

RENE HUTCHINSON

Help Center volunteer Gold Deeds winner

By Lucille Prince
TimesDaily Editor

Irene Hutchinson, a Help Center volunteer who believes that helping people means more than giving them food and clothing, is the recipient of the Exchange Club's Book of Golden Deeds Award for 1998.

The award recognizes the good deeds of the heroes and heroines of everyday life and documents their accomplishments, according to Olin Mefford, Golden Deeds chairman.

Mefford presented the award at the Exchange Club's banquet at the Florence Golf and Country Club last week.

"Florence and Lauderdale County are blessed with many individuals who willingly contribute their time, talent and resources to activities that benefit the community. Irene Hutchinson is one of those individuals who help to make Florence and Lauderdale County a better place in which to live. The Florence Exchange Club is pleased to present its Book of Golden Deeds Award for 1998 to her," Mefford said.

"The first recipient was Mrs. A.D. Coffee in

1921 with Judge J.J. Mitchell and Maud Lindsay following the next two years. The award is not given every year, and this year is the first time it's been awarded since 1994," Mefford said.

He said Hutchinson is well known for her faithfulness as a servant to the Help Center since the first clients were interviewed on Dec. 3, 1982.

"Every person who requests assistance is interviewed to determine needs of that individual," Mefford said.

"It is the responsibility of the interviewer to reconcile these needs with the resources available and guidelines that have been established," he explained. "Mrs. Hutchinson has served as an interviewer throughout the period that the Help Center has operated. In recent years, she has coordinated the efforts of eight other interviewers as well as the efforts of two to three receptionists who help each day."

Discussing her work in an interview Monday, Hutchinson said everyone at the center talks to clients about getting a GED certificate or undergoing training so they can get a better job.

"I wish everyone could learn to read," she said. She also mentioned the educated and well-

trained people who sometimes need help because of some predicament.

"We want everyone to feel that it's OK for them to ask for help when they need it," Hutchinson said. "Anyone can lose a job, become ill or face any number of things. We're there to help people get back on their feet, too."

The Help Center serves people of all of Lauderdale County by providing clothing and food to people in need. It also assists with utilities, prescription medicine, transportation for medical attention, etc., to those who qualify.

The idea for the center originated in a meeting of the Florence Ministerial Association when members decided that churches could more efficiently serve the needy by working together instead of individually. The founding group was known as the Cooperative Community Center and churches of various denominations and faith involved have grown to 46.

Churches provide volunteers and approximately 43 percent of the center's income, Hutchinson said.

"The rest of the income comes from the public — individuals and clubs," she said. "We get some

AWARD continued on 2B

money from the Federal Emergency Management Act. The city utility department also accepts donations people add to their own utility bills. Food World supplies us with outdated bread and sweets that are still good."

Clothing and such items as furniture are donated by residents.

The report for 1997 shows that over 7,000 families were served, and \$154,000 was distributed for medical prescriptions, assistance on utility bill, food and other cash items.

All of this money was provided by churches and individuals except for \$11,885 that came from the FEMA.

Volunteer Mary Wilson called Hutchinson "a faithful servant" to the Help Center.

"She is among the most faithful people in the project since it was started," Wilson said. "Her time and energy seem endless."

Volunteer Helen Head said that Hutchinson "is a wonderful person to work with whose sweet kindness is known to everyone she comes in contact with."

Hutchinson is a native of Florence. Her father, John F. Gordon, was a longtime secretary of the Exchange Club.

She attended Kilby School and graduated from Coffee High School and Agnes-Scott College in Decatur, Ga.

"I received a degree in sociology and psychology," she said. "I intended to become a social worker, but just didn't get around to it."

During World War II, she worked as a secretary in New York. In 1946, she married John Hughston Hutchinson. They have four children, a son and daughter in Birmingham, a daughter in Montgomery and a daughter in Nashville, Tenn.

The Hutchinsons are members of First Presbyterian Church in Florence. She has served as a circle leader and president of the Women of the Church and assisted with the clothes room while it existed. As a volunteer with Friends of the Library Used Bookstore, she distributes magazines from the bookstore to hospitals and the Help Center.

Commenting on the increase in activity at the Help Center, Hutchinson said, "Florence has had its ups and downs just like any other town. But it has more ups than downs. For a small town, we have a lot to offer. The people here are wonderful in developing the arts. We have a lot to offer and one of the things we offer best is help to the less fortunate. It's a wonderful place."

To her, paying off the mortgage of the building the center occupies at 612 S. Court St., is the most exciting event this year.

"It's gratifying to be a part of the Help Center," she added. "It makes everyone happy and makes them feel good. We probably get more out of the center than our clients. This is shown by our lack of turnover. Volunteers stay until they die or are not physically able to come."