

## Community moves ball forward at Guardian Angels Catholic School



*Principal Mary Stalzer poses for a portrait in the chapel of Guardian Angels Catholic School. Principal Stalzer has worked at the school for 18 years. | [GABRIELLA ANGOTTI-JONES | Times, 2018]*



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CLEARWATER — At many workplaces, it's the camaraderie and relationships developed over time that make employees stick around.

Those are especially important at Guardian Angels Catholic School, where cultivating a tight-knit community and support network is considered to be integral to the success of its teachers, students and overall mission.

"We want everyone to work very closely together to lead children not only to knowledge, but to closeness with God," Mary Stalzer, who became principal in 2016, said.

Guardian Angels, a Catholic school with grades pre-kindergarten through eighth, was this year's No 1 top workplace in the small category. It focuses on the Catholic faith, academic excellence and treating its students as unique individuals.

The key to achieving these, employees said, is collaboration. In the classrooms, that comes out in teachers' approaches to each grade's learning material.

Guardian Angels is accredited by The Florida Catholic Conference. While the school follows a particular curriculum, teachers have the ability to develop their own plans for meeting such standards.

They often work together on projects. Faculty also collaborate with one another in "clusters" of several grades (pre-kindergarten to second grade, for example) to discuss how to meet standards.

"They put out some questions to each cluster about what we want to do going forward," Stalzer said. "Decisions come from across the entire faculty, and the best ideas come out that way."

Stalzer, who has worked at the school for 18 years, first joined Guardian Angels as a third grade teacher.

"I was really taken by how warm and welcoming everyone was," she said. "The teachers were happy; the students were happy."

Collaboration is evident in her approach to leadership.

"You have to be willing to do everything and anything that anyone that works there is doing," she said. "You want it to be clear to everyone that you would be honored to do whatever they do alongside them."

Her longevity with the school isn't unique. The all-female Faculty currently average about 10 years with the school, and several have stayed between 18 and 21 years.

"This is a place where people want to stay," she said.

In an anonymous survey of employees conducted by the *Tampa Bay Times* and Energage, several cited the communal aspect as a reason that they enjoyed working at Guardian Angels. "My students, parents of students, my staff and my administrators make the job enjoyable and fun," one teacher said. "Everyone is respectful, communicates effectively and there is a positive sense of teamwork."

Multiple employees — both in survey answers and in interviews — referred to the Guardian Angels community as a "family."

"I am able to do what I love with people that are truly like family," one employee said in the survey. "The teamwork mentality among the staff and administration is very encouraging. I feel like I am part of something special at Guardian Angels."

A community approach isn't just limited to the classrooms, either. Parents often rely on one another to shuttle children to school and extracurriculars, and many socialize outside of school-related events.

Jane Grantham, communications director for Guardian Angels, has two children enrolled at the school.

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"We all have each other's backs at all times," Grantham said. "I think all the children really realize how close we all are, and that's very comforting to the student population."

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### **Employee comments**

In the *Tampa Bay Times*' Top Workplaces survey, Guardian Angels Catholic School employees praised management's commitment to treating them as individuals and a positive work environment.

Here's a sample of comments, submitted anonymously, in response to the prompt, "I love my job because":

- "We all work and pray together as a team. We all work towards the same positive Christian goals. We are here to serve."
- "It is a workplace of wonderful, kind loving individuals. They support each other in so many ways. It is a fun environment full of laughter and support. I learn something new every week."
- "I have bosses who treat me like a person, not an employee number. I get to help kids learn, grow and reach their fullest potential, and there is nothing more heartwarming than seeing students reach that point."