

Doing a Lot with a Little:

The Gulf Coast Fund for Community Renewal and Ecological Health

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Size really does matter. It is true that small foundations do not have the financial resources needed for large-scale grants and initiatives – at least not on our own. But collaboration can provide a path to greater impact, and small foundations have particular gifts to bring to collaborative efforts. Many of us are nimble, and we may have greater flexibility to take risks than our larger counterparts. In the case of The Jenifer Altman Foundation, being small has meant capitalizing on the ability to take risks and move quickly, focusing on collaborative grantmaking and combining relatively small investments with sweat equity and in-house expertise to help bring additional resources to the table.

All of these factors came into play in important ways during our response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. For several years previously, The Jenifer Altman Foundation had supported groups in Louisiana working on environmental health and justice issues. When the hurricanes struck, we had the capacity to provide only a few small emergency grants to our existing grantees. But along with colleagues at the Health and Environmental Funders Network and the Environmental Grantmakers Association, we recognized an opportunity to put our regional relationships to work. We created a funding vehicle that could be used by many more foundations and that had the potential to direct funding that otherwise never would have found its way to grassroots efforts in the Gulf Coast. Together we created a pooled fund: the Gulf Coast Fund for Community Renewal and Ecological Health.

The Gulf Coast Fund immediately presented an opportunity for funders interested in supporting post-Katrina/Rita rebuilding of communities and organizations, but lacking the relationships in the region to do so quickly and with assurance. We were able to bring our relationships in the region to the table. In addition, a few of us were able to support the fund with staff time – we worked with the part-time staff person at the fund, effectively creating a Gulf Coast Fund Team to bring in additional funding partners and create the systems and infrastructure needed to operate effectively. The creation of a pooled fund also opened the door to a creative risk – how would the fund make decisions regarding grants, if most of its contributing foundations did not have expertise or relationships in the region? We asked, “Why not look to the experts on the ground?” Again, our relationships and experience in the region brought value to the fund’s development. We

worked with leaders in the communities impacted by the storm to structure an advisory group of two dozen leading policy advocates, community activists, and grassroots organizers from Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas representing a broad swath of constituencies, geographies, and issues. These advisors stepped in to play the central role in informing the fund’s grantmaking priorities and policies and in directing the fund’s resources. Active engagement of participating funders – small and large – helped grow resources.

The Gulf Coast Fund represents an exciting new model of community-driven philanthropy. It is dedicated to empowering historically disenfranchised communities and approaching recovery in a holistic manner to ensure that communities are healthy, equitable, and sustainable. The long-term purpose and goals of the fund are to invest in the nonprofit infrastructure and strengthen civil society in a region that has remained relatively underfunded by traditional philanthropy. In addition to grantmaking and leveraging new sources of funding, the fund undertakes programs to promote movement-building, strengthen networks, increase the capacity of community-based nonprofit organizations, and cultivate leadership within historically disenfranchised communities of the Deep South.

The fund’s grantees have made significant contributions to public health and mental health, housing, worker and immigrant rights, youth leadership and empowerment, gender rights, cultural preservation and arts, indigenous coastal protection, environmental health, environmental justice, and communities’ right to return. Many of the fund’s grantees and all of its advisors have chosen to donate to the fund personally, as have some foundation staff and trustees. A number of small foundations have supported the fund with \$1,000-\$5,000. Most fund grants are between \$5,000-10,000, so a small grant to the fund can make a great difference. Since September 2005 the fund has distributed over \$2 million to over 125 grassroots and community-based organizations, far more than our small foundation could have done alone – both in dollars and in capacity-building of grassroots groups across the region. It has achieved much more than simply the effects of “grants out the door.”

By its nature, the fund created a venue for leaders in the Gulf Coast to build and deepen their relationships with each other, leading unexpectedly to new joint projects, shared vision, and a stronger base of collective leadership on a

number of issues affecting Gulf Coast communities. Together they have founded new coalitions in the region; raised their collective voice in Washington, DC; and turned around recent unjust decisions by state and local governments. With relatively small grant dollars we have made a big impact. The fund has supported the development of a vital network of grantees – individuals and communities working to increase collaboration toward a just and sustainable recovery of the Gulf Coast. We were not deterred by our small portfolio in the face of an emergency. Rather, we took advantage of our flexibility, relationships in the region, experience with collaborative efforts, and staff time and passion for the work to make a real difference and to help other small funders do the same. Size really does matter, and small is beautiful.

Doing a Lot with a Little is an occasional series of the *GIH Bulletin*.