



Baubles: Craig Martin of Cafe 50's shows some of his Louisiana carnival beads.

PHOTO BY W. CHILLALU

Bead Deed

L.A. restaurateur raises funds for New Orleans

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New Orleans Mardi Gras veterans know that there are tons of beads tossed from floats in the dozens of parades that lead up to the "Fat Tuesday" festivities. Revelers walk away weighed down with sacks of the brightly colored baubles. Most beads eventually get tossed in the trash.

But one Los Angeles restaurateur has

found a way to put his collection to good use: He started selling them to his customers in order to raise money for reconstruction in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. And now that word's gotten out, residents of the Big Easy and its environs are sending him their beads in quantities so huge that he's swamped.

He may soon get even more: Mardi Gras is this Tuesday.

Craig Martin, the 49-year-old co-owner of retro diner Café 50's in West Los Angeles,

said he felt compelled to create a relief fund and give all the proceeds from the beads to the New Orleans Habitat for Humanity after watching television footage of the damage Katrina did to the Louisiana region. He's raised \$6,000 so far.

"As a business owner, just the idea of having one day where I could come to work and my café could be shut down and my employees could be out of work would devastate me," he said. "I don't know what I would do if I were them."

He sells a basic strand of beads for \$1, although the elaborate and rare ones go for up to \$20.

Martin said he fell in love with New Orleans when he attended Mardi Gras there in February 2005.

After Hurricane Katrina struck that August, he started selling the bagfuls of beads he received during his trip to support Habitat for Humanity's plan to rebuild 1,500 homes over five years in the city.

After some press coverage in New Orleans about his efforts, boxes full of donated beads started arriving at his diner from Louisiana residents. Some of his L.A. customers donated their souvenir beads from their previous trips to celebrate Carnival, which is the long and parade-filled season leading up to Mardi Gras.

Bob Marye, the development coordinator for Habitat for Humanity in New Orleans, said when a business like Café 50's supports the rebuilding effort, it not only helps boost Habitat's work but contributes to the public awareness of the business.

"Craig's support is a very powerful message to all of us here that we have not been forgotten, that there are friends out there who still reach out to help and do it in creative and innovative ways," he said.

Marye said Habitat rebuilt 37 homes in 2006 and plans another 200 home reconstruction projects over the next year.

Martin said he plans to continue raising funds for Habitat in New Orleans for however long it takes to rebuild the city.