Special to The Herald

Although Mrs. Leola Dillard, a 100-year-“young” retired school teacher and local community activist who is affectionately known as the “Cheerful Giver,” claimed to have held her final National Make A Difference Day Project last year, her residence on Grand Avenue still proved to be the “action site” again this year.

The renowned Free Flea Market sponsored by Mrs. Dillard for the past 15 years recently took a new twist recently.

Developed by the Lifesavers Program coordinator and its diverse team of volunteers, including the Dillard family, the 2012 National Make A Difference Day project became the “Wishing Well,” a service-oriented event designed to pay tribute to the renowned project sponsor. The one-day event, inspired by Mrs. Leola Dillard, continues to enrich the lives of children/youth, strengthen families and enhance the community weeks following National Make A Difference Day held annually across the nation the last Saturday in October.

In an effort to recognize Mrs. Dillard for her commitment and dedication to serve others, she was granted 15 personal wishes to be fulfilled by volunteers. Unsurprisingly, only a few of the wishes were directly benefiting Mrs. Dillard.

As always, this “Cheerful Giver” focused on helping others. Her top wish was “to see every individual perform one simple act of kindness not just on Make A Difference Day but every day of the year.”

Some of her other wishes: knowing that every adult goes to the polls to vote every Election Day; having all residents make an extra effort to initiate a project to clean-up and beautify the whole community starting with his/her own neighborhood; seeing youth take time to visit, uplift and entertain the elderly and disabled residents at personal and public nursing homes; to see more parental involvement, especially by males, in the lives of their children in educational (such as reading, science and math programs) and health/recreational activities; to see herself and others attend worship service together with family; and to see city/county leaders work closer together to implement a county-wide Make A Difference Day project next year and throughout the year.

While not all of her wishes have been granted yet, Mrs. Dillard is keeping hope alive continuing her traditional ways. Always demonstrating the true meaning of being the “Cheeful Giver,” Mrs. Dillard donated huge baskets of school supplies and other educational tools to every elementary school in Yazoo City Municipal School District, as well as to the private schools.

Also through her family and her own active membership and partnership with the Gateway Make-A-Promise (MAP) Coalition (which she is the eldest member of the team) and the Lifesavers Program (inspired by her over four decades ago), Mrs. Dillard has “adopted” McCoy Elementary School and presented prizes and treats to the winners of the Red Ribbon Week coloring contest.

Mrs. Dillard encouraged her daughters, Margaret Dillard McGlown of Clarksdale, Bessie Dillard Walker of Chicago (both retired educators) and Roxie Dillard Harris (a healthcare professional and former employee of the local Foster Grandparent Program) of Yazoo City, to join the volunteers promoting the Lifesavers Family Literacy Program.

The Dillard sisters including support services provided by Mildred Dillard Smith of Tupelo and Shirley Dillard Coleman, Jewel Dillard Dooley, and Emma Dillard, all of Chicago, shared a morning reading to students in various classrooms at McCoy Elementary School after preparing treats for students, teachers, administrators, staff and grandparents visiting the school that day.

A huge assortment of books was presented to principal Brenda Martin and the school librarian through generous donations from Lifesavers Program volunteers, specifically Clarence and Marjorie Brown, Paul and Joann Adams and the Knight Family Reunion Committee (descendants of Josephine Smith and Allen James Knight).

The “Cheerful Giver” continues to make a positive difference in the lives of others, and she wishes others would take that same stand.

To join those paying tribute to Mrs. Leola Dillard via the “Wishing Well” or to join the team of volunteers in the Lifesavers Program, call Gloria Elayne Owens (coordinator) at 528-6050 or rgeo56@aol.com.