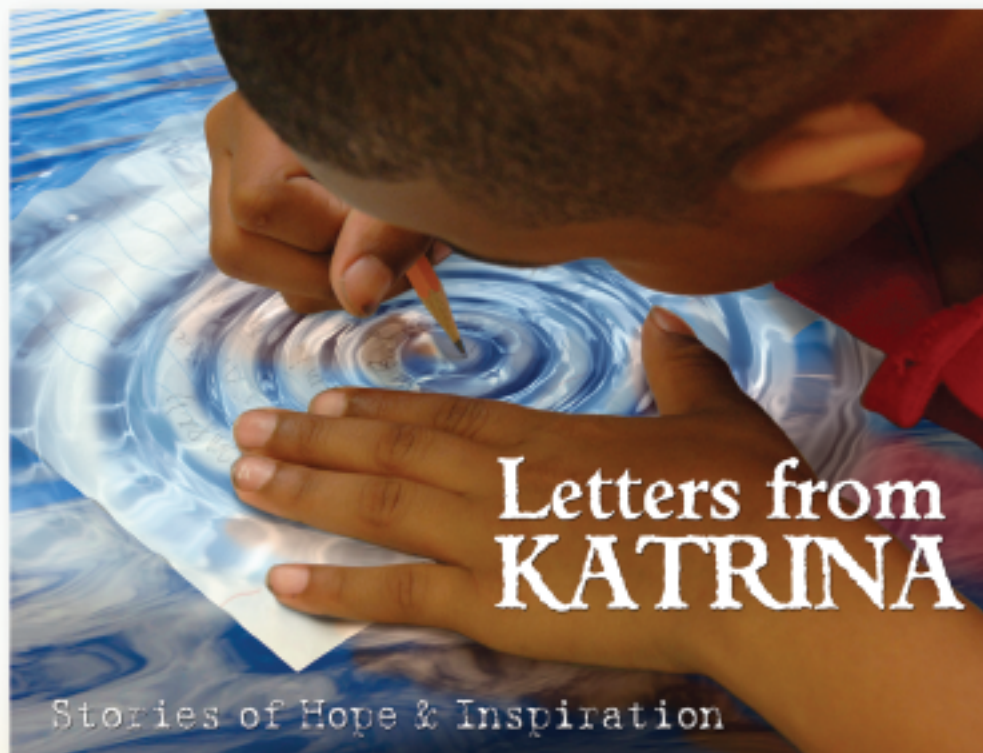




# Message in a Book

Local Students Send Hope to Hurricane Katrina Victims

BY RENEE BRINCKS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIM LEMAIRE



“I’m here today to talk about my friends in Mississippi,” says Carmel area photographer Kim Lemaire, addressing elementary students at Salinas’ Montessori Learning Center. “Do you know what happened there a couple of years ago?”

“Hurricane Katrina,” answer several students, as their faces get serious. They ask Lemaire about her recent visits to the state. How many homes were destroyed? Did people try to protect themselves? Did some children lose their parents?

After showing post-Katrina video from Hancock County, Mississippi, Lemaire and several students gather in a classroom. She gives each a copy of the book “Letters from Katrina” and the name of a Hancock County student. The children draw pictures and write notes in the books, which will be shipped to their new pen pals on the Gulf Coast.

“Your words can change the world,” Lemaire says as they write. “Just by saying one nice thing to someone, that will ripple into something else.”

Lemaire and Colorado-based children’s author Mark Hoog released “Letters from Katrina” in August 2007. All proceeds from the book fund a scholarship endowment for Hancock County students, and Hewlett-Packard recently signed on to sponsor a second printing.

In addition to correspondence between California and Colorado children and those in Mississippi, the book features Lemaire’s poignant photos of the Gulf Coast youngsters.

Two years after the storm, many still live in Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers and attend schools housed in temporary buildings.

