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Heart of Gold

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Marietta resident Charles Hopkins will be receiving the Heart of Gold Award from the organization All About Developmental Disabilities for his years of working with and aiding people with developmental disabilities. Here he holds one of his signed thank you cards from those he has helped get jobs.

Photo by Laura Moon

EAST COBB - On Tuesday, All About Developmental Disabilities will honor east Cobb resident Charles Hopkins with its highest award for his career of service helping people with developmental disabilities, at its awards ceremony at the Emory Conference Center Hotel in Atlanta.

The Atlanta-based advocacy organization is presenting Hopkins with its Heart of Gold Award. Hopkins, 59, began working in the field of developmental disabilities at age 22 and is now retired. His work to bring people with disabilities into mainstream society has earned him national recognition.

In the 1950s, when AADD was formed, people with developmental disabilities in Georgia were often institutionalized by their families in places such as the Milledgeville State Hospital, at one time the nation's largest mental health institution, and Gracewood School for Mental Defectives in Augusta. Patients were often isolated.

By the 1970s, when Hopkins entered the profession, people with developmental disabilities were still being institutionalized by their families. Ultimately, Hopkins worked to bridge the gap between those people and their communities, by training the public on how to teach them and care for them.

"What I focused on was the importance of people with developmental disabilities being part of their communities and not excluded from their communities," Hopkins said.

"What we tried to do is say everybody is in. Everybody is a part of the community. We do acknowledge that they need some support to be a part of the community.

So we're the support that can be put in place, so that folks with severe developmental disabilities can enjoy the community life that we enjoy."

Though he had little experience, Hopkins, who studied psychology at Georgia Southwestern State University and University of Georgia, first landed a job in his hometown of Washington after college, directing a small day program for people with developmental disabilities.

His passionate work drew the attention of state officials and in 1981, he was promoted to the position of overseeing developmental disabilities programs in several northwest Georgia counties for what is now the Highland Rivers Community Service Board. In 1985, he received the Georgia Department of Human Resources' first Distinguished Service Award.

In the late 1990s, Hopkins rose to become developmental disabilities program chief for DHR's Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Addictive Diseases. He retired in 2008 as deputy director of DHR's office of developmental disabilities.

In retirement, Hopkins remains an advocate for people with developmental disabilities and volunteers his time with three organizations in the field.

"I like the people a lot," he said.

"I think that the success of my career has been that I am in relationship with lots of people with developmental disabilities."

Kellie Roberts, 48, of Canton, can attest to that. As a single mother with an 18-year-old son, Chad, who has been diagnosed with autism and other disorders, she credits Hopkins with forever changing their lives when they met him several years ago.

"I'm telling you, from that day on our lives were never the same. He has always stepped in and helped us in situations of crisis," Kellie Roberts said.

"Chad has broken my arm before in a couple of places. When that happened, Charles worked with his provider, securing the right kind of services that helped Chad remain in the home, which is where I want to keep him, that's always been my goal. I just don't think he would be here with me if it wasn't for Charles."

David Blanchard, AADD executive director, said throughout his professional and personal life, Hopkins has never lost sight of how important it is to give back to others.

"He has a unique ability to see the potential in others, listen to their true dreams and help them fulfill them," Blanchard said. "As a national leader in the field of developmental disabilities, Charles has had a positive and profound impact on thousands of individuals' lives in Georgia."

In light of being honored with the AADD's award, Hopkins said he has done quite a bit of reflecting on his career and life.

"One thing that I'm proud of and appreciative of myself, if you will, is throughout my life I've always not put barriers between me and other people," he said. "It is my tendency to meet people where they are. I appreciate people's differences."

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