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## Gifts from Mississippi pen pals

By **CLARISSA ALJENTERA**  
Herald Staff Writer

A little bit of Mardi Gras swept through All Saints Day School in Carmel on Thursday.

The purple, gold and green beads came Thursday in handmade friendship packages locked in clear bags from their pen pals in Hancock County, Miss.

The 48 fourth- and fifth-grade students began writing to students in Mississippi in September and have exchanged information about their favorite sports, singers and hobbies.

The letters and the back-and-forth exchange came courtesy of photographer Kim Lemaire, whose children attend All Saints Day School.

She has been working with Colorado-based author Mark Hoog on the book "Letters from Katrina," which details the hurricane's devastation in Mississippi. The two have brought letters and photographs back and forth from students in Mississippi to Carmel and Colorado in recent months.

Proceeds from the book are expected to go to the Mississippi children's college funds.

Lemaire made her third presentation to All Saints on Thursday, showing students images from the book as well as pictures of their pen pals.

The fourth-graders in Iris Sullivan's classroom sat attentively, waiting for their friendship package. One by one, the 20 students squealed and laughed as they received fistfuls of beads and handwritten letters. One boy picked up Yu-Gi-Oh cards. Another girl received nail polish.

Kasina Vaewsorn, 9, received almost 20 necklaces and a map of Mississippi.

"I like giving gifts to people and like having people know they are loved," Kasina said.

Kendrick Pearson, 10, picked up a squishy ball and a toy car from his pal, Delfred.

"Hurricane Katrina destroyed my house and I hope I get another house," Delfred wrote in his letter.

Students in Celeste Williams' fifth-grade class were busy unpacking newspaper articles and seashells from their bags. Among the treasures: One student from Hancock County packed in an award she received for being a "Terrific Kid."

One girl shrieked when she rummaged through her bag to find a photograph of pop singer Avril Lavigne.

The students in Williams' class have been eagerly awaiting photographs of their new friends.

"They have been very excited," Williams said. "They are very interested in establishing a pen pal relationship."

At the end of her presentation, Lemaire collected more packages and letters that will be sent out Wednesday.

"You wrote nice, kind words," Lemaire said to the students. "I'm proud of every single one of you."

The book is expected to be released in August.

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Clarissa Aljentera can be reached at 648-1171 or [claljentera@montereyherald.com](mailto:claljentera@montereyherald.com).

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