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Foundation's gift of computers benefits Waco educational entities

By TERRI JO RYAN Tribune-Herald staff writer

Some of Waco's most disadvantaged students and their families will gain access to computers through the proceeds of a class-action suit's settlement.

Some \$300,000 in computer equipment purchased with a grant from the Texas-based Beaumont Foundation of America was awarded Wednesday to three public high schools, a charter school and a community center during a ceremony at A.J. Moore Academy.

A.J. Moore, a magnet high school for business and technology studies, is one of the recipients of Toshiba computer equipment donated through the Beaumont Foundation, a nonprofit entity created in 2000 to bring unfettered access to information to communities great and small. The equipment will be used by children, their parents and other people who might otherwise never have had access to computer programs and the Internet.

A Web site describing the project, www.wacoisd.org/toshiba, which was designed and developed by A.J. Moore students Adrian Lara and Tony Nelson, also was unveiled for the audience of about 30 business and school officials who met at the school Wednesday.

Other recipient schools are Waco High School, which will receive two wireless laptop carts, one for the business teacher and the other for the science department, and University High School, which will receive two mobile computer labs housing 15 computers and a printer and projector.

Also benefiting from the computer equipment were the Audre and Bernard Rapoport Academy, which will create a family research project with its new mobile lab with 24 computers, and Community Training Center, which will receive one mobile lab with 15 computers and two printers for its Helping Hands after-school program.

Students in Texas State Technical College's "Geeks to Go" program, led by special projects director Brenda Suggs, will maintain the machines, just as they do for several other Waco-area nonprofit organizations.

The technology grant is known as "With Access Comes Opportunity!," or WACO.

The Beaumont Foundation is the first of its kind of nonprofit entity, said Executive Director Frank Newton, as it is funded through part of the \$2.1 billion settlement of *Shaw v. Toshiba*, a nationwide class-action case. The suit, filed in early 1999 on behalf of more than 5 million Toshiba customers, alleged that the firm knowingly manufactured and marketed faulty floppy diskette controllers containing defective microcode, resulting in the loss of data or corruption of millions of files.

In the settlement, finalized in January 2000, the corporation admitted no liability, but agreed to pay for the repair or replacement of consumers' equipment, thereby avoiding further expense and litigation. Attorneys' fees alone topped more than \$147 million in the case.

Three attorneys — Wayne A. Reaud, Gilbert I. Low and Hubert Oxford — devised a plan to use large class-action litigation for public good. The plan was approved by Federal District Judge Thad Heartfield, opening the field for a new form of philanthropy, said Michelle Reynolds, a program officer with the Beaumont Foundation.

Under this model, unclaimed portions of class-action awards are placed in a foundation fund to address unmet social needs. The Beaumont Foundation, a product of this approach, will use its \$350 million treasury to provide computers to low-income students, the poor, hospitals, churches and libraries in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The treasury comes from leftover funds after the computer repairs and replacements were made for members of the class action suit.

Wayne Reaud, chairman of the Beaumont Foundation board, was acquainted with the Audre and Bernard Rapoport Foundation, the Waco-based philanthropic organization that has given away more than \$23 million since its founding in 1989.

Bernard Rapoport said at Wednesday's event that Reaud was impressed with the local foundation's work as recorded through its annual report. Reaud called upon the Rapoport Foundation to function as an intermediary between the Waco community entities and the Beaumont Foundation.

Texas was one of four states to receive grants this year. In 2003, the Beaumont Foundation will award grants to 20 additional states and the District of Columbia. In 2004, the foundation will add the remaining 26 states. Additional grants will be available in subsequent years.

vation for Native Americans that straddles North and South Dakota, and in Laredo, where English is a second language for most of the residents.

Those particular locations were chosen because they represent the underprivileged populations the foundation seeks to serve through its grants, Newton said.

Waco's privileged status as the first recipient community, he said, comes from its location and demographics in the American heartland.

"Quite frankly, places that are smaller than Waco are dying," he said. And those that are larger are making population shifts as they sprawl out, spawning Waco-sized cities with a mix of income ranges. Waco, therefore, is a microcosm for the Beaumont Foundation to try this approach to further the greater public good.

"It's not just the right thing to do," Newton said. "It's the smart thing to do."

Newton said that if Texas doesn't start doing a better job of preparing its young to take over leadership when their time comes, "We will soon be a third world state in a first world nation." Too many students are failing high school and even middle school, and too few heading to college in an age where post-secondary education is vital for advancement.

Darek Gilliam, a Moore student who demonstrated the new equipment for visitors, said the best thing about the computers is the increased speed and access, allowing students to get their work done more quickly.

Saundrea Walker, a junior, noted that the laptop option means classes are no longer bound to the building, but can take them to the field for recording data.

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