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KATY (Aristoi Classical Academy) – When one of the world’s largest energy companies began donating 300 computers to Katy’s Aristoi Classical Academy in the summer of 2018, no one could have imagined that the gift would allow the small charter school to shift with relative ease into online education during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.

Two grandparent volunteers, Jim and Cathy Jones, helped facilitate the gift that allowed both of Aristoi’s Katy campuses to seamlessly transition from classroom instruction to at-home learning when on campus classroom instruction ended after the 2020 spring break.

“Parent volunteers add the bells and whistles to Aristoi Classical Academy by their caring donations and volunteer hours,” said Aristoi Classical Academy Superintendent Brenda Davidson.

Prior to their retirement, Jim and Cathy Jones worked for energy giant Shell. They helped coordinate the donation of used Shell laptops and tablets to Aristoi’s two schools in the City of Katy.

They are also responsible for getting every device properly re-imaged so the old software could be removed and replaced with the appropriate programs for Aristoi students and teachers.

“We were able to replace all of the teachers’ outdated computers,” Davidson said.

Once the teachers’ needs were satisfied, the Joneses began replacing all of the technology in the computer labs at Aristoi’s elementary and upper school campuses. When that was completed, the Joneses began preparing Shell’s donated technology for Aristoi students. At the time, they never knew the donated computers and tablets would be needed by teachers and students during a pandemic.

“They had all of this done prior to COVID-19,” Davidson said. “They even had teams of employees from Shell and other companies to volunteer to help them deploy the computers to the teachers and students,” Davidson said.

“You want to be able to be very mobile and able to do things outside the classroom,” Jim Jones said. “Everything we brought to them was portable, not a bunch of computers that sat on a desk.”

So, when COVID-19 struck, Aristoi had plenty of computers and tablets for students to use at home. Not every student needed a device, but those who did had their needs met due to the donation from Shell. When classroom teaching turned virtual, not a single student went without the technology they needed to keep learning.

No one at Aristoi anticipated COVID-19, but their mobile computing systems were exactly what they needed when the pandemic struck.

“We wanted to build an environment that was much more cloud-based and internet-based. An environment that was much more mobile,” Jim Jones said.

“I just consider it divine intervention,” Davidson said. “We would not have been at this place without this donation.”

Writing and defending a thesis is a rite of passage for high school seniors at Aristoi. Typically, students defend their thesis in person in front of teachers. This year seniors defended their theses during an online meeting, and it was the Shell laptops that allowed that process to happen seamlessly.

Classical education is not a place where modern electronics are considered central to learning. Students are not allowed to bring cellphones to school at Aristoi Classical Academy. While technology allows easy access to information, Aristoi wants teachers to guide students to find knowledge and wisdom from within, from the study of classic texts, and from Socratic dialogue, and not by relying on using an external device.

“We never would want to be ruled by our tools, but at the same time we don’t want to be afraid of innovation,” said Kathryn Locheed, head of Aristoi’s upper school.

“The Joneses have been learning about classical education and falling in love with it,” Davidson said. “They have not in any way tried to move us from our goals and philosophy of a classical education. They’ve struck the perfect balance.”

That balance means Aristoi will be ready to educate students in the fall, whether instruction moves back into the classroom or continues to be offered virtually to some extent. The Joneses created a computer center at the school to handle technology work orders. They also helped the school interview and hire two IT employees who keep their technology running smoothly. So, thanks to the kindness of Shell, and the dedication Jim and Cathy Jones, Aristoi is ready, no matter what challenges arise this fall.

About Aristoi Classical Academy

Aristoi Classical Academy is a tuition-free public charter school offering classical education to students in grades K-12. Aristoi currently has two campuses in historic Katy with a total enrollment of nearly 1,000 students. The Cypress campus, that will offer grades K-4 in its first year, is set to open in August 2020. Enrollment spaces are still available. To learn more about Aristoi Classical Academy, visit www.aristoiclassical.org or call 281-391-5003.



Caption: Aristoi Faculty & Staff with their Shell laptops

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