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WHERE'S THE MONEY?

One fund spending, one just starting

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Celebrity fundraisers that lifted spirits along the Gulf Coast in the months after Katrina now are being eyed curiously by some residents who wonder where the money is.

Of two such widely publicized charities, both involving prominent Mississippians, funds from one are being disbursed with regularity and the other is still making plans to get started. Combined, they represent about \$39 million designated to help Mississippians with Katrina losses.

The Rebuild the Coast Fund established with a \$5 million gift from best-selling author John Grisham and his wife, Renee, reports total proceeds of about \$9 million. The Grishams report about \$2.4 million already has been given directly to victims of Katrina and more than \$1 million awarded in construction grants to create housing for victims.

The selection process is arbitrary, Renee Grisham said, and based on the circumstances of the applicant.

She said the couple reviews every application and writes every check and has been awarding individual grants in amounts between \$5,000 and \$25,000.

Though plans originally were announced to post an application online at www.rebuildthecoastfund.org, Renee Grisham said in a written report, they found it to be unnecessary.

"Word of mouth worked just fine," she said, "and we now have more applications than we can possibly process - at least 500 in the pipeline."

She said the Rebuild The Coast Fund is a temporary charity that will be closed when the money is gone, and "we're awarding grants as fast as possible."

Few people on the Coast will forget the emotional "Mississippi Rising" concert broadcast Oct. 1 from Oxford, which showcased both the talents and ties of famous entertainers who have Mississippi roots. Hollywood veteran Sam Haskell of Amory produced it and Academy Award winner Whoopi Goldberg spent several days on the Coast filming footage for the concert.

The exact amount raised during that concert is not known, but its ripple effect is credited with attracting the \$17 million in co-mingled money that is now in the bank for the Mississippi Hurricane Recovery Fund, according to William Richardson of Jackson, who was appointed by Gov. Haley Barbour to administer the fund. He heads a volunteer board of five members and three officers.

The fund also has a commitment from the Bush-Clinton Fund of about \$12 million, Richardson said, so it ends up with about \$30 million. He traces it all to the effect of the concert.

"The concert was the catalyst that brought worldwide attention to the devastation in Mississippi and the need for private sector contributions," he said. "It helped draw attention to our fund, which has received money from worldwide sources. The largest contribution has been \$2 million and the smallest less than \$1."

Richardson said he expects his board to begin considering needs and fundings within the next 30 days. He said right now they are developing policies and procedures for how the money will be distributed.

Those under consideration for the money, he said, are people in all counties declared disaster areas, "with emphasis on the mega-disaster areas in the lower-tiered counties. Our first target is for individual assistance."

A FEMA spokesman said 49 counties were declared federal disaster areas for individual assistance.

Charities in Mississippi have one year after formation to make a financial accounting to the state. All that is required at this time for a charity formed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is to be registered with the state, said David Blount, spokesman for Secretary of State Eric Clark in Jackson, "but we have no financial information to indicate how much money they have raised or how effectively they have

spent it."

"For larger charities that were formed in September 2005," Blount said, "we will receive an audited financial statement and a copy of their IRS tax form in September 2006."

Grisham Fund grants

Here is a list of some of the grants awarded so far through the Grisham Fund:

- \$312,000 to Habitat for Humanity's Charlottesville, Va., chapter to build six homes for Gulf Coast families.
- \$240,000 to Northwest Medical Teams of Portland, Ore., for the rehabilitation of 40 homes in Moss Point.
- \$50,000 to the Building Goodness Foundation of Charlottesville for construction of 25 emergency shelters in Pearlington.
- \$434,000 to the Home Again Project in Pass Christian, in partnership with two foundations for a total gift of \$1.3 million to fund a pilot project of 15 energy-efficient and sustainable homes, to begin in late spring.

For the record

Two Web sites with details about donating toward hurricane recovery efforts are www.rebuildthecoastfund.org and www.mississippirecovery.com.

Mississippi Recovery.com also sells CDs (\$19.95 plus tax, shipping and handling) of the "Mississippi Rising" benefit concert held in October, for which 100 percent of the proceeds go to the fund, according to William Richardson, volunteer administrator of the fund.

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