to expand their definition of what home is and what family is," Cotter said.

For more information on the Rainbow World Fund, visit its Web site at www.rainbowfund.org.