

2023 Simon-DeVos Prize Winners Laura and Jeff Sandefer Create Change Through Education

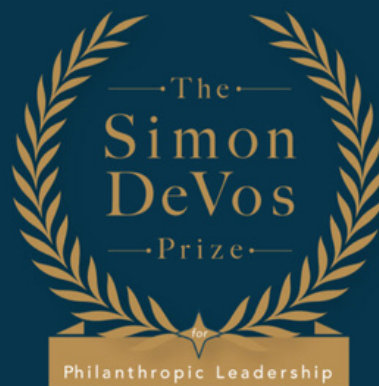
David Bass

Pathways to Opportunity

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LAURA & JEFF SANDEFER

2023 Recipients of the Simon-DeVos Prize for
Philanthropic Leadership



A 2009 encounter with a teacher dramatically changed the course of Laura and Jeff Sandefer's lives—and the lives of thousands of students—forever.

That year, the Sandefers were considering a move from Montessori to traditional school for their sons. During a meeting with a teacher from a local private school, Jeff Sandefer asked when they should make the transition.

“As soon as possible,” the teacher said. “Once they’ve experienced so much freedom, they will hate sitting in a desk and being talked at all day.”

When Jeff pictured his curious, energetic boys confined to a classroom in this way, he was heartbroken. And that afternoon, when he returned home to Laura, he told her “We’re not doing that to our boys. We’re either going to home-school or start our own school.”

That’s how Acton Academy was born.

For their groundbreaking contributions to education through platforms like Acton Academy and the Acton Children’s Business Fair, the Sandefers are the recipients of the 2023 Simon-DeVos Prize for Philanthropic Leadership. This Prize honors living philanthropists who have set an example of leadership excellence through charitable giving, and by conveying the values of individual freedom, resourcefulness, faith in God, personal responsibility, scholarship, volunteerism and helping others help themselves.

Awakening Heroes on a Hero’s Journey

Acton Academy is a global network of private schools inspired by the one-room schoolhouse approach to education. These schools inspire every student to see themselves as a hero in waiting, with an important quest to embark upon. At Acton Academy, students are encouraged to connect to their unique gifts and genius, much like the small-group learning and apprenticeships of early America.

“We believe each child has a special gift, and our role is to inspire them with great stories from the past to be the heroes in their own hero’s journey,” Jeff says. “We believe children learn best through trial and error, in a tightly knit community, tackling real world problems through sharing the stories, examples, rubrics and recipes widely available because of 21st century technology.”

Acton’s founding centered around the idea that each student is a genius in his or her own way. Every individual has a unique calling to uncover, and within that potential lies the ability to change the world for the better.



“While our learners excel as thinkers, speakers, writers and users of math and technology, we believe courage, setting goals and getting along with others are even more important,” Laura says.



From a Small Rental Space to a Global Movement

What started with seven students in a small rental house has expanded to a growing, worldwide educational phenomenon. Acton Academy's learning model is characterized by:

- Game-based learning programs that help students develop core knowledge and skills
- Discussions based on the Socratic method that encourage the development of critical thinking
- Real-world, hands-on projects and learning experiences
- Apprenticeships that equip students with all-important skills and knowledge they can take into their professional lives

Now, with 300 schools in more than 25 countries so far, the Acton Academy model is steadily increasing in popularity. Students from kindergarten through 12th grade study and develop their individual talents in these intimate settings as they prepare for entrepreneurship, higher education or the workforce.

“My parents had seven children, none of whom learned the same way,” says Bill Simon, Jr., co-chairman of the William E. Simon Foundation, which, along with the DeVos [Family Foundation](#), sponsors the annual Prize. “Laura and Jeff Sandefer are visionaries in helping empower parents to create schools that meet the needs of their children through the Acton Academies. We are so pleased that their accomplishments and generosity are being recognized with the 2023 Simon-DeVos Prize for Philanthropic Leadership.”

The Sandefers credit Acton Academy's success to the families who had the courage to try a new approach to education.

“We focused on the needs of the end customer,” Jeff says. “Then, we built experiments that turned into kits many could use, and a network of people willing to work and learn together. In every way, it was a bottom-up experiment that relied on the hard work of thousands of young heroes and parents with real skin in the game.”

Sifting Through the Past: Education Before the Industrial Revolution

As Jeff and Laura began to consider what launching their own school might look like, they traveled back in time—first to the Industrial Revolution of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when our current public school model emerged. The current public school system is professionalized and modeled to train productive citizens. But that means children are being trained in an environment that is, essentially, industrialized.

The Sandefers believe the traditional model of education fails to recognize students as individuals. Rather than treating children as cogs in a machine, Acton Academy seeks to transform them into the leaders and heroes they're capable of becoming.

"Children aren't widgets," Jeff said in his [2011 TEDxOKC Talk](#).

Rather than emulating the current educational system, Acton Academy is modeled after the one-room schoolhouse educational style that predates the Industrial Revolution. It's also characterized by apprenticeships that allow students to study under a knowledgeable teacher who can help them learn essential skills for the years ahead.

