

# Joann Richards carries weight of church

**How do you feel about being nominated Citizen of the Year?**  
"I am just blown away!"

By Amy Moore  
The News staff writer

Joann Richards likes to clean. She does not mind climbing in and out of dusty closets to organize and she enjoys a good scrubbing every now and then.

Richards' clean habits landed her the position of property chairman for her church, First Christian Church, in Port Arthur. While cleaning is a fun hobby, the responsibility of being property chairman has Richards reaching far beyond the cleaning supplies to make a difference.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Rita, homes, churches, businesses and people stood in shambles waiting for help. As some reached out their hands for offerings, others reached out to see what needed to be done.

"We had a good bit of damage to our church buildings," Richards recalled. "Just about \$1 million worth. My job as property chairman was to organize the work to repair it all."

What should have been a simple task — hire a contractor to be in charge of construction repairs — was not because everyone else in Southeast Texas was trying to do the same thing. "I got back to the area about eight days after the storm and this church was in horrible condition. The roof was gone and there was standing water all over. It was soaking wet.

"I sat down in a wet pew with water up to my ankles and begged God to take this responsibility from me. He said no. He told me that I didn't need to know how to do everything, He'd help me. I just needed to listen to Him," she said.

Relying on her faith, Richards listened and began working on the church. On top of that, Richards did something else.

"I organized groups of volunteers to come into the area from across the nation to repair homes," she said humbly. "I had to make sure they were housed and fed. We would feed them breakfast then prepare their lunches for when they were out working. We're still doing it, too."

In the two years since Rita ravaged Southeast Texas, Richards, a widow, has helped over 1,000 volunteer workers find homes to repair as well as homes to sleep in.

"I'm not the only one doing this in the area, though," she added. "We work with the Week of Compassion who coordinates people to come here and then with SETIO to give the volunteers work."

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**Joann Richards**

But Richards did not limit her good works to a few. Instead, she opened the church's doors to an entirely different church altogether.

Driving home after returning from evacuation, Richards noticed what many others saw, gasped at, and passed. The most photographed church depicting Rita damage was the Seventh Day Adventist Church on Texas 73. Barely a roof remaining and the entire inside molded and open for all to see, the structure was pitiful at best.

While many others merely passed with shaking heads, Richards noticed what others didn't — a message on the church's marquee asking for help with a meeting place.

"I called up the number and spoke with Pastor Bob and they've been meeting here at our church for the past two years. They even have school that meets here during the week," she said.

Richards said it was a simple decision



Mike Tobias/The News

Joann Richards' clean habits landed her the position of property chairman for her church, First Christian Church, in Port Arthur. While cleaning is a fun hobby, the responsibility of being property chairman has Richards reaching far beyond the cleaning supplies to make a difference.

to bring in another church.

"We decided that if it was us, we would want someone to do the same thing. It's just following the Golden Rule," she said.

Richards was nominated as The News Citizen of the Year by her fellow church member and friend, Doneane Beckcom.

"Little did she know when she took on that post (of property chairman) earlier in 2005 what a tremendous task would be before her and her committee after Rita hit," Beckcom wrote in her nomina-

tion letter. "Joann worked tirelessly with insurance adjusters, contractors, clean up crews, and volunteers to put our precious building back together again. We still are not finished, but Joann's tireless efforts go on."

Richards said with still thousands of homes with blue roofs, only worsening in condition by time and more recent storms, her work will continue.

Richards also serves as the church's choir director.

**JOANN RICHARDS**  
AGE: 68  
CITY: Groves  
FAMILY: husband Jack (deceased), three children, six grandchildren and one great-grandchild  
OCCUPATION: Retired

#### NOMINATED BY:

Doneane Beckcom: "The reason I am nominating her goes back to 2005 and the aftermath of Hurricane Rita. Joann had been serving at that time as the Chairman of our Property Committee. Little did she know when she took on that post earlier in 2005 what a tremendous task would be before her and her committee after Rita hit. Our church sustained over \$1 million in damages, including the total loss of our choir room and many thousands of dollars of music and equipment, not to mention having to completely gut and refinish our Sanctuary and many other areas of the church facility. Joann worked tirelessly with insurance adjusters, contractors, clean up crews, and volunteers to put our precious building back together again. We still are not finished, but Joann's tireless efforts go on."

#### JOANN RICHARDS TIDBITS

In the aftermath of Hurricane Rita, homes, churches, businesses and people stood in shambles waiting for help. As some reached out their hands for offerings, others reached out to see what needed to be done.