“Here at home, no one considers that they’re still living in those



**Samuel reflects on how his family's life — he is one of eight children — has changed since Hurricane Katrina.**

**Nathaniel's mother has told him not to take off his jacket, even when the temperature tops 100 degrees, because she doesn't want him to lose it. It is the only jacket he has.**

**Nine-year-old Samantha listens to her classmates discuss what has happened to their homes and family lives in the wake of the storm.**

**"Letters from Katrina" photographer Kim Lemaire talks with Samantha Purcell, as Purcell and her Salinas classmates write encouraging letters to their Mississippi pen pals.**



Photo: Kelli Urdall

conditions," Lemaire says. "We look at Katrina like it happened two years ago. But it's heartbreaking. Some kids go without food; others have been separated from their parents. It's intense. I didn't expect what I've seen there."

"Letters from Katrina" happened almost accidentally. Near the first anniversary of the hurricane, Mark Hoog went to Hancock County to deliver books from his Growing Fields children's book series with encouraging notes from Colorado students handwritten inside. Lemaire was on hand to photograph the exchange.

As they read the students' letters of encouragement, the pair was inspired to do something more.

"When I first went down there, I didn't anticipate a book at all," says Lemaire. "It became more than Mark and I ever thought it would be, though it was a heart project from the beginning."

Hoog is continually surprised by how students on both sides of the project have similar interests, dreams and goals, despite what the Gulf Coast children have endured. He's also amazed at how little has changed since the storm.

"One of the biggest concerns is the impact [of Katrina] on this whole generation of children in the South," he says. "This book is about hope. It's an opportunity to make sure those kids know they do matter; that they are not forgotten."

Letters written by students at Carmel Valley's All Saints Episcopal Day School are included in the book. Many of the children there keep in regular contact with their Mississippi friends, and Lemaire anticipates the same for students at Montessori Learning Center.

Among them is 10-year-old Samantha Purcell, who is glad those



# “Your words can change the world”

~Kim Lemaire

students in the South have each other, but believes they still need encouragement from afar:

“I want to keep the hurricane behind them and just let them know that there are people out there who care,” she says. “It’s awesome to be a part of this and to make a difference for them.”

Nine-year-old Ashley Woods, who says she almost cried while watching Lemaire’s video, agrees.

“I felt bad for them, but I bet they’ll be happy because someone has hope for them.”

That connection between kids is what this project is about, according to Lemaire.



Photo: Keili Uffell

**Fourth, fifth and sixth graders at Salinas’ Montessori Learning Center hold donated copies of “Letters From Katrina.” Inside, each has composed a personal note to a Mississippi student impacted by the hurricane.**

“Kids are so quick to help,” she says. “I think as adults we hesitate, but they jump in without even thinking. If we allow them that opportunity to help, we all learn and we all grow.”

Lemaire is surprised, and gratified, that a simple photo shoot has become such a significant venture.

“I keep thinking that I don’t understand how I got to this place,” she says, “but there are things that happen probably once in life. You just have to say yes!”

To purchase “Letters From Katrina” or contribute to the Katrina Endowment, visit [www.lettersfromkatrina.com](http://www.lettersfromkatrina.com). The book is also available at Borders in Sand City.

A colorful advertisement for Woodies of Carmel. The background shows a man and a woman sitting on a red sofa in a store filled with clothing and accessories. The store has a warm, inviting atmosphere with various items on display. A large red ribbon graphic frames the top and sides of the image. In the center, there is a red box with white text that reads: "Get him something he wants! A gift certificate from Woodies Free Gift Wrapping Apparel ~ Gifts ~ Home Decor Mostly for him Mostly for Automobilia www.woodiesofcarmel.com". In the bottom left corner, there is a logo for "THE CROSSROADS SHOPPING VILLAGE Carmel, California Highway 1 at Rio Road". In the bottom right corner, there is contact information: "Open Daily 10-6pm Sundays 12-5pm Tel: 831-626-9064 114 Crossroads Blvd".