Southern High Celebrates Financial Literacy Month with Unveiling of Teleconference Suite

Oakland, MD – Students enrolled in one of Lisa Bender’s spring semester personal finance classes knew they would learn about stocks, bonds and mutual funds because it was listed on her syllabus. What they didn’t realize was that they would hear about these topics from an expert sitting in his office that was 200 miles away. Thanks to teleconferencing equipment purchased with funds contributed by SHS 1989 graduate Robert W. Sharps, the high school now has a unique suite with the capability to engage adults in their own workspace, in real time, in order to learn more about the world of work.

Bender, a 28 year veteran business teacher, wanted to re-purpose an old school store area with a business boardroom set up that would help the school to emphasize college and career readiness. She reached out to alumni who might be interested in donating to the cause and found an eager donor, Rob Sharps, who was interested in helping his alma mater update this space with 21st Century technology tools. Bender also approached local banks for business furniture asking for donations of surplus items that could help outfit the school’s new college and career suite. Bender was excited to learn that MyBank First United had a boardroom table and chairs that could meet the school’s needs.

Robert W. Sharps, who actively supports the Oakland area school by funding the Alumni Association Scholarship program, earned a degree in accounting from Towson University, and a MBA in finance from The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. He also has a CPA and CFA designation. Sharps eventually joined T. Rowe Price in their Baltimore office in 1997 after working for KPMG Peat Marwick as a senior management consultant focusing on corporate transactions. Today, he is a Vice President at the firm and is the lead portfolio manager of the T. Rowe Price U.S. Large Cap Equity Strategy team, and manages over $30 Billion in assets.

When it came time to unveil the new room and arrange for a first teleconference for SHS students, Bender knew who to turn to first. Her students had just completed the 10 week stock market game and some intensive study about equity markets, so the class’ interest would reach a peak during April, when the nation celebrates Financial Literacy Month. Sharps agreed to meet on a Friday morning before the stock exchanges opened. “The best people to speak to my high school students about college and career readiness are people in the field, working in their own space, in real time. A live teleconference would allow our alumni to speak to current students’ questions, concerns and curiosity about the world of work”, said Bender. During the first teleconference, students heard from Sharps about some of his corporate clients and also learned of his worldwide travels and how important it is to understand local customs and cultures. Sharps, was asked by students to describe his typical day. He explained that with his job, every day can be different. “Sometimes I am traveling overseas, and other times I am analyzing reports and research from our staff. One skill I use each and every day is communications. These are invaluable in the workplace; make sure you work on your speaking, writing and listening skills because they will help distinguish you in the world of work”, said Sharps. “It was interesting to hear him speak about his travels and people he has met one on one, like Jeff Bezos the CEO of Amazon and Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla. That’s pretty cool to know a graduate of our school is doing these things” said Grace Ingram, a sophomore enrolled in the personal finance class. SHS Principal Jim Maddy was also impressed adding “The opportunity to bring the sights and sounds of the workplace to students here at Southern is one we want to explore as much as possible”. Maddy was in attendance during the first teleconference and commented on how engaged all the students were with Sharps. “The students asked some great questions and learned a lot from this experience”, he said. The president of the Alumni Association for
Southern was also present and was pleased with how well the technology worked. “This will be an exciting tool to help our students learn more about careers from alumni who also serve as role models by demonstrating that SHS students can compete and succeed at every level as they continue their education and pursue their careers. We see this as a tool that will motivate students to achieve in school and to set high goals in the future.” said Alumni President Robert P. Sharps.

Bender has made arrangements for other teleconferences to take place using the new business suite. The school’s theater class will engage in a teleconference with an SHS graduate who is currently a theater major at West Chester University in Philadelphia. An alum who is a faculty member at the University of North Carolina Wilmington has also agreed to speak to SHS students who have career designs in a medical field such as Physical Therapy, Physician Assistant, and Athletic Training. It will be exciting to see how access to this technology and the students’ interest in exploring more college and career readiness shape the possibilities for this project” said Bender.