

Former first lady visits area school

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PEARLAND — Wearing a checkered suit and her classic white pearls, former first lady Barbara Bush spoke to area officials, residents and students about a COW — a Curriculum On Wheels.

Founded by Bush's son, Neil, the COW is a computer, projector and speaker combined in a purple box that gives teachers a media outlet to engage students in learning through song, diagrams and cartoons.

"The COW program is based on kids," Bush said. "They are used to using computers and they like all these crazy songs."

After the Hurricane Katrina evacuation, thousands of transplanted children were placed in Houston-area schools. Alvin ISD's Mary Marek Elementary, in the Shadow Creek subdivision, was one of the many schools that took in students.

To assist area teachers with increased enrollments, Bush made a donation of eight COWs to the Houston area through the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund.

"Through the generous donation of the purple COW, science has become more exciting for the students," sixth-grade science teacher Craig Kettler said. "It presents curriculum in a way that students can understand."

The donation was to help the schools serve their students and the students from Louisiana, Kettler said. Harrington McDowelle and Thong Dinh, both from New Orleans, enrolled in Mary Marek after the hurricane. The COW helped Dinh interact with his new classmates through education, Dinh said.

"It is much more interesting than learning from a textbook," Dinh said. "We thank Mrs. Bush for making it possible."

McDowelle thanked the Mary Marek staff and students as well.

"Upon coming to Marek, I found that meeting friends was easy," McDowelle said.

McDowelle's mother, Dana, also thanked the school and the opportunities the elementary gave her children.

"When we evacuated, we had no idea what type of devastation our family would face," Dana McDowelle said. "We had cousins who lived in Shadow Creek, so we came here. ... When they (her cousins) brought us to Marek the first day, the administrators sat us down, had us fill out papers, our kids went into a magical room and came out with backpacks and they took them in. The transition was seamless."

Dana McDowelle added, "My kids have never liked science, but with the songs of the purple COW, they love it."

The McDowelle family plans to stay in Pearland and soon will have a house to call home in the Shadow Creek subdivision.

In the corner of the cafeteria, Kettler demonstrated the COW for the audience. An upbeat song about volcano eruptions began sounding from the purple box that looked like an enlarged projector. An overweight, cartoon disc jockey bounced up and down on the screen as pictures displayed lava shooting out from black ash. During the verses of the song, diagrams showed viewers where the magma and gases were in a volcano.

"The COW includes so many essential elements the teacher needs," Mary Marek Principal Jennifer Valdez said. "Learning is certainly reinforced in how the students retain information."

Valdez added, "Thank you, Mrs. Bush, for allowing us to extend our learning."

For information about COW, visit www.ignitelearning.com.

Lucretia Fernandez covers Alvin ISD for The Facts. Contact her at (979) 849-8581.