

# Beaumont-based charity opens its doors

By Erin Koenig  
Staff writer

With the opening of the Beaumont Foundation of America, disadvantaged school districts, charities and community organizations from around the nation will now be looking to Beaumont for help in bridging the Digital Divide — the trend in which affluent Americans are much more likely to have access to technology and its benefits.

While the country has experienced more than a five-fold increase in the proportion of households with computers since 1984, there are still many Americans who may feel like the information superhighway has completely passed them by.

According to a 2000 study by the Department of Commerce, only three in 10 households with incomes below \$25,000 own a computer.

The mission of the Beaumont Foundation of America, which recently opened its doors on the first floor of the Orleans Building in downtown Beaumont, is to grant computers, software and training, in partnership with other philanthropic organizations, to Americans who are currently casualties of the Digital Divide.

The foundation was the brainchild of local attorney Wayne Reaud, founder of the Reaud, Morgan and Quinn law firm, and the result of a 1999 settlement of the Shaw vs. Toshiba case.

Reaud, who served as lead counsel in the case, envisioned using large class action litigation for the greater public good, providing an example of how the legal system can work to improve the lives of all Americans.

The Toshiba class action suit alleged that defective chips in the control disk drives of the company's laptops caused information to be corrupted, and that the defects were present in nearly all of the company's laptops shipped to the U.S. since 1985 — around five million.

The case resulted in a \$2.1 billion settlement, \$350 million to \$400 million of which is being used to fund the foundation. The funding will result in the distribution of computers with a retail value of \$500 million that will be provided to low income school districts, rural Americans, community organizations and others through the new foundation.

"We want to ensure that every citizen has access to the tools and information to get ahead and stay ahead," said Reaud, who serves on the board of directors along with local attorney Gilbert I. Low and Rod C. Keller, executive vice president of Toshiba's Computer Systems Group.

W. Frank Newton, executive director of the foundation and former Dean and Professor of Law at Texas Tech University School of Law, said one-year pilot programs in six states — Texas, New York, North Dakota, South Dakota, Illinois and New Mexico — are set to begin soon. The states chosen for the pilot programs were selected according to geographic criteria and their diversity of populations.

"We are actively seeking existing organizations to work with, and we have gotten a very good response from all of those we have contacted. We are not trying to re-invent the wheel," Newton said. "We are work-



Beaumont Foundation of America open house Feb. 21, 2002



Pictured above, from left: W. Frank Newton, Wayne A. Reaud and retired Congressman Jack Brooks



The open house featured music by The Kings Strings, from left: Roma Newton Richey, Ellen Rienstra, Laura Lewis and Michael Truncale

ing with commissioners of education and are allowing already-existing organizations to tell us what they need in order to have a lasting impact on their communities. We are working with groups and individuals who are already serving low-income individuals."

The pilot programs are set to begin in September and will be evaluated with the help of experts from the LBJ School of Public Affairs after the first semester. In Texas, pilot programs will be conducted in Dallas, the Golden Triangle, El Paso and in a rural area in West Texas, Newton said.

"Those are models that are subject to replication in other areas. We want to make sure we are reaching representative low-income communities, including people for whom English may be a second language," he said. "We are hoping to start

working with all of the other states early next year and hopefully start the additional programs in September of 2003."

The Toshiba computers provided by the foundation will be brand new laptop computers with wireless systems.

"This is not yesterday's technology. These are state-of-the-art computers," Newton said. "Working with the foundation is very exciting. We're not just talking about helping people; we are talking about creating a model that may be emulated throughout the United States. So part of our challenge is to do a good enough job that we would influence others with similar kinds of cases to follow this example in the future."

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