We are a family!” Sister Rita Rinaldi, IHM, says emphatically about her ministry at Detroit Cristo Rey High School. That bond has been essential for students, teachers, administrators and staff as the school has worked to establish itself.

Detroit Cristo Rey opened on the Holy Redeemer campus in southwest Detroit, part of the Cristo Rey Network®, in September 2008. Co-sponsored by the IHM Sisters and the Basilian Fathers, it is the only Catholic co-ed high school in Detroit.

All students participate in the Corporate Work Study Program, which complements the school’s curriculum with one day per week of work experience. Students’ salaries are paid directly to the school, making a faith-based, student-centered education affordable.

Sister Rita has been with Detroit Cristo Rey from the start. She taught English for two years and then moved on to theology and Campus Ministry. She now teaches theology full time and pastorally counsels students who come to her when they are troubled.

Listening to her talk about “her kids,” the love Sister Rita has for them is very apparent.

“They’re resilient, strong and have been through so much at such a young age,” she observes. “For instance, just last year, we lost two sophomores to guns – two kids we loved. The attitude with all the students is one of ‘we’re all struggling; we’re all the same.’

“I am so proud of what goes on in this school,” Sister Rita continues. “There are no fights, no students wandering the halls. Most Detentions are for infractions such as not having school ID or being tardy. There is a respect here that is lacking in many schools.”

That respect has had far-reaching effects; 90 percent of the corporate sponsors rehire year after year because the students’ work is so exemplary. Often, they create even more openings so they can hire additional students.
In addition to their academic and corporate work, students also enjoy extracurricular activities such as chess, debate teams, and working on the school newspaper and year book. “We’re trying to get a choir going too,” says Sister Rita. “And we have our sports teams – we’re the Detroit Cristo Rey Wolves – ‘We howl!’

“Cristo Rey is ‘the school that works,’” she notes. “As a result, both students and teachers have a schedule that tends to be more rigorous than at other schools. We have a month-long job training in the summer; an extended school day and an extended school year.”

Detroit has a 75-percent drop-out rate. Thus far at Detroit Cristo Rey, it’s a far different story: 100 percent of the seniors in the school’s first two classes have graduated.

“We are blessed with a wonderful group of volunteers who help with tutoring,” observes Sister Rita. “There’s no way our seniors won’t graduate – we’ll do whatever it takes.”