Judy Stephens didn’t see this coming. After 18 years of helping the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln grow and become a charitable force in the area, her fellow board members blindsided her with a gift of their own; the establishment of **Judith G. Stephens Chairperson’s Fund**.

“I never imagined this sort of thing happening,” Stephens said. “I think the Board was creative to set it up. I’m very honored. They’re wonderful secret keepers.”

Stephens retired from the board in December 2005. The fund will provide a $500 gift for the organization of the retiring chairperson’s choosing. Stephens chose the Sojourn Women’s Shelter in Springfield as the initial recipient. The money is earmarked to help with costs for a staff attorney for the shelter. Federal funding for that position was recently cut.

“I felt that was a good place to start the Stephens Fund,” Stephens said.

She served as chairperson in 2003, but her legacy as a driving force in the evolution of the Community Foundation is what made the current board members choose to honor her.

“If not for Judy’s vision and persistence, this community may still be absent a thriving community foundation” said current Chairperson Mike Barker. “Judy is a community leader in every sense of the term and the board thought this fund would be a way to honor her leadership for years to come.”

Stephens joined the Community Foundation board in 1987. She helped orchestrate the Foundation’s move from a small volunteer organization to a thriving, charitable foundation that has grown tremendously in the past three years.

“It was an evolution process,” Stephens said. “It took five or six years to convince them to go and raise money instead of being a tacit recipient. The people who believed in it, stayed with it. We took a leap of faith.”

A key in the organization’s growth was the decision to leave an all-volunteer effort behind and hire a full-time Executive Director in John Stremsterfer. “We realized we went as far as we could go with all volunteers,” Stephens said.

Stephens is not leaving the Community Foundation entirely. She will serve on the Foundation’s Advisory Board (The Council) and left the fulltime board with wonderful feelings.

“This has been a wonderful group of people,” she said. “Every one of the board members has great leadership skills. ... It’s a joint effort. Several are very inspiring people and they let us push on. You don’t ever do anything alone.”