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**DURHAM COUNTY PHARMACIST WINS \$100,000 NATIONAL AWARD FOR  
IMPROVING SENIORS' ACCESS TO MEDICATIONS**

BOSTON – May 30, 2001 – Gina Upchurch, who recognized that older adults on limited incomes in Durham County often needed help purchasing expensive medications and monitoring their use, created a model assistance program and now has earned the nation's highest honor for community health leadership.

Upchurch is one of 10 outstanding individuals selected this year to receive a \$100,000 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Community Health Leadership Program award.

Upchurch, RPh, MPH, is the founder and director of Senior PHARMAssist (SPA), which has helped more than 2,600 individuals on limited incomes obtain necessary medications and has educated more than 800 older adults about proper medication use. SPA also works closely with patients' doctors and other health care providers to ensure that the often-numerous medications taken by seniors are as safe and effective as possible. In a study conducted at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and published last year in the North Carolina Medical Journal, Upchurch found that emergency room visits and hospital stays dropped by approximately one-third among senior citizens who were SPA clients for at least one year.

Upchurch's interest in the special needs of the elderly began as a child when her grandmother was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. In pharmacy school, Upchurch learned that the medication given to her grandmother had either caused or worsened her Parkinson's symptoms. This experience ultimately led to the creation of SPA, and ironically, the first patient enrolled had just been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Upchurch immediately recognized that the medication the woman had been taking for years often causes symptoms that imitate Parkinson's. When Upchurch contacted the doctor, he halted the medication. Today, the woman is doing well, does not have Parkinson's and remains a participant of SPA.

"Because of her genuine warmth, patience and concern, many who would not divulge personal information to anyone will open up and confide in Gina so that she can help them," says Lizzie Harrison, an SPA client. "She literally makes the difference between some seniors eating or paying for their medication. Gina makes it possible for us to do both."

Upchurch has become an active advocate for quality-of-life issues for senior citizens throughout North Carolina, and her SPA model is now in use in other parts of the state. "Helping seniors with chronic conditions remain as healthy as possible is one of Gina's visions that honors individuals and strengthens our community," says Valerie Rosenquist, associate director, Rural Church division, The Duke Endowment, and Upchurch's nominator.

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“This year’s honorees prove that obstacles can be turned into opportunities when tackled with determination and innovation,” says Catherine M. Dunham, Ed.D, director of the Boston-based Community Health Leadership Program (CHLP). “They each have made tremendous progress in their communities by believing there are solutions and by not giving up.”

The Community Health Leadership Program awards \$1 million each year to 10 individuals who have overcome significant challenges to improve access to health care and social services to under-served and isolated people in their communities. Upchurch and this year’s other winners will be honored on June 27 in Washington, DC. Each will receive a \$95,000 award to sustain and strengthen their program and a \$5,000 personal award.

Upchurch was selected from among 577 nominees nationwide. Now in its ninth year, the Community Health Leadership Program has honored a total of 91 individuals from 41 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, headquartered in Princeton, NJ, is the largest private philanthropic organization dedicated to improving health and health care for Americans.

This year’s award winners have created programs to address some of our country’s most difficult challenges, from health care for migrant workers and elder Native Americans to farm safety and environmental health. They represent rural and urban areas in nine states: Alaska, California, Kansas, Mississippi, Montana, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Utah. CHLP award winners are nominated by colleagues, community leaders, government officials, health professionals and others who have been inspired by the achievement of these leaders in the face of overwhelming odds.

For more information about the Community Health Leadership Program, call(617) 426-9772 or visit CHLP on the Web at [www.communityhealthleaders.org](http://www.communityhealthleaders.org).