Tamara Carrera doesn’t live in Sandy Springs, but while working out of a cramped office at the Community Action Center, she has helped countless city residents. Carrera, 60, has spent 20 years at the center and remembers when there were the occasional quiet days. But with the economy still on the mend and the center’s mission to assist those in need, the center served more than 2,200 families in 2011. The center makes available a food pantry, adult education classes, financial assistance, and a thrift store. Carrera is particularly proud of the thrift store.

“In order to do this job, you can’t have someone who does another job on the side,” Carrera said. “We need to do more than give them a check. We’re a package deal.”

Carrera, who lives in Marietta, on Jan. 16 became the first non-Sandy Springs resident to win the Sandy Springs Humanitarian Award. The city recognized her during its Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration.

Clasping the trophy in her hands, Carrera said the award belongs to everyone involved with the Community Action Center.

“I’m honored to be in the company of all those whose lives are my inspiration,” Carrera said.

Carrera also serves on the board of the Sandy Springs Education Force and created a Teacher’s Supply Closet where students in need can obtain supplies for free.

Carrera moved to the Atlanta area in 1992 with her husband, Carlos Diaz. Prior to her work at the Community Action Center, she was the executive director of La Alianza Hispana, in Boston, which served that city’s Latino community. She has a daughter, Christina Dias Carrera, 26.

Melanie Noble-Couchman, the recipient of the 2011 award for her work with the Couchman-Noble Foundation, introduced Carrera. Noble-Couchman said the award is an opportunity to raise the profile of other nonprofits. She thanked the Sandy Springs City Council for waiving its residence requirement for the 2012 award.

“She is truly an asset to any group she works with,” Noble-Couchman said about Carrera.

Carrera said the work has allowed her to see the CAC’s clients come full circle, growing from a client in need to a volunteer and donor.
“This is humanitarian work at its best,” she said.

The Humanitarian award is presented annually during the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration as a tribute to Dr. King. Nominations are accepted from community members with a volunteer committee reviewing submissions and selecting the honoree, the city of Sandy Springs.

In a press release, Councilwoman Diane Fries, who oversees the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day event, said:

“Dr. King once said that ‘faith is taking the first step, even when you don’t see the whole staircase.’ Tamara’s work within the community exemplifies King’s philosophy. She has visualized and created programs promoting self-reliance and self-esteem,” Fries said.