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[Personals](#)
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 go

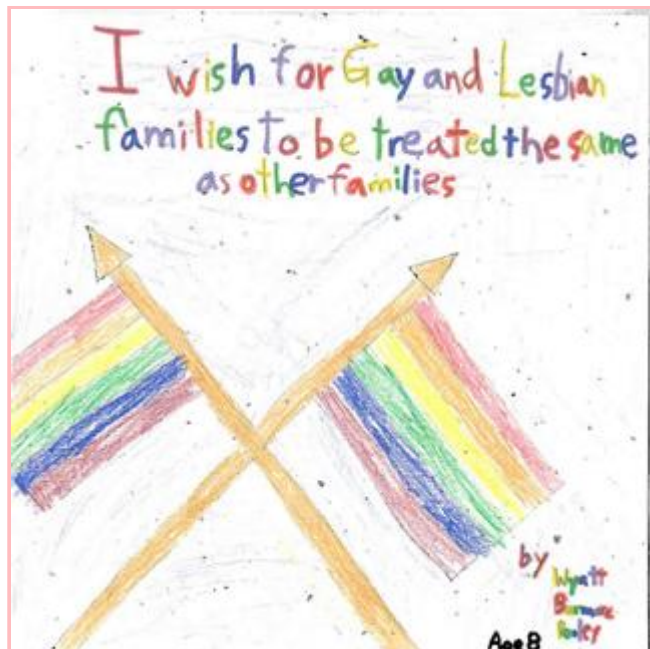
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[Calendar](#)
[Resource Guide](#)
[News](#)
[Local News](#)
[National News](#)
[International News](#)
[Ann Rostow National News Roundup](#)
[Editorials](#)
[Letter to the Editor](#)
[Columnists](#)
[Tom Moon, MFT](#)
[Queer Faith](#)
[Anything But Straight](#)
[Sparks](#)
[Guest Columnists](#)
[Citizen Crain](#)
[TransNation](#)
[Whole Lesbian Sex](#)
[Astrological Forecast](#)
[Health & Wellness](#)
[Theatre](#)
[Hot Tickets](#)
[Entertainment Specials](#)
[Movies](#)
[Film](#)
[Film Features](#)
[DVDs](#)
[Deep Inside Hollywood](#)
[Television](#)
[Clubs](#)
[Music](#)

Tree Of Hope Unveiled By Rainbow World Fund at City Hall

By Dennis McMillan

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Five thousand origami cranes expressing wishes from around the world decorated the 22-foot tall evergreen Tree of Hope, which was unveiled at a ceremony in City Hall open to all, thanks to the sponsorship of Mayor Gavin Newsom, newlywed Jennifer Siebel Newsom, and the Rainbow World Fund (RWF). Rainbow World Fund was founded in 2000 as a humanitarian service agency based in the queer and friends community. The mission of RWF is to promote LGBT philanthropy in the area of world humanitarian relief. RWF works to help people who suffer from hunger, poverty, disease, oppression, and war by raising awareness and funds to support relief efforts around the world. RWF has gathered and distributed more than \$1 million in money and medical supplies in the past four years.



The Tree of Hope project, now in its third year, "gives individuals a way to join together to express hopes and intentions for the future of our global community," said Jeff Cotter, RWF's founder and executive director. "By developing the campaign as an art project, RWF hopes to demonstrate how one person's wish, when combined with those of thousands of others, can be transformed into something much more powerful and beautiful than what any single individual might hope to achieve." Strength in numbers!

Mayor Newsom earlier stated, "The Tree of Hope offers the opportunity for the City of San Francisco's compassion to be seen and heard throughout the world to promote peace and humanitarianism."

To further explain, the origami crane became known as a symbol of peace in 1955, when the world learned the story of Japanese schoolgirl Sadako Sasaki. An atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima, with the tragic result of Sasaki contracting leukemia. While in the hospital, a friend told her about a Japanese legend that grants one wish to the folder of 1,000 paper cranes. Sasaki died 356 cranes short

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Personals
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of her goal; but her classmates gladly folded the rest, so all thousand cranes were buried with her.

Likewise RWF gathered wishes online at rainbowfund.org and by mail weeks prior. The project was a collaboration between the LGBT and Japanese-American communities, and it included the participation of elementary-, middle-, and high school students in San Francisco. More than 100 people came together, donating more than 3,000 hours to create the Tree. Donna Sachet emceed this year's tree lighting ceremony, with entertainment by the San Francisco Boys Chorus to start the ceremony with carols, followed by several speeches, and then singer Veronica Klaus doing holiday music and some of her standards with accompaniment by Tammy Hall and Daniel Fabricant. The event ended with plenty of food and wine and water for everyone.

"These wishes on the Tree represent people coming together across all inconceivable differences to celebrate the act of giving, being with loved ones and friends, and the act of compassion for others," said Jennifer Siebel Newsom. She asked everyone to take a moment of silence to imagine a more peaceful world and what we could do individually to ensure that vision becomes a reality. The Rev. Nobuaki Hanaoka of the United Methodist Church is a survivor of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. He told a detailed, shocking story of how the disaster gruesomely affected his family and friends, and then addressed the anti-gay Prop 8. He said the election results were "basic human rights of a minority group denied by the majority, which was unjust." He continued, "But that was not the end of our hope. That was just a minor setback." He concluded, "Hope is something for which we must keep on working, moving, and fighting!" Then the Counsel General of Japan presented to Cotter a giant folded paper crane with the message: "People from San Francisco and Japan meet together, work together for peace and prosperity of the world. And the friendship and partnership of Japan and the United States should develop further. I pray for the hope."

"This is a time when a lot of people understandably are fearful of the economic crisis and fearful that a majority could take away rights from a minority," said Geoff Kors, executive director of Equality California. "But it's in times such as this that we truly have the opportunity to transform our society." He said, "So rather than live in fear, we have to see this as a great time of hope." Kors noted that the margin for same-sex marriage shrank 19% since 2000, and more than 3 million more people voted for equality than they did for the anti-gay Prop 22. The Rev. Lea Brown of Metropolitan Community Church said, "At MCC, we like to say that no matter who we are - no matter what we believe or don't believe - we have tremendous power to bless one another and all of creation."

Designer of the Tree Paul Stankiewicz and Audrey Joseph, SF Commissioner and events producer, read a couple dozen of the hopes on the Tree. The Tree of Hope's many well-wishers included President-Elect Barack Obama, whose wish was for "a world for our children more just, more fair, and more kind than the one we know now." One man had written, "I wish fellow human beings be allowed the freedom and dignity to love and marry without discrimination." Another wrote, "I wish for a world without AIDS, where tolerance and acceptance is the norm, not the exception." Dr. Jane Goodall, pioneering anthropologist, wrote, "I dare to wish for a world in which people live in harmony with each other, and with the natural world, and with all the wondrous animals with whom we share the planet." Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote, "I wish for a world where all people are treated with dignity, respect, and equality - no matter who you are or who you love."

At the countdown from ten, self-proclaimed giga-star and comic Aussie drag queen Edna Everage lit the tree, adding her hilarious - though sometimes sarcastic, sometimes serious - remarks. The Tree of Hope will be on display at the top of the Rotunda steps of City Hall from now until Jan. 2.

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