Rhonda Sanders works every day to leave a legacy.



Whether it is as a lieutenant with the Lowndes County Sheriff's Office, as a mother, as a wife or as an active participant in her community, Sanders' energy is infectious and knows no bounds.

Need help with a project? Sanders is more than happy to assist or connect you with someone who will help. Her willingness to lend a hand stems from a mind-set that views serving others as a "blessing".

That's why Sanders is comfortable being called a "servant leader" and is at ease with setting an example and motivating others. Sanders will talk about how that attitude drives her daily at 1 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 21, when she is a guest speaker in New Hope Upper Elementary School's Leadership Series.

Sanders follows meteorologist Matt Laubhan as part of the inaugural Leadership Series, which will run throughout the school year and highlight individuals from all walks of life who will showcase different aspects of leadership and what it means to be a leader.

Sanders graduated from New Hope High School and played basketball for two years at East Mississippi Community College. She grew up in a family of missionaries and with people who worked in the church and said her mother, Laura Pippins, and her grandmother, Mary Bell Williams, always gave, even when the family only "had a little". Sanders recalls learning from an early age that it is a blessing to help others, and she has embraced the notion of serving because she feels it is something God has "ordained" her to do.

“I wanted to be a change and to see a change,” said Sanders, who first remembers feeling the need to give back and to serve when she was 22 years old and became a corrections officer. “I lead by example. One of my biggest mottos is what will you do when people are not watching, and I just try to live by that.

“Leadership is taught, and I think it is better taught by seeing my actions, so when I am out in the community working or volunteering and doing for other people, you never know who is watching.”

That’s why Sanders makes a point every day to try to do a good deed or to do something for others. Whether it is in service of one of the 29 food pantries in Lowndes County or a family in need or a child who doesn’t have a bed, Sanders is driven to be a force in the community. Her goal in talking to the students at NHUE is to show them what it means to be a servant leader.

“You don’t understand my drive until you have seen hungry children or seen a family make a decision whether to pay their light bill or to feed their children or decide not to have Christmas because they don’t have money to pay their bills,” Sanders said. “These are good, honest, hard-working people who don’t have a job that is going to pay them $70,000 and they need a hand up, not a handout.

“I want to feed people who are hungry, and I have a desire to help women who are in domestic violence situations.”

With sons Jay (East Mississippi Community College Mayhew) and Eli (football scholarship to East Central C.C.) and daughter Brooklyn (Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science) as sources of motivation, Sanders said it is easier to lead others. She said she never will ask people to do something she isn’t willing to do herself.

But Sanders knows she can’t do everything herself, which is why she has learned how to delegate so she doesn’t burn herself out. She said

learning to balance family, work and community has helped her grow as a leader.

“If I am out doing any and everything in front of my kids, what do they think?” Sanders said. “Respect is earned. It is not just given. I try to give people respect, but in order to keep the respect you have to earn it.

“I am humbled by the fact people have so much respect for me, but it didn’t come overnight. It comes from working with people and meeting people where they are. I have been to the lowest of lows to meet people, and I have sat at tables with multi-millionaires, and if you treat people the way you want to be treated, that is how you earn respect.”

Janie Shields works with Sanders as victim advocate and investigative support coordinator at the Lowndes County Sheriff’s Office. She met Sanders through her work in the community and then volunteered with the Community Benefit Committee, the nonprofit organization Sanders founded. Shields said Sanders works tirelessly to make a difference in the lives of others.

“Rhonda has a natural ability to lead, but she does so with humility, compassion and a genuine concern for the people around her,” Shields said. “Rhonda has always had a servant’s heart. She leads by example and is never afraid to step in and do the work herself. Whether she is helping a victim, supporting a colleague, organizing a community initiative or simply encouraging someone who needs it, she consistently puts the needs of others before her own.”

Shields said Sanders’ leadership extends far beyond the workplace and that she leads because she cares, not because she seeks recognition or praise.

“Rhonda often says, ‘Leadership isn’t about holding a title, wearing a badge or standing at the front of the room’,” Shields said. “True

leadership is about service, responsibility and the quiet choices made when no one is watching."

Lowndes County Sheriff Eddie Hawkins said Sanders is an "outstanding" example of a leader, and that she leads by example, consistently demonstrating professionalism, dedication, compassion and a genuine commitment to serving others. He said he is proud to have Sanders as a member of the Lowndes County Sheriff's Office and that he knows she will make a lasting impression on the students at NHUE.

"One of Lt. Sanders' greatest strengths is her ability to connect with people, particularly young people," Hawkins said. "She understands leadership is not simply about holding a position or having a title; it is about earning trust, setting a positive example and being willing to invest in others. Her involvement in community and youth initiatives reflects her commitment to making a positive difference beyond the walls of the Sheriff's Office.

"Lt. Sanders is an excellent choice to speak to the students at New Hope Upper Elementary. She can help them understand leadership begins with character, responsibility, respect and the willingness to do what is right — even when no one is watching."