

The heart of St. Mary's: A retirement tribute to Principal Linda D'Andrea

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As we continue to face increasing discriminatory barriers, financial insecurity, job loss, and fractured legal, educational, and healthcare systems, it becomes difficult not to withdraw and navigate these disparities in isolation. It is even more challenging to cultivate trust and a genuine sense of belonging within the people and places that shape our communities. For parents today, this reality can feel especially heavy as they long for their children to experience the same collective happiness and hope they once knew in their own childhoods. In many cases, parents rely on schools to supplement, or even sometimes fully provide, the experiences that help children feel seen, supported, safe, and connected to a wholesome community. Herein lies the challenge: those teachers and administrators are also parents and individuals confronting many of the same hardships as their neighbours. The good news? Every once in a while, there emerges an educator or leader who, despite the barriers they may encounter personally or professionally, commits wholeheartedly to cultivating a school community grounded in togetherness, trust, faith, and positivity. It was the first week of September in 2020. Already strained and fearful amid an unprecedented pandemic that had begun just six months earlier, parents of children attending St. Mary Catholic Elementary School in Nobleton received an email announcing that a new principal had been hired. Community parent social media groups quickly filled with questions and speculation. Who was this new principal? Why would a new principal be appointed during such uncertain times? Would this new principal be embraced as warmly as the previous one? That new principal was Linda D'Andrea, and she most certainly surpassed all expectations. The day before the first day of school, I decided to send Principal D'Andrea an email welcoming her to the school community. I attached a picture of myself with my boys, AJ and RJ. I can only imagine how inundated she must have been with responsibilities on the eve of the school year, and yet she responded almost immediately with such warmth and kindness. Throughout her tenure at St. Mary's, Principal D'Andrea never failed to begin each morning by greeting parents and students as they made their way through the drop-off loop. She helps students cross the parking lot, unload knapsacks from cars, zip up jackets, and, of course, chat with parents whenever time permitted. I always looked forward to her radiant smile and the remarkable way she seemed to know whether I needed a hug or a good laugh. Students deeply respect Principal D'Andrea. She possesses the rare ability to build meaningful relationships with students while maintaining a strong and respected leadership presence. She immerses herself in the lives of her students, valuing who they are both inside and outside the classroom. I can still picture her reaction upon hearing of a student's accomplishment, eyebrows raised, palm to her heart: "Can you believe it? I'm so proud!" Central to her character is the care she demonstrates for student well-being. It is never acceptable for a child to feel excluded or bullied? not on her watch! She understands keenly that without positive mental health, meaningful academic growth cannot occur. Building community is undoubtedly a priority for Principal D'Andrea. She consistently supports initiatives that bring students and families together, including the Halloween Fundraiser, Christmas Market, and end-of-year school BBQ. These efforts extend equally to her teaching staff. Rumour has it that teachers across the GTA seek transfers to (or hope to be hired at) St. Mary's, and I believe I know why. The teachers at St. Mary's consistently praise her leadership and pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning. Much like with her students, Principal D'Andrea skillfully balances personal connection with professional leadership, all grounded in mutual respect and collegiality. One of the qualities I admire most about Principal D'Andrea is her ability to speak with such poise and authenticity. During events and assemblies attended by hundreds of parents, she addresses audiences effortlessly with thoughtful and inspiring words. No cue cards, no nerves, no hesitation? just sincere expressions spoken from the heart. And now, here we are six years later, and Principal D'Andrea has made the decision to retire. While our parent community wishes she could stay, we are profoundly grateful to have had her leadership for as long as we did, and deeply honoured that she chose to close this chapter of her career at St. Mary's. I hope she truly understands how deeply she has shaped the minds and spirits of this community. We thank her for restoring the belief that, regardless of the obstacles or loneliness life may bring, there are still bright and steadfast individuals capable of uplifting and strengthening a community to its fullest potential.