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What is business without charity?

Geoff Pickle
 Web Editor

Springfield businessman Keith Jaspers believes those in the position to help others should do so without hesitation.



SBJ Editor Eric Olson sat down with businessman Keith Jaspers, a 12 People You Need to Know honoree.

He sat down with Springfield Business Journal Editor Eric Olson on Tuesday at this month's 12 People You Need to Know breakfast to discuss his work in both Nicaragua and Springfield.

Jaspers, owner with his wife, Karen, of the Days Inn, Howard Johnson, Red Roof Inn and Day by Day Tours in Branson, founded the Rainbow Network in 1995, a Springfield not-for-profit that sends aid to the developing country.


"People with some means have some responsibility," he said "If you're able to save a life or to change a life significantly, then why not do it?"

The Rainbow Network provides financial support, but it is also adamant about working in partnership with the Nicaraguan villagers.

Nearly 50 Nicaraguan staff members and a handful of employees in Springfield, at 3834 South Ave., help to keep the operation running smoothly. But the bulk of the work is done by its 2,000 to 3,000 Nicaraguan daily volunteers.

The Rainbow Network controls the funding -- about \$2 million is raised annually -- but the Nicaraguan staff members make decisions on behalf of the community.

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"It becomes a program for Nicaraguans but by Nicaraguans with partners from the U.S." Jaspers said.

When the Rainbow Network started, it served five communities and has now expanded to 124 communities, providing what Jasper calls the keystones of society: health care, housing, economic development and education.

Real change, he said, isn't a temporary solution. The organization has been in the area since '95, and operations do not appear to be slowing.

He said by continuing to aid over a long-term basis, a charity organization can not only change the landscape, it can change people's mindsets.

Over the years, the network has built 650 houses, more than 500 grade schools and 200 feeding centers, Jaspers said.

The Rainbow Network has started issuing microloans -- typically about \$150 to \$170 each -- based on a set category of needs and which tend to be paid back within six months.

Jaspers said the Rainbow Network has about 1,500 American families that donate and donations came in from 46 states in 2009.

He stepped down as executive director in 2009, naming the Rev. Jim Oman as his successor, but Jaspers is still involved in the organization as a lifetime board member. Later this year, he will make a trip to Nicaragua, a trip that he says anyone is welcome to attend.