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Charity's founder to be honored

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ARLINGTON Last month, while preparing Mission Arlington for the Christmas holiday, Tillie Burgin halted her busy day to assist a distraught mother who needed a coat for her son.

Exuding the peaceful, reassuring determination and smile that is her hallmark, Burgin sat with the woman and calmed her. She asked a Mission Arlington volunteer to help find a jacket in the clothes pantry, and then Burgin went back to work.

Tillie Burgin is always at work. From well before sunup until after dark, Burgin is on the cellphone, organizing volunteers, unloading a truck and ministering to the poor.

For that determination and commitment, Burgin will be honored today as minister of the year by the Kiwanis Club of Arlington at noon at First United Methodist Church.

"She is Arlington's very own Mother Teresa," said Tarrant County Commissioner Marti VanRavenswaay, whose precinct includes the city.

Mayor Robert Cluck said Mission Arlington was the first resource he called upon when Hurricane Katrina evacuees arrived in the city last summer.

"Mission Arlington was already crowded with people getting help, but Tillie never hesitated to open the doors to more people in need," Cluck said.

In addition to providing clothing, the charity has a medical and dental clinic and offers child care and counseling. Its fleet of vans and minibuses helps clients access its services and some of those provided by the JPS Health Network.

Burgin grew up at 104 South St., just one block from where Mission Arlington is today.

"I really haven't gone very far," said Burgin, 69.

As a youngster, she spent time at her father's Abram Street gas station in downtown Arlington.

"I would fix flats with the guys and dust the floorboards," she said. "Now, if a car is old enough, I can fix it."

She graduated from Arlington High School in 1954 and met her husband, Bob, when they were studying at what is now the University of Texas at Arlington. They married in 1956, and when her husband was drafted and sent to South Korea, she went, teaching at a Methodist boys high school in Incheon.

The couple returned to Arlington in 1959, and Burgin had the first of her two sons the following year.

Burgin's family lived in South Korea twice between 1966 and 1978.

What she learned overseas, she later applied in Arlington.

Burgin taught school when the family settled again in Arlington. She became head of personnel for the Arlington school district in 1980, a post she held for about five years.

But missionary work is a calling, and the call was strong.

"If you can do missions in Korea, why not do missions in Arlington?" Burgin asked.

First Baptist Church in Arlington agreed to give it a try. The mission was born in what Burgin describes as a "little, bitty space, not much bigger than a closet."

In her first week, Burgin helped a woman get her electricity restored and organized a Bible study group at a young man's apartment.

Today, more than 260 Bible study groups are associated with Mission Arlington. More than 1,000 volunteers contribute time throughout the year to help the poor.

The charity has an annual budget of about \$1 million, a dozen full-time staff members and about two dozen part-time workers, Burgin said.

Support for the agency's work was evident after two Christmas fires burned Mission Arlington's clothing pantry, housed at South and Oak streets. The police are investigating the fires as arson. Donors have helped restock the mission with clothing.

Burgin's office is filled with many recognitions, among them a handwritten note from President George W. Bush.

On one office wall hangs a copy of Rembrandt's Return of the Prodigal Son. Nearby is a Norman Rockwell print of a multicultural crowd with the title, Do Unto Others. .

Burgin always wears a small lighthouse pin on her lapel.

"If you are out somewhere and need help and find a lighthouse, you will get help," she said. "A lighthouse is a refuge."

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Tillie Burgin, Mission Arlington's founder and executive director, will be honored as the 2005 Minister of the Year by the Kiwanis Club of Arlington at noon today at First United Methodist Church.

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