

Southern Mutual Help Assoc. receives \$10K leadership award

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Southern Mutual Help Association (SMHA), the New Iberia-based community help and development organization, has once again given Iberia Parish reason to be proud.

SMHA was named the winner of the 2003 Leadership IS Award by the Independent Sector, a non-profit, nonpartisan coalition of more than 700 national organizations, foundations and corporate philanthropy programs.

"It is terribly exciting to be named the best in the country in our business by them," said Orna Bourge, the co-founder, president and executive director of SMHA. "It is like winning the Academy Award for non-profits."

In the letter announcing the award Diana Aviv, president and CEO of Independent Sector, said SMHA exemplified the ideals of the Leadership IS Award.

"The organization is grounded in the ideals of empowering citizens and growing leaders," Aviv said. "Through its many programs the organization has propelled positive change in the lives of many residents of rural Louisiana and created change in the public policies that affect all Louisianians.

SMHA joins Aspira Association Inc., Washington D.C.; Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, Roxbury, Mass.; the Mar Vista Family Center, Culver City, Calif. and the Young Woman's Project, Washington D.C. in the list of awardees.

"We have been at it a while and hopefully we are pretty good at what we do," Bourge said. "Winning this award is very important to us because it is a recognition from the major corporations, foundations and non-profits in the country. It means we are doing something right."

The award, created in 1999, is sponsored by ChevronTexaco and comes with a \$10,000 gift.

"We will use the money to continue to increase our capacity to make a difference in the community," Bourge said. "Now that we have won the award, we have to keep living up to it.

"Winning it tells us we are off to a good start and we are on the right track but there's a lot more work to be done."

This is SMHA's 34th year working in community economic development, Bourge said, and it promotes leadership not just at the top but through-out the organization.

"Leadership is expected of everyone. You can call it depth of leadership within the organization" she said. "We promote leadership by expecting people to notice things, take an initiative, do critical thinking and analyze and propose recommendations for action."

Within the community, the organization provides leadership in changing national policies on local communities and families, and they help individuals become homeowners.