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2010 12 People You Need to Know: Keith Jaspers

Tanja Kern
Contributing Writer

Throughout their careers, local business owners Keith Jaspers and his wife, Karen, have dedicated more than 50 percent of their time working with poor people through Christian mission programs. In 1995, they founded the Rainbow Network, a Springfield not-for-profit that serves 52,000 people in rural Nicaragua and has support from dozens of area churches, businesses and other nonprofits.

"It's an outreach of Christian faith," Jaspers says. "I had always felt that people had some responsibility to help other people in need, and I learned how to do it by volunteering at other organizations like Habitat for Humanity."

Jaspers studied music at the University of Iowa. Early in his career, Jaspers worked for Kinney Shoes, Osco Drug and the Sather Cookie Co. He and his wife went into business for themselves in the



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Keith Jaspers

Position: Founder of the Rainbow Network; owner of the Days Inn, Howard Johnson, Red Roof Inn and Day by Day Tours in Branson

Age: 66

Education: Bachelor's in music

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1970s when they bought a bowling center in Worthington, Minn. In 1982, they moved to Springfield.

"It's been a busy life - but a fun and exciting life," Jaspers says.

The couple sold Battlefield Lanes after a few years and began building hotels in the late 1980s. Today, they run the Days Inn, Howard Johnson and Red Roof Inn in Branson and the Wingate by Wyndham Hotel in Maryland Heights, outside of St. Louis.

Jaspers' business success allowed him to pursue his dream of opening the Christian mission project. "In the early years, (Rainbow Network) was done with our own private funding, but as we grew, others helped us," Jaspers says.

Nicaragua is Latin America's poorest country, with some of the worst indicators for human welfare. Three quarters of the poor live in rural areas. Half of these people are so poor that they can't meet their daily food needs, and unemployment is extremely high.

The Rainbow Network helps the residents of Nicaragua with nutrition, health care, education, housing and micro-loans so they can start family businesses. In March 2009, the organization celebrated serving 25 million meals at a feeding center in Nicaragua.

Jaspers stepped down as executive director of the Rainbow Network in late 2009 to pursue more time with his family, including his nine grandchildren.

"This had been in the planning for three years," Jaspers says of naming the Rev. Jim Oman as his successor.

Oman is uniquely qualified for the task through his 23 years of executive leadership within a variety of Christian ministries.

For the last 15 years, Jaspers has traveled to Nicaragua six or seven times a year.

"I have been to Nicaragua 100 times over the past 25 years, which is one of the reasons why I'm cutting back," he says. "I sacrificed some of the success we could have had in our business and I certainly missed a lot of family activities."

Still, he can't stay away from his mission work. He flew to Nicaragua three times in 2009 and will go two times in 2010.

Education: Bachelor's in Music from the University of Iowa

Career: Customer service at Kinney Shoes, Osco Drug, Sather Cookie Co.; owned Battlefield Lanes