

Rainbow World Fund: Queer Humanitarianism

By Dennis McMillan

Rainbow World Fund—an LGBT humanitarian service agency promoting queer philanthropy for world compassionate relief—recently delivered medical and school supplies and financial assistance to help some of Guatemala's most needy children. RWF held a fundraising party at the historic Alamo Square Inn to celebrate this successful journey. A large screen projected slides of this trek and resulting hospitals, schools, and homes being developed in Guatemala.

RWF Executive Director Jeff Cotter spoke to the guests, starting with a traditional ancient Mayan greeting, "I am another you," setting the tone of the evening. "It says quite powerfully who we are as human beings and about the unity we share in the human family."

According to the mission statement, RWF provides a united voice, a large visible presence, and a structure to deliver GLBT charitable assistance to the larger world community. The Rainbow World Fund works to help people overseas and in the United States who suffer from hunger, poverty, disease, oppression, and war by raising awareness and funds to support existing relief efforts around the world. RWF accomplishes this by working in the queer community educating people about world need.

Currently their work focuses on global HIV/AIDS, water develop-

ment, landmine eradication, and hunger—both domestic and international. RWF currently supports projects in Africa, Asia, Central America and the United States. RWF is a non-profit organization, headquartered in San Francisco. To learn more about RWF, visit their Web site at rainbowfund.org.

"We are changing how the world sees GLBT people," Jeff Cotter told *Bay Times*. "Much of the world still sees GLBT people as only caring about sex, drugs, and Madonna, but we care about a lot more than that." Cotter said he started the organization three years ago, as the culmination of a childhood dream. "As a kid I was always really concerned about what was happening in the world and why there was so much money in the U.S. but it was not like that in other parts of the world," he said. "I turned 40 a while ago and thought, 'Is this the world I want to create?' No, so I created some space in my mind for a humanitarian aid program in the gay and lesbian community. It's a way we can serve the world and in a sense be served by our service."

He added, "This allows us to take what we've learned from our civil rights struggles and what we've learned about HIV in coming together as a supportive, loving community and then exporting that to the larger world."

Cotter spoke about a program at the Guatemala City Garbage Dump, where one of the most unclean and unsafe slums is being converted via



Executive Director Jeff Cotter - in the cowboy hat - discusses the Rainbow World Fund with a parade-goer at RWF's booth at this year's Freedom Day Parade.

Project Safe Passage into livable housing. This was started in 1999 by an American woman, Hanley Dennig, who was appalled by the lack of safe water, good housing, and a school. "The situation is pretty dire down there, once you leave the tourist areas and see how these forgotten people struggle to live," said Cotter. "We begged, borrowed, and stole some of the newest anti-fungals, antibiotics, and other medications for the clinic, and we did the

same thing with school supplies. And we also delivered financial assistance." He said the stories of those poor people are very similar to those of the queer community. "The government tries to make the Mayan population invisible, for a long time having invalidated their marriages and their cultural and social traditions," said Cotter. "We queers have a lot in common with many of the indigenous populations around the world. We have a tremendous

opportunity to be in solidarity with them and teach them what we have learned."

Projects are set up to go to Cambodia and deal with landmine removal with Adopt-A-Minefield; to Honduras with Water Partners International to install safe water and sewage removal; to Africa with Project Africare—the largest African-American based aid provider in the world; and working with CARE, the great grandmother of humanitarian organizations, focusing on world hunger. "We are sort of a queer peace corps/queer United Nations thing," said Cotter.

RWF disseminates information that most people are not aware of, such as the fact that the leading cause of death for the world's children and what kills more people than cancer and AIDS combined is unsafe water. RWF is also alerting the public that what a pet project of Princess Diana had been—landmine removal—continues to be a massive problem with over 35,000 Cambodian amputees requiring ongoing healthcare and rehabilitation. The cost to eradicate mines is up to \$10 billion annually.

Currently 15 people are involved with RWF, with a small board of four. They are looking to expand with more people involved. Cotter posed a very simple and yet quite complex question to the attendees and anyone with benevolent tendencies: "What would YOU do to help heal the world and make it a better place?"▼