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Rebuild the Coast Fund doles out \$8.8M; aid ends

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Marshall Johnson and his wife, Laura, were down to their last \$175. Hurricane Katrina had robbed them of money, their Biloxi home and any sense of security.

Then they received a check from the Rebuild the Coast Fund, headed by Mississippi best-selling author John Grisham and his wife, Renee.

"I have a hard time explaining what that meant to us ... you just can't put things like that into words," says Johnson, 60, who has been a waiter at Mary Mahoney's restaurant for 38 years. "But I'll say this: I've never met Mr. Grisham, but I've seen him in the restaurant. The next time I see him, I'm going to go over and thank him - but I'm going to wait a couple of minutes so I can draw a crowd. I want people to know how much he and his wife have touched the people on the Coast."

Since last September, the Rebuild the Coast Fund has given away \$8.8 million to 635 individuals whose lives were devastated by Katrina. The Grishams donated \$5 million. Businessman Warren Hood of Hattiesburg gave \$3 million. Another \$800,000 was collected in bunches (\$100,000 from one Mississippi corporation) and bits (a few children raided their piggy banks to give \$5 each).

"Basically, Renee and I would sit at the kitchen table every night with a pile of applications and a checkbook," Grisham says. "Every single one of them were heartbreaking. I wish we could've given money to everyone who needed it."

But today, the Grishams will announce the fund is out of money, out of business. No more applications will be accepted.

"It's a thing where you want to keep giving and save the world, so to speak," John Grisham says. "But there comes a point when you realize you can't help everyone."

"And we did exactly what we set out to do: Raise a bunch of money quickly and give it away to those who needed it quickly. It's one of the most rewarding experiences of our lives."

Gifts ranged from \$1,000 to \$25,000, depending on the individual's situation.

Grisham, the former Mississippi legislator who has built a fortune with novels such as *The Firm* and *A Time to Kill*, and his wife toured the Gulf Coast a few days after the storm hit. "We were in shock and depressed like everybody else," he says. "But then you see these people who have lost everything, and they're not complaining or whining. They're just going about their business and trying to survive."

"That's when we said, 'OK, we've got to do something to help.' And I can't say enough about Warren Hood stepping up like he did."

Dawn Denton, daughter of the late lawyer Will Denton of Biloxi, headed the relief fund's office on the Coast.

"One thing I know for sure, we got the money to people who really needed it," Denton says. "And John and Renee were very 'hands on.' It was really amazing to see how concerned they were and how determined they were to help people who had lost everything."

"There was one woman who received money from the fund, and she told me 'Now I can go out and buy me a pair of shoes and some clothes.' It was those sorts of comments that made the long hours worth it."

Grisham, who is putting the final touches on his new book *The Innocent Man*, says he and Renee made a decision long ago that money would not make them calloused to those in need.

"We have yet to be tempted to become something we're not," Grisham says. "We're not overwhelmed with celebrity. We're very thankful for our good fortune, but we've always said that one of these days the popularity will pass. It happens, whether it's music or books or art. One day the books won't be selling, and we both want to look back and say 'It was fun, but it never changed us.'"

"The only thing that really matters in life is helping other people. What fun is it to accumulate a lot of money and sit on it?"