"Jeff and Laura's visionary ideas have transformed the educational ecosystem by fostering entrepreneurship, critical thinking and character development in young people through experiential student-led learning," says entrepreneur and investor Rick DeVos. "Their work through Acton Academy has empowered students to discover their unique gifts and become independent lifelong learners. Jeff and Laura's outstanding contributions uplift communities and ignite a ripple effect of transformational impact."

Creating an Agile, Powerful Network Through Experimentation

Acton Academy's founders and leaders have demonstrated a deep willingness to experiment and remain agile in their quest to develop its strong educational programs. According to Laura, they've carefully "defended against mission creep," remaining focused on the task at hand.

"We learned from groups like the early Christian church and Alcoholics Anonymous how to create lightweight, powerful networks where those we serve promise to serve others and pay it forward," she says.

Throughout Acton Academy's development, its leaders have experimented in order to improve the educational model. They repeat what works until they can package it into a kit for others. Then, they create networks to learn from one another. When experiments are proven to be effective, they become part of Acton Academy's playbook.

Entrepreneurial and Educational Roots Inspire a Fresh Method of Learning



At its core, Acton Academy helps to develop critical thinking and entrepreneurial skills in young students. The concept formed in part as a result of the Sandefers' unique backgrounds.

A successful entrepreneur and educator, and the founder of seven businesses including the oil and gas company Sandefer Offshore and the energy investment firm Sandefer Capital Partners, Jeff learned entrepreneurship at an early age. His father, an oil businessman from Abilene, Texas, made his living from wildcatting, a high-risk method of exploratory oil drilling that may or may not yield results. At 16, Jeff launched his first business painting oil tankers.

He earned his bachelor's degree in petroleum and gas from the University of Texas. From there, he went on to Harvard University to earn his MBA. During this time, he learned about the Socratic method, a teaching technique that Acton Academy employs today to encourage critical thinking in its students. For more than three decades, Jeff worked as a professor, first at the University of Texas then at his Acton School of Business MBA program and later as a guide at Acton Academy.

Laura, whose mother was a beloved teacher, holds a bachelor of arts and masters of education from Vanderbilt University. She's also the author of "Courage to Grow: How Acton Academy Turns Learning Upside Down."

Combining their shared backgrounds, the Sandefers blazed an entrepreneurial trail, establishing and growing Acton Academy into a global movement. Despite its success, they remain mindful of the reasons they first established the school.

“Our mission is to serve families and their quest for learning – not to take political positions or participate in educational reform,” Laura says.

Making an Impact Through Engaged Philanthropy

At the heart of every charitable donor is a desire to improve the lives of others. When it comes to being an engaged philanthropist, Laura says it’s important to focus on “questions, choices and community” over money and top-down solutions.

“[We focus on] questions to discover the deeply felt needs of an individual; choices to offer to the individual who becomes the hero in his or her own story and community so the individual becomes part of something grander and more beautiful, and almost always pays it forward by serving someone else,” she says.

Rather than using multiple metrics to gauge their success, the Sandefers say they only focus on one: the willingness of learners and their families to recommend Acton Academy to others.

Jeff says Acton Academy has looked to Philanthropy Roundtable as a model for its own growth and development.

“I found ... Philanthropy Roundtable in 1989 when I was 29 years old,” he says. “Over the last several decades, their focus on donor intent, keeping overhead low and staying focused on the needs of those we serve have been guiding lights.”

Looking Toward the Future

As recipients of the 2023 Simon-DeVos Prize, the Sandefers will receive an award of \$200,000, which may be paid toward one or more selected charities. Jeff and Laura have elected to split the award between the Acton Institute, which bears no relation to Acton Academy, and Hope International, a micro-finance organization that helps fight poverty.

“Jeff and Laura’s journey has been defined by a relentless pursuit of positive change, a commitment to innovation and a deep compassion for humanity,” says Dick DeVos, president of the Dick and Betsy DeVos Foundation. “Their ability to inspire, motivate and mobilize others across the globe through the Acton model is a testament to their exemplary leadership and charisma. Their story reminds me that each one of us has the capacity to make a difference, creating a legacy that extends far beyond our own lifetimes.”

For the Sandefers, accepting the Simon-DeVos Prize is the culmination of many years of philanthropy and impact. But it's also a poignant moment for Jeff and Laura, who have been inspired by the Simon and DeVos families for many years.

"I've long admired the work and character of Betsy, Dick and the DeVos family," Jeff says. "Likewise, Bill Simon has been a hero of mine since the 1970s, from his pioneering of the leveraged buyout to his world changing service as Secretary of the Treasury."

"Being recognized by the Simon and DeVos families is a great honor and we'll do everything we can to live up to it," he adds.

The Prize was presented to the Sandefers on October 25, 2023 at Philanthropy Roundtable's Annual Meeting in Rancho Palos Verdes, California.

Learn more about the Simon-DeVos Prize [here](#).