

ST. MARK CATHOLIC SCHOOL

# Retiring principal leaves behind legacy of success, caring

By Michael Gresham  
The Texas Catholic

PLANO – Some may say it was by happenstance that Patricia Opon ended up in the dream job of her life. Opon, though, believes it was God's hand.

"This job changed my life. It was truly the Holy Spirit at work," said Opon, who after spending the bulk of her educator's career in Garland ISD, began contemplating ways to better reach students when her dental hygienist told her about the principal's opening at St. Mark Catholic School. "At first, I wasn't going to do it."

Encouraged by her family to make the most of the opportunity, Opon prayed about it and, in 2014, became the second principal in St. Mark's 38-year history.

"Thankfully, the Holy Spirit pushed me forward, and my life, and the lives of my family, changed forever," Opon said. "From the teachers to the students to the parents, this school is incredible. It's a truly special place."

After 31 years as an educator, Opon retired in December to spend more time with her family.

"Recently, my husband had a small health scare and was strongly advised by his doctor to retire. We decided, as a couple, it was time to start the next chapter of our lives," said Opon in a letter to the St. Mark community announcing her retirement, adding that she will always consider her time as principal of St. Mark the greatest honor of her career. "The decision to retire was much harder than the decision to accept this job. It required complete faith that I am following the plan God has for me and for St. Mark. I could never leave if I did not truly believe this."

Opon credited staff, faculty and the overall St. Mark community



MICHAEL GRESHAM/The Texas Catholic  
Patricia Opon, principal at St. Mark Catholic School, retired in December. During her tenure, she oversaw numerous technology, facility and curriculum improvements at the Plano campus.

for the school's tradition of success.

"This community is so involved, so special. We have masterful, caring teachers who truly have the students' best interests at heart," said Opon, adding that she will miss the daily interactions with students including her own grandchildren who attend the school. "My heart will be full of wonderful St. Mark memories that I will always treasure."

Though Opon may no longer physically be in the building, her legacy will continue to impact students for years to come. Under her leadership at St. Mark, Opon oversaw the incorporation of an integrated STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math) curriculum, introduction of a SmartLab technology facility — the first in north Texas — and virtual reality classroom, coordination with assistant

and reading venues and picnic tables.

The final 12 months of Opon's tenure at the school, though, may best reflect her leadership as she guided the community seamlessly through the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the introduction of distance learning in the spring of 2020 and a synchronized off-campus learning program that began in August 2020.

Her leadership efforts were not lost on staff and parents.

"Through Mrs. Opon's leadership, we developed protocols and procedures that have kept our students and teachers healthy, while not compromising on the high quality education students receive at St. Mark," said sixth-grade teacher Sarah Salvia, praising Opon for her steady demeanor and leadership. "I will miss her calm presence, positive reinforcement and willingness to try new things that will benefit the students and teachers on our campus."

Salvia said the outgoing principal always focused on what was best for students and teachers at St. Mark, even if that meant implementing new ideas.

"During her time, our focus centered on a differentiated approach to learning and teaching, recognizing what is best for each student," she explained, adding that the school also became a fully integrated technology campus with a 1:1 device for all students.

Barbara Ehms, a third-grade teacher at the school for 16 years, agreed, pointing to the focus on increased and enhanced use of technology.

"Mrs. Opon likes to emphasize that due to constantly evolving technologies, many of the jobs our students will pursue after college have not yet even been fully envisioned," Ehms said. "She feels strongly that the education of our

students must keep up with these continual changes so that they will be prepared for the rigorous challenges of college and beyond."

Ehms, who said she has been a part of the school for 23 years as both of her daughters attended St. Mark, said what makes it special is its strong sense of community. Ehms said Opon contributed to that community.

"She recognized that sense of community when she arrived at St. Mark and has continued to work to keep the feeling of community strong," Ehms said.

For Jeff and Shelly Hoke, St. Mark has played a huge role in the lives of their children, who all have attended the school since pre-Kindergarten. The couple's oldest son, Jackson, now is a sophomore at Bishop Lynch High School while Mason is a seventh-grader and Brooklyn a fourth-grader at St. Mark. Jeff Hoke recalled when Opon was hired to replace Suzanne Bacot, who before retirement had served as the school's principal from its inception.

"We were nervous with anticipation at the arrival of a new principal. Very quickly, Mrs. Opon quieted our fears," he said. "She continued the school tradition of providing a challenging, yet rewarding learning environment, but at the same time brought us up to date with new technology, enhanced fine arts and many campus improvements."

Hoke said Opon's leadership led to more than technology and facility upgrades.

"She truly cares and is compassionate about each student and their families. Every interaction with her makes the students and parents feel special," said Hoke, adding that Opon helped endear the community to St. Mark. "Parents know when they drop off their children, they are sending them to a safe place. "She will be missed."