

Now serving in her 44th year as executive director of the agency that oversees programs for senior citizens in 14 area counties, Kay Hind has tirelessly devoted her life to finding ways to make older Southwest Georgians' golden years truly golden. She's never sought accolades for doing a job she was born to do, but those accolades have come nonetheless, her good works trailing her like a comet tail lights the path of the body that preceded it.

She's been named Woman of the Year by various area and regional agencies; she's been named a Trailblazer by 100 Black Men of Southwest Georgia; she's claimed the Georgia Gerontology Society's John Tyler Mauldin award; she's been selected as a White House Conference on Aging delegate four times; Darton College gave her its Woman of Worth award; she's received both the Southeast's Jane Kennedy and Georgia's Elsie Alvis Excellence in Aging awards.

On Feb. 23, at the close of Senior Week at the state Capitol in Atlanta, Hind will be recognized one more time. Area Reps. Winfred Dukes, Carol Fullerton and Ed Rynders will welcome Hind to the floor of the House of Representatives to receive the Distinguished Older Georgian award, a singular honor presented to citizens of note 80 years of age or over.

"Yes, that's really special," Hind said during a conversation at her 1105 Palmyra Road office. "I certainly do not do this job for that kind of thing, but it's nice to be recognized for my passion."

Since Jan. 1, 1968, Hind's passion has been focused on the needs of the elderly in her community. She came to the SOWEGA Council on Aging out of a need for work and a "curiosity about that little house on the corner" from which the agency operated. Some four decades-plus later, Hind has become synonymous with the organization that kindled her passion.

"Kay has always been an advocate for seniors, for people that often do not have the ability to speak for themselves," said Carole Utlaut, who worked with Hind for 10 years and now serves on the Council on Aging's advisory board. "She's always been willing to fight for what she believes in, and one of the greatest things in my life has been the opportunity I've had to work with her."

“The award she’s about to receive is very much deserved.”

Hind was born at home on Pine Avenue in Albany, and unlike so many women of her era, she chose to continue her education after graduating high school. She attended Georgia Southwestern College in nearby Americus for two years and completed requirements for a BS degree in Home Economics at the University of Georgia in 1951.

Shortly after graduation she started work as a Home Economist Extension Agent in the tiny Roberta community of Crawford County. A year later she accepted a similar position in Lee County.

Hind stopped work to raise her three children — Richard, Ken and Gail Barnhill (now Burke) — but she returned to work after that marriage ended. When she remarried Carswell Hind and the couple sold their dairy farm in Lee County and moved to Albany, she decided to look for work when she discovered “I couldn’t stand to just sit around.”

Albany government officials founded the Council on Aging in the mid-1960s following passage of the 1965 Older Americans Act, and they named Starrette McKendry to head the organization. McKendry’s father and husband were tragically killed in a plane crash a short while later, and she stepped down as head of the agency.

Months later Hind applied and interviewed for the position.

“I was looking for something part-time to do, something to keep me busy,” she said. “I knew some people on the board at the time, and I told them I’d like to interview. They had me in, and a short while later I was hired.”

Hind had always been a people person, and as she basically started over from scratch with the Council on Aging, she gradually discovered that she had found her calling.

“I started out with a budget of \$8,000 and was told I had to find funding for the agency,” she said. “They told me if I wanted a paycheck, I had to raise the funds myself. So we started looking for any opportunity that came along. The Retired and Senior Volunteer

Program was the first program we applied for funding and got, and we're still getting it.

“So it was a challenge, but the position just gradually grew on me. I discovered I liked everything about it.”

In 1977, the federal government, in an effort to make sure all U.S. citizens had access to an advocacy agency like the SOWEGA Council on Aging, expanded local agencies' outreach to include larger areas of influence. The local council's reach extended into 14 area counties. Rather than fretting at the larger caseload, though, Hind was excited by the challenge.

“I just said, ‘Let's take off,’ ” she said. “There were so many small communities that were offering very little or no assistance to their seniors, and I was glad we were able to broaden our impact.”

About halfway through her tenure as head of the Council on Aging, Hind started actively pushing for a new centralized senior center in the region's largest city. Programs were scattered locally over several separate locations, making it more difficult for participating seniors and volunteers. Hind picked up a pair of major allies in her fight — 2nd District U.S. Congressman Sanford Bishop and Albany Mayor Willie Adams — but the quest to fund a center remained elusive.

“Out of the 14 counties in our area, every one got a Community Development Block Grant to build a senior center except Colquitt County and Dougherty County,” Hind said. “They built one using other funding sources in Moultrie, but nothing happened in Albany. We held meetings at housing projects, at the old USO building, pretty much wherever we could.

“Albany had the largest program, the largest population and the most money. Yet we could never get something concrete when it came to a new senior center.”

Utlaut remembers Hind's never-ending efforts to make her dream a reality.

“It's ironic; I started working with Kay more than 20 years ago, and

one of the first things she told me way back then was that she wanted to build a new senior center here,” the advisory board member said. “She promised that one day we’d have a great senior center.

“When the day comes that they build that center, it’s going to be a day of great rejoicing.”

That day now appears to be on the immediate horizon. Planning and design work on a new state-of-the-art facility is nearing completion, and the project is expected to be put out for bid in March.

“It actually gives me chills to think about it,” Hind said. “It’s not only going to be a wonderful center, it’s going to have facilities for 20 different programs and activities as well as the council offices, all at one place.

“It’s going to be everything we’ve ever wanted.”

With the construction of the senior center, Hind’s legacy, already secured by her decades of tireless and dedicated service, will be permanently entrenched in the community. Which leads to the inevitable questions surrounding the possibility that she might call it a career.

“That’s one of the hard things about finally seeing this happen,” Hind said of the senior center, which will be located on land donated by Phoebe Health System. “I’ve been saying for so long that it’s my goal to get this thing built, and now it’s about to happen. But I can’t see myself breaking a bottle of champagne on the front steps and going home.

“I figure I’ll want to stick around and enjoy the place for a while.”

No one would expect less or deny Hind that pleasure. After all, she’s spent a lifetime making it happen.

“I’d say over these 44 years, the biggest reward I’ve received is when people recognize me out somewhere and come up to thank me for some program at the SOWEGA Council on Aging,” she said. “That means the world to me.

“In social services, what you do is never about large salaries. And it’s not about some 9-to-5 job. It’s about the people. And it’s about being there for them. It’s just what I do.”