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## Springfield's Rainbow couple has changed many lives

*Roger Ray*

I am grateful for having had a number of opportunities to know or meet several famous people over the years, including academics, religious leaders, American senators and members of Congress and the president of Nicaragua. But the person who has had the most profound impact on my life is a former Iowa farmer who bought a bowling alley in Springfield and then went into the hotel business.

Keith Jaspers, along with his wife Karen, combined a gift for business with a willingness to sacrifice and work hard and made themselves surprisingly successful by the time they had reached middle age. I remember hearing Karen in an interview, several years ago, explaining that "When we realized that we had more than enough for our own needs we wanted to find a way to give back to others." That statement has stood out in my memory because I know so many people who have so very much but who never seem to reach the point of feeling urgency about helping the poor. You would think that helping others would be a natural reflex but, in fact, it is sadly rare.

After first working with Habitat International, Keith went to Nicaragua to start a new kind of ministry. He experimented, initially using only his own money, in trying to find a combination of medical, educational, housing, nutrition and small business loans in a network of services which could help raise a small village out of poverty. The Rainbow Network was born out of the hearts and the wallet of these two Christian business people and now nearly 50,000 people are being helped every day by Rainbow.

The "rainbow" of their vision was to bring together Protestants and Catholics, liberals and conservatives, the rich and the poor, into a partnership to work toward ending the violence of poverty for some of the world's most impoverished people. I must have personally said "no" to more than two dozen invitations to go to Nicaragua with Keith Jaspers before he finally convinced me to go. That first trip has turned into a dozen more trips and has, in every good way imaginable, changed my life.

This weekend Keith and Karen are officially retiring from this organization which they founded. I wish that the Humanitarian of the Year award was mine to give to this family because they are directly responsible for saving the lives of thousands of impoverished people in Nicaragua and they have created an opportunity for ministry which has brought together people from across a broad religious divide who normally would not associate with one another.

We religious types often talk a good fight using words like love, grace, forgiveness, peace and compassion, but the truth is that not many of us really stretch ourselves to work with people from the other side of whatever religious boundaries divide us and we don't sacrifice much to reach out to the nameless, faceless poor who live beyond our national boundaries. Keith and Karen Jaspers are exceptional people.

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