



Alabama • Arizona • Florida • Georgia • Nevada • Pennsylvania

School Spotlight

July 2016

Golden Rule Academy

Fort Pierce, FL



“Community-based” is how Senior Administrator Kimberly Baumgardner describes Golden Rule Academy, a school her mother-in-law Joyce Baumgardner began 12 years ago and one that Kim now oversees. With its diverse student body – which often includes at-risk youth from surrounding neighborhoods – the leadership and staff have developed a unique learning environment that sets it apart from many traditional private schools, making it a much-needed educational option for children growing up in this Treasure Coast area of Florida.

Golden Rule was created in 2004 out of a simple need to serve students in the community that were struggling in their neighborhood public schools. The first few students that attended the school did so through donations that covered their tuition and the first teacher’s salary. However, it soon became clear that there was a greater need within the community, especially for at-risk children from the surrounding areas who desperately needed an alternative learning environment. Through Florida Tax Credit Scholarships and the McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities, many of these children were able to attend the school, where Kim and her staff at Golden Rule welcomed them with open arms.

Every child that attends Golden Rule is treated as an individual – something that is interwoven into the teaching methods used at the school.

“We make it our priority to teach to the unique needs of each child that enters our classrooms,” says Kim. “We have children from so many different backgrounds and learning needs. So instead of trying to change the way a child learns, we have adopted a flexible teaching style that makes it possible for them to grasp the subject at hand.”

This kind of flexibility includes field trips and conducting science classes outside, where kids can literally dig in the dirt, experience gardening and botany, and participate in other hands-on lessons. It also means tailoring teaching methods for different learning needs, such as conducting verbal tests for children that struggle with taking traditional tests. They also have special needs classes when more intervention-based help is needed, as

well as experts that come on campus for in-school tutoring in reading and math. The staff's dedication to addressing each child's needs is proving beneficial for the students at Golden Rule.

Simone Tillman, the middle and high school principal, recalls one student that was undergoing speech and occupational therapy and he was behind academically. Traditionally, he would have been put in a special needs program, but he was determined to stay in class with his peers and the teachers at Golden Rule made that possible. The one-on-one attention and flexible teaching methods helped him go from a 5th grade level to the 8th grade level that year – helping him catch up with his peers.

In addition to fulfilling the educational needs of their students, the staff also serves as an extended family and support system for children that need additional emotional support and counseling. And the teachers at the school have dealt with their fair share of difficult and even tragic situations involving their students.

One young man in particular stands out in Kim's mind – not because of his tragedy, but because of how he has overcome it. He came to them from a nearby neighborhood where violent crime and gang activity is prevalent. Kim recalls the morning he arrived at school, only one day after his stepfather had tragically been shot and killed. She and other staff helped to counsel him that day and continued to provide support over the next few years. That same young man is now a graduate of Golden Rule who serves as a summer camp counselor-in-training (CIT) at the school and will possibly do a career-based internship with them next year. On the weekends you can find him on campus serving as a mentor to other at-risk children, helping to encourage them to rise above their circumstances and find a path that will better their futures.

You can hear the pride in Kim's voice when speaking of him, like he is her own son. "This is a young man that could very well be on the streets, in gangs just like others around him," she says. "But because he was given an opportunity to use education as a way to overcome his situation, he is now destined for success."

Because many of the children at the school come from low-income and often single-parent homes, the staff has even stepped forward to address other issues – such as hunger. Several of the teachers noticed children coming to school hungry, making it hard for them to concentrate in class. Women from the church began bringing in a brown bag lunch and other food to ensure those children didn't go hungry during the day. The school is now working to qualify for the National Free and Reduced Lunch Program so that they can provide breakfast and lunch for the children who need it.

Over the last 12 years, the school has grown to serve about 225 students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. They have developed a well-rounded program that offers traditional academic classes, as well as fine and creative arts such as violin, guitar, keyboarding, and dance. Athletics include full-contact football, volleyball, basketball, soccer, and cheer. Golden Rules' high school students can dual enroll at the college level or take virtual classes to accelerate meeting their educational goals. The school also recently ventured into a new STEM program that garnered recognition for their high school boys. Golden Rule was the first school in St. Lucie County to compete in the national FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Technology) robotics program. For six weeks straight, the school's 9-12th grade boys' team worked on building their robot – including before and after school and weekends. Their hard work paid off and they ended up ranking in the top 50 percent. Next year, with adequate funding, the school hopes to expand the program to include LEGO robotics for elementary through high school students.

Kim accredits scholarship organizations like AAA Scholarship Foundation and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program for making it possible for Golden Rule Academy to serve children whose needs cannot be met in traditional public school settings.

“We are so grateful to the donors who provide the funds for these scholarships for our children,” Kim says. “We in turn are working to do our part by providing our students with lifelong skills, instilling them with integrity and teaching them how to be logical thinkers, communicators, and role models so that they can serve as the next generation of business and community leaders.”

About AAA Scholarship Foundation

The typical AAA Scholarship student is an ethnic minority living with a struggling single parent/caregiver in a high crime community. The average household income of families accepted to receive scholarships is \$23,559 for a family of four. Many children are either below grade level, failing at their previous school or both when they receive a scholarship. Parents, who find their children in these circumstances and care about their future, look for viable options. They seek an atmosphere that challenges their child to reverse inadequate learning and/or social patterns and the potential lifelong negative impact. They wish to change their child’s learning environment, acquaintances, and the unfortunate predictable outcomes associated with school failure.

AAA Scholarships are funded in Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, and Pennsylvania by corporations that redirect a portion of their state tax liability to the AAA Scholarship Foundation in exchange for a tax credit (dollar for dollar in Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Georgia and Nevada, and up to 90 percent in Pennsylvania). The AAA Scholarship Foundation is one of the only approved Scholarship 501(c)(3) Nonprofit Organizations exclusively serving qualifying low-income, disabled and/or displaced students through these Scholarship Tax Credit programs. AAA Scholarship Foundation provides your company with the convenience and efficiency of a single-solution for participating in multiple state tax credit scholarship programs. For more information or to learn how your corporation can participate in the program, visit www.AAAScholarships.org, or contact Kerri Vaughan at kerri@aaascholarships.org or 888 707-2465 ext. 730.