

Foundation will help educate, put computers in the hands of poor

By Jerry Jordan
Staff writer

HOUSTON — Key figures from government, education and technology sectors from across the nation were in Southeast Texas this past week to meet with directors and staff of The Beaumont Foundation of America over how to put computers in the hands of less fortunate children throughout the country.

The group flew into Houston on Friday and traveled to Beaumont for a tour of the foundation and dinner at The Southeast Texas Art Museum before returning to Houston for the two-day event.

Larry Irving, former Asst. Secretary of Commerce for President Bill Clinton, told the group that the foundation is making a phenomenal national effort to bridge the digital divide.

"It is focused on outcome oriented goals and it has taken some of the best success stories and is replicating them," he said.

Irving, who is credited with coining the phrase, Digital Divide, told the group that he took the phrase from an L.A. Times article and put a new meaning on it.

"We have to deal with the issue of access by bringing it to the community level," said Lodis Rhodes, Ph.D., of the Lyndon Baines Johnson School of Public Affairs. "With the cutbacks in public funding and the tech sector not being as robust, it is not fashionable to be as concerned about closing the gap in the digital divide. This organization is one of the few major interests out there that is focused on that issue."

Rhodes said The Beaumont Foundation of America's pilot project will provide schools, churches and families with computers to help educate children and prepare them for the future.

"This is a critical time for our nation when you are looking at access to technology," said William McHenry, Mississippi Asst. Commissioner for Academic Affairs for Institutions of Higher Learning.



Photo by Jerry Jordan

Executive director Frank Newton, left speaks with William McHenry, Juanita Sims Doty and Rep. Joe Deshotel about how the foundation will provide technology to the poor.

"If we move forward too quickly we will leave a large part of our citizenry behind and create a society that is divided along who is technologically literate and who is technologically illiterate.

"This organization is taking things from other programs and building a model that can be used to introduce technology across the country. I am excited about having poor people, who previously had no access to technology, at least getting that access now."

Frank Newton, former Dean of Law at Texas Tech University and executive director of the foundation, said The Beaumont Foundation of America will be there to provide technology to low income people.

"We will give this technology to the people who are there working with low income people," Newton told McHenry. "Tell me who is effectively helping low income people in Mississippi. I am not an expert on Mississippi, but I will partner with you and you can show me who is helping low income people use technology."

Created with over \$350 million in funds generated by a class action lawsuit, the charity stands as a stellar example of how the legal system can work to improve the lives of Americans, Newton said. The foundation's core purpose is to grant computer hardware, in partnership with other philanthropic organizations, to Americans who are currently casualties of the digital divide.

Its board of directors is made up of prominent local attorneys Wayne Reaud and Gilbert Low and Toshiba Executive Vice President Rod Keller Jr.

"The central challenge of the Beaumont Foundation of America is to remedy this inequality that is one of the most pressing challenges of American education in the 21st century," Low said. "The foundation seeks to serve disadvantaged school districts, rural Americans, disabled Americans, faith-based charities, community organizations and others."

Rachel Hebert, Principal at Fletcher Elementary in Beaumont, said she is excited about the idea of providing computers for children at her school.

"We will do after school programs and family nights," Hebert said. "Parents of the children at our school want to know what their kids are learning. Now they will have the tools to do it."

Hebert said she would like to have at least one computer for each grade level so that a student might check out the computer and bring it home to show their parents what they've learned.

"More affluent families already have access to computers and now, thanks to The Beaumont Foundation of America, low income families will have access as well," Newton said.

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