

MAKING A DIFFERENCE ONE VILLAGE AT A TIME

A San Franciscan leads a humanitarian group of gay men and women to Guatemala.



— PATRICK LETELLIER

Twenty-four duffel bags packed tight cover the floor around Jeff Cotter. At first glance it looks like an airport's lost luggage room. Each bag is gaping open, revealing a hodgepodge of loot. One is stuffed with toothbrushes and miniature tubes of Mint Colgate. Another is packed with gauze, Band-Aids and

bulk-size bottles of Ibuprofen. In a third, paintbrushes, colored pencils and calculators. A fourth bears a most unlikely combination: a giant stuffed Winnie the Pooh and 1,500 condoms.

"Let's put medical supplies in that corner," Cotter says, clutching a handful of yellow and red ace bandages and gesturing to his



left. "School supplies by the door. And keep the HIV meds in a separate pile." The room is abuzz. Thirteen gay men and women from the United States have just arrived in Guatemala with Cotter for a ten-day journey around the country organized by the Rainbow World Fund, the international GLBT humanitarian aid group Cotter founded six years ago, and the only one of its kind in the world. And everyone is excited.

The loot the group is now sorting is an impressive cache: \$250,000 worth of medical and school supplies they collected from friends and coworkers, plus almost 600 stuffed animals, to be dispersed in orphanages, clinics, schools and tiny Mayan villages. Some of the poorest people in Guatemala, one of the poorest nations in the Western Hemisphere, will receive these supplies. And

Cotter, the RWF volunteers and two nuns will lead the tour.

"Thanks be to God for all you people for dragging all this down here!" says Sister Marie, gleefully. "My gosh, this is wonderful. This is solidarity."

For Cotter, a 43-year-old psychiatric social worker from San Francisco, this scene is a snapshot from a much larger vision he'd been having since

childhood. His vision was to change the world and eradicate poverty.

"As a kid I was always questioning why there was so much poverty, so much disparity between rich and poor," Cotter says. "And I've always been concerned about children."

Born in Bristol, England, to a single, working-class, 18-year-old Irish woman, Cotter and his identical twin brother, John, were put up for adoption and spent the first four months of their lives in a Catholic orphanage. Their adoptive parents, an American couple, moved the boys back to the United States within a year, and Cotter spent most of his childhood in Maryland.

"I was always conscious of being adopted, and because of that I always wondered about the welfare of other orphans, and eventually about the welfare of children everywhere," he says. "I developed a world view really young and tried to educate myself about what was going on around the globe."

A heartfelt desire to help people propelled Cotter into social work, where he has spent almost two

decades counseling survivors of trauma and people with HIV/AIDS. But by the late 1990s, he had begun to burn out.

"I wanted to do something different, but I didn't know what it would be," he explains. "So I set out some guidelines. I wanted something that had personal meaning for me, had broad impact on the world, would help people, and that had never been done before."

A couple of months later, he had a sudden, startling thought: start a world relief organization in the gay and lesbian community. So he did.

"Our community had grown so strong that I knew we could help people around the world. I also thought this could change the way we see ourselves and give the world a much fuller picture of who gay people are."

Cotter founded the Rainbow World Fund in 2000, and spent the next four years developing relationships with other world relief groups, like CARE, and building the organization's infrastructure.

But how did he know how to do all this?

"I had no idea!" he says, laughing. "I eventually got over myself and did it anyway."

Cotter cites a 1987 pop-psychology bestseller, "Feel Your Fear and Do It Anyway," as one of his guiding principles. "My hesitations are all internal," he says. "I allow myself to have fears, then I do what I need to do."

In the last two years, that has included raising just over \$1 million dollars from the GLBT community for humanitarian aid, including \$250,000 for survivors of the 2004 tsunami and \$360,000 for Hurricane Katrina. For these efforts, he has been officially recognized by the California State Assembly, was dubbed one of Out Magazines 100 most influential GLBT newsmakers in 2005, and was named a "Person of the Year" by Gay.com.

But none of the attention phases Cotter. His focus remains on raising funds and getting aid to people who need it. He wants to see RWF chapters in cities around the globe to help with the group's current work: building a water project in Honduras, eradicating land mines in Cambodia, responding

to the famine in Niger and helping children and families in Guatemala.

"We're living in an amazing time on the planet with lots of opportunities to shift the direction of the world," he says. "We're all part of one big global family and we have to help each other." **ON**

Patrick Letellier is a freelance writer in San Francisco. You can reach him at letpatrick@yahoo.com.

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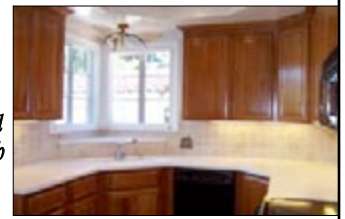
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