

Kim and Geoff Block needed a change. Tired of the rat race, they left New Jersey in 2015 and settled in Bluffton, after being regular Lowcountry visitors for many years. Life was pretty tranquil for 14 months. Then Hurricane Matthew hit. When their builder, Josh Simpson, approached them with stories of Lowcountry residents struggling with home repairs, the three decided they wanted to help. With the guidance of the Community Foundation, Lowcountry Strong was born.

Geoff says their original plan was to have the fund assist with hurricane relief, primarily construction projects. Instead, we recommended broadening the mission to cover any type of disaster relief. “With the help of the Community Foundation, our fund became evergreen, able to adapt to any crisis,” Geoff says.

This broader mission has allowed the fund to fix roofs of mobile homes in Ridgeland, provide financial assistance to displaced families on Hilton Head Island, and donate to local nonprofits addressing a variety of crisis situations, Kim says.

Fast forward to spring 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Leah McCarthy, a friend of Kim and Geoff, and the owner of Downtown Catering Company in Bluffton, mentioned that she wanted to start a foundation to provide meals to laid off hospitality workers. The Blocks said, “No need. We have a fund at the Community Foundation and we can get a program up and running quickly.”

Within days, the Hungry Heart Hospitality Workers Relief Fund, a special initiative under the Lowcountry Strong Foundation and one of the first COVID-19 relief efforts established in the Lowcountry, was operational. They served their first meal on March 23. “By April 30 we were serving more than 2,000 meals a week, at 40 participating restaurants,” Kim says. “We’ve been able to accomplish this so quickly by utilizing the talents and hard work of a dedicated team which, in addition to the Community Foundation, includes Ashley Rhodes, Nick Borreggine, Leah McCarthy and many volunteers.”

“And because our relationship with the Community Foundation has allowed us so much flexibility and depth, we were able to work quickly and create a really effective program,” Geoff adds.

Through Hungry Hearts, struggling hospitality workers get tickets for free lunches and dinners to use at participating restaurants. “These are people who don’t normally ask for any relief,” Geoff says. “But the beauty of this program is that the workers who are using these tickets are helping to keep the restaurant doors open. Through this program we’ve been able to put over \$75,000 back in the hands of the restaurants. These workers should be proud to use these meal tickets because they’re helping our economy continue. They are truly part of the solution.”

If you’d like to donate to the Hungry Heart Hospitality Workers Relief Fund, go to <https://cflowcountry.civicore.com/LowcountryStrongFoundation>. For more information about Lowcountry Strong Foundation, visit <https://www.lowcountrystrong.com>.

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