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**JAMES 'JIM' THOMAS**  
AGE: 75

CITY: Port Neches

FAMILY: Wife, Sandra Haven

OCCUPATION: Retired from Gulf, Chevron; real estate

#### NOMINATED BY:

Rhonda Pagan of the Port Neches Senior Citizens Center noted that he volunteers with many groups in the area and is treasurer of the Senior Advisory Board where he pays bills and helps secure donations the center.

"He is also secretary for the Senior Citizen Foundation Board. Jim is a relief driver for Meals on Wheels to homebound senior citizens and volunteers serving meals when at the center. In 1997 he received the Outstanding Senior Citizen Award from the PN Rotary Club for his many community contributions," she wrote. He is involved with the Port Neches Chamber of Commerce and helps senior citizens, low income and military people with their taxes. He chaired the United Way fund for 10 years, was president of the Chevron-Gulf Oil Retirees Organization for two years and has been on their board for many years, Pagan reported.

He's on the Salvation Army Board and helped survivors of Katrina and Rita.

"In 2006, Thomas was awarded the Public Service Award for the Chevron Retirees Association at its annual meeting in Pittsburgh. The award recognized his volunteer services in the community and honored him with a \$4,000 contribution from Chevron Corporation to the non-profit organization of his choice. Jim chose to divide his prize between the Salvation Army and the Port Neches Senior Citizens Center."

## Thomas takes care of community beyond retirement

By Justin Sanchez  
The News staff writer

PORT NECHES — Out of the thousands of residents in Southeast Texas, Port Neches resident James "Jim" Thomas is one of the few honored with a Citizen of the Year nomination.

His constant involvement with the community might have something to do with it.

Since retiring, Thomas hasn't exactly become inactive. In fact, with his retirement, he became even more involved in the area, and it's something he wouldn't change.

"I enjoy being with the community and dealing with people," he said. "My wife helps me, too."

Thomas has always been, and continues to be actively involved with numerous organizations.

He said what started out as just helping a fellow graduate assist others, has become one of his main contributions to the area — doing tax work for senior citizens.

"When I started doing tax work, I enjoyed it. Since 1990 I've been doing free tax work for seniors, so it has been nearly 18 years," he said. "We'll do about 800 people's taxes for free."

He'll be filing away again at the Port Arthur Library just beyond the new year, from Feb. 1 until April 15.

Thomas doesn't just file taxes in his free time, though, he also serves as an alternate for the Meals on Wheels program.

**How do you feel about being nominated Citizen of the Year?**

"You kind of shocked me there," he said with a laugh.

He said although he isn't first in line, if the program needs his help, he'll be there.

For Meals on Wheels, the organization delivers full meals to those unable to get out of the house and get it themselves. He said delivering the meals and giving people company who may not otherwise have anyone to talk to gives him a feeling of satisfaction.

"It's hard to get people to volunteer and do things like that," he said.

When it came to Rita a few years back, Thomas made sure his presence was felt.

"I helped during Hurricane Rita by coming back early," he said. "We gathered donations and took the load to a local Methodist Church, then gave them out."

In his lifetime, Thomas has lived in a lot of different locations around the globe, but now calls Southeast Texas his home.

"When I was in Germany, I helped out with Eagle Scouts," he said. "I was born in West Texas and moved to Southeast Texas in 1943."

When he finally moved to Port Neches, it was a much better fit, he said. The bigger city atmosphere of Baytown, which is right near Houston, was never appealing, so the

move to Mid County was welcome.

"It was a real challenge living in Baytown," he said. "There are so many more people there."

The Lamar graduate says he never wants to leave the area. He currently works at his own business renting apartments, even after retirement.

Thomas does get out every once in a while, however.

"Me and my wife work hard and we play hard," he said. "Last year we went on a cruise to the Caribbean. We've also been to Rome and saw the Vatican."

It's straight back to the office afterwards, as Thomas has plenty of organizations to keep him busy.

One way or another, he manages to stay involved with the Senior Citizen Center of Port Neches, Port Neches Chamber of Commerce, Chevron-Gulf Oil Retirees Organization and the Salvation Army among others.

Thomas was nominated by Rhonda Pagan, director of the Port Neches Senior Citizen Center.

Being a part of the community is what it's all about for James Thomas.



Mike Tobias/The News

James Thomas volunteers countless hours helping seniors at the Port Neches Senior Citizens Center. Pictured here, Thomas sits in his Port Neches office.

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*Congratulates  
our very own*

**Tom Butler**

**2007 Citizen of the Year (top 10)**