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Gay Relief on the World Map

Jeffrey Cotter's Rainbow World Fund aims at global solidarity

By MARCUS O. CARLSON

Jeffrey Cotter believes that it is important to offer aid to people in need around the globe and also critical that the gay community demonstrate that it is committed to that goal.

In New York earlier this month for the OUT 100 awards ceremony, Cotter took advantage of his time here to further awareness in this city of his initiative, the Rainbow World Fund (RWF), an LGBT sponsored worldwide relief organization founded in 2000. A San Francisco-based social worker, Cotter hopes to be able to establish a New York branch in the near future.

"We've had a lot of support from people here," he said in an interview. "New York is a gay mecca and I would love to open up a Rainbow World Fund office here."

Over the past few months, Cotter has been busy networking in New York, ranging from creating awareness at this past June's LGBT Community Center Garden Party to attending private parties while in town. At one of the more recent parties, he learned that the Metro



Jeffrey Cotter explained that his philanthropic drive

Bears of New York had raised more than \$5,000 to help fund an RWF project for Hurricane Katrina victims. Cotter is also grateful for the assistance he received from the Community Center in RWF's tsunami aid campaign earlier this year.

grew out of his Catholic upbringing; Rainbow World Fund members met with Oasis, a Guatemalan HIV advocacy group, this fall.

"And so many people here have shown interest in volunteering, so once I get people committed, a formal fundraising party could be one of the steps for the year ahead," Cotter commented on his future plans in New York.

Through direct, LGBT-sponsored aid, Cotter argued, the gay community as a whole can demonstrate to the world community its commitment to play a role in improving the lives of those less fortunate around the globe. As a gay man born in the '60s, Cotter said he has witnessed a maturing of the gay community during his lifetime—a progression in its social consciousness from the 1969 Stonewall rebellion to a broader perspective of international solidarity today.

"We have so many resources in the LGBT community," said Cotter, who went on to emphasize, "but we don't fully realize our own influence in the world."

Helping gay people understand the role they can play in making a difference is one of his missions.

"Because in this world, we are really all one family," he argued.

According to Cotter, helping others is one way to actualize lessons learned while growing up gay, lessons that deal with coming together to support each other.

"It is really all about valuing ourselves," he said in explaining the meaning of helping others in the lives of LGBT people.

Cotter's rationale for organizing LGBT-funded relief around the world is based on what he calls the solidarity model, and the group's fundraising encourages donors to specify the projects they wish to support. By allowing supporters to direct aid to specific ends, such as a clean drinking water project in Central America, the Rainbow World Fund is determined to show the community that it can make a tangible difference. RWF projects are typically focused on alleviating a clearly delineated problem, such as providing latrines in Central American villages or tents for homeless Pakistani earthquake victims.

Cotter said his own experiences working with non-gay help organizations have been decidedly positive. Cooperating with major relief organizations, such as CARE and AfriCare, the Rainbow World Fund has been able to help the starving in Niger and to support South Africans with AIDS. Hoping to expand HIV projects in Africa, Cotter is currently communicating with an LGBT organization in Ghana to support a health care project there.

RWF efforts are typically targeted at what Cotter termed the "five biggies"—alleviating hunger, access to safe drinking water, landmine eradication, addressing global HIV, and providing disaster relief. This fall, he made what he called a "global awareness trip" to Guatemala, where he networked with Oasis, a local HIV advocacy organization. While there, his RWF team delivered \$50,000 worth of medical supplies to poverty-stricken villagers, and explored a safe drinking water project similar to an effort the group has funded in Honduras. A follow-up trip is scheduled for next year.

"We are looking forward to future collaborations with groups such as Oasis," Cotter said. "Eventually we would like to sponsor a speaking tour of LGBT representatives from developing nations to come and educate us first hand about their struggle for human rights."


So far this year, his organization has granted \$650,000 worth of aid, at home and around the world. Cotter operates with an advisory board of four directors and a \$5,000 administration budget, donating many more hours of his own time each week to RWF than he is able to put into his day job as a psychiatric social worker for the city of San Francisco. He said his organization was able to raise \$250,000 to help victims of the Christmas 2004 Pacific tsunami and, more recently, \$350,000 for the benefit of Katrina relief projects. Many donations are made directly online, on the rainbowworldfund.org website.

Cotter explained that he grew up in a caring Catholic family, having been adopted as an Irish orphan when his American parents were living in the U.K. After moving to the States at the age of 11, he found himself asking questions that ultimately dealt with disparities he

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came to understand in the larger world. Concern for the plight of the poor was a cornerstone in his Catholic upbringing, he explained, which eventually brought on concrete questions of "What can I do?" During the past two years, he has carried out several RWF collaborations with religious congregations, including the Saint Francis Lutheran Church in San Francisco and the Cathedral of Hope, a gay church in Texas.

Cotter was particularly pleased that the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Baltimore gave RWF a \$10,000 in response to the actions taken by Pope John Paul II in silencing one of their fellow sisters, Jeannine Gramick, for her LGBT ministry work. Cotter relished the irony of John Paul's actions inadvertently benefiting an LGBT organization.

"You know as the Catholics say, when God closes a door, Mary opens a window," he noted.

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