



Septima P. Clark Academy

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Media Release



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Top Five Teacher of the Year Finalist – Septima Clark Academy's Grace Barry

Charleston, S.C. – For Grace Barry, being named a [Top Five Teacher of the Year Finalist](#) is about much more than herself. It is about the students she teaches at Septima P. Clark Academy.

"My students wanted to know how we won," said Barry. "They were filled with joy, exclaiming, 'We did it.' They feel that this is their award, too, and it is."

Barry said on the day of the announcement, as she wept onto the shoulder of Superintendent Anita Huggins, she thought about the enormity of what was happening. Barry's mind flashed to the fact that she was the first teacher to be named a Top Five Finalist in any Charleston County School District (CCSD) alternative education program.

"This is my chance to get the word out about my students and this special little school," said Barry.

Barry, an English teacher, hopes to use this opportunity to show the rest of the district the successful things going on at Clark Academy and to combat any misconceptions people may have about the choice program.

"Clark is not a well-known school, but it is a one-of-a-kind program in the district," said Barry. "It is often mistaken for a behavioral-based program when, in fact, it is an academic alternative program. We are not a punitive school. It is intended for students that need extra academic support, smaller class sizes, and overall mentorship."

The school's mission mirrors the style of teaching that Barry favors.

"I am as rigorous of a teacher as any other in the district, but I infuse all things that I do in and out of the classroom with kindness," said Barry. "Kindness and rigor are not mutually exclusive. You can be both."

Barry thinks of Clark as "the little school that could."

"Clark is a mix of students from all over the district," said Barry. "They feel at home here, and they feel capable here. The environment fosters that idea, and you can't put a price tag on that."

Interim Principal Dr. Nakeam Binyard said Barry's strength is beyond teaching the standards, it's her character.

"She is committed to the mission of ensuring that all non-traditional students that attend Septima P. Clark Academy expand their learning," said Dr. Binyard. "With consistency and efficacy, she teaches with intentionality and kindness."

Becoming a teacher

This is the second year Barry has been named Teacher of the Year at Clark. She was also recognized as the school's Rookie Teacher of the Year in 2021. Her awards and recognitions are evidence of the quality teacher that she is.

Barry said she knew she wanted to pursue an educational career long before entering the classroom. She worked at The Citadel for three years as a tutor in the Student Success Center. She also worked at Sylvan Learning Center, helping students prepare for the SAT, and offered homework support. Her time at Sylvan allowed her to work with CCSD students from second grade through high school. In 2020, she came to Clark after student teaching at her alma mater, Wando High School.

"Like many educators, I played school as a young child," said Barry. "The idea of becoming an educator was ingrained in me from a very young age, but the type of educator I wanted to be evolved."

Barry describes herself as a theater kid who never aged out.

"I love an audience," said Barry. "I love caring about people and helping students in all aspects of their lives. Teaching, for me, is the marriage of content and caring about other people."

Barry said that the teachers in her life solidified her desire to teach. Many of those are still with CCSD; she is honored to call them colleagues.

During her sophomore year, Barry's English teacher used a moment in a lesson to explain how one verb can change the meaning of something entirely, and it resonated with her. She knew at that moment that she wanted to teach high school English. Barry now uses that same activity in her classes.

"It is rewarding to work here at Clark because I get to teach these children several times during their years here," said Barry. "Whether I teach them or not, I see them daily and watch them grow. I also witness their academic growth and evolution as productive and confident human beings. It is special because of the bond we create with one another. I can truly invest in them."

According to Dr. Binyard, Barry elicits a variety of thinking from students.

"Student/teacher relationships, flexibility, and cultural awareness are the elements that are reflective of how Ms. Barry strengthens and improves the teaching profession for all English Language Arts learners at Septima P. Clark Academy," added Binyard.

A passion for the work

Barry has been at Clark for four years and loves it.

"I knew this was the career for me when I attended my first graduation at Clark," said Barry. "Graduation is a huge accomplishment for these students, and there was a great sense of pride in the room that day as I watched these students realize their dreams. Some students genuinely thought they would not graduate, and many were told explicitly or implicitly that it would not happen for them. They defied the odds."

Barry is a young teacher, but she learned quickly that the easiest classroom management tool is getting to know her students and making time for them.

"I am a teacher and a mentor, so my students know I am there for them," said Barry. "These students come here for various reasons, and I want them to leave here confident young adults who take pride in themselves. I am developing active citizens of society who will look at the world with a critical lens. I want them to trust themselves and know they can be right and think independently. I want them to leave here with a strong sense of self-worth and academic ability."

Dr. Binyard said one of Barry's greatest contributions to the profession is her leading ability to inspire and support the whole student.

"She takes the time to ensure that students who may not have access to reading materials at home are prepared with sufficient materials," said Binyard. "Students have been heard stating that they didn't even know that they loved reading until they joined Ms. Barry's English class."

Barry believes in giving back and helping those who need it most. She is an adjunct at the Citadel, teaching in a program that is specifically designed to increase equity at The collegiate level. She also teaches summer school at the Juvenile Detention Center during the summer.

"I think all educators should do something like this at some point in their career," said Barry. "I am not just teaching them academics, but teaching them to have hope for themselves."

Barry said it would change her life if she was named Teacher of the Year.

"I am young, and my career is first and foremost in my life right now," said Barry. "It would be the greatest honor for me to represent CCSD. I would use it as an opportunity to highlight all that it offers, focusing on the remarkable diversity and richness of the entire district. I want to use what I've learned advocating for Clark and use that to advocate on behalf of the remarkable people who make Charleston County School District so special to me, both personally and professionally."

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally accredited school district committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves approximately 50,000 students in 88 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse portfolio of educational options and specialized programs delivered to the students of CCSD through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools and programs. Rich educational opportunities for students include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military; dual credit; and many more.