

THE *first day*

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PHOTOS BY BILL DRESLER



Heartfelt: In honor of the first day of school, Amy Lazare gives Cara a necklace with a small, gold heart-shaped charm.

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the other end would be their kindergarten teacher, Dawn Frederick, and her teaching assistant, Stevey Reid.

After the tender mom-daughter moment, Lazare started to get emotional. And Cara hadn't even stepped out of the Farmington Hills home yet.

"Now it's hitting me," Amy said. "I keep looking at her and I can't believe she's going to kindergarten."

For her first day of school, Cara didn't have the chance to wear one of her new outfits, bought during a recent shopping excursion.

Instead, she wore a teal Wood Creek t-shirt (Frederick wanted her class to wear the same thing for uniformity) and blue jeans, fastened with a shiny new belt. Her brown hair was adorned with a blue, purple and green bow.

With about 15 minutes to go until the bus would arrive, Cara's dad, Mark Lazare, walked in the front door after making a 20-mile commute from the office. There was no way he'd miss out on his little girl's big, big day.

"I'll probably come home early and watch her get off the bus, too," he said.

Usually, Mark's schedule forces him to miss "a lot of the fun things," such as pre-school field trips taken in past years by Cara and 3 1/2-year-old son Jarrett. Not this time, Mark operated a hand-held videocassette recorder, capturing all of the precious moments.

Skipping out of their home, toward the corner bus stop, were Cara and Jarrett — relishing his sister's impending school debut because Amy promised to give him her undivided attention later in the day.

Also outside with their cameras were neighbors Mary Beth and Bob Minelli. Both Cara and Robbie Minelli stood next to each other in the driveway as more film was taken and more photographs snapped.

"Big smiles, everybody," said Mark Lazare.

While Amy was helping get Cara ready for the first day, she served up advice to just have fun. "I told her that this is the start of the best time of her life and to enjoy it."

But when the bus came into view on their winding neighborhood street near 12 Mile-Drake, she kind of wished the beginning of Cara's school career would be delayed for a while.

Right on schedule, at 11:58 a.m., the bus pulled up in front of the Minelli's residence. There were only a few other children scattered around the large, yellow vehicle as the children hugged their moms and dads one more time and took the big step up.

Before Cara boarded, she and her mom exchanged so-called "thumb kisses." Their thumbs are pressed against each other in lieu of regular kisses, which might carry an embarrassment factor.

"It's like, 'Thumbs up and I



Come in: While others hang up their backpacks, Cara stands in line before entering her kindergarten classroom.

love you," explained Amy. "It's pretty cool. When she gets older, we'll still be able to do that."

Cara and Robbie sat next to each other near the front of the bus as the folding door closed and the vehicle left the corner. The Lazares and Minellis stood behind, almost in shock. The moment they had always thought about had already become reality.

"It goes by too quickly," acknowledged Mary Beth Minelli. "Amy Lazare then exhaled heavily. 'It's happy tears.'"

Next stop, school!

They watched the bus disappear. It was now shortly past noon. The children would have to sit on the bus while other stops needed to be made along the route to Wood Creek.

By the time they would reach their new school, it would be nearly 1 p.m. Waiting for them were Frederick and Reid. Like the children, they also wore the teal t-shirts.

The reason for the attire was for everybody to immediately feel part of the class, and to know where everybody is when the bigger kids come out onto the playground during recess.

A few minutes before the bus arrived, the educators talked about the difference between the type of kindergarten they attended as youngsters and today's version.

Not just milk and cookies

Frederick, in her seventh year in the district, and Reid, in her 22nd year, also said the changes have been dramatic since the beginning of their respective careers.

"Because most kids attend preschool, there is a gradual emotional shift from home to school — and fewer instances of children feeling shock and loneliness. Reid said there used to be

at least a half dozen "criers" on the first day; on Monday, only one child cried.

Children come to kindergarten more prepared for learning. It means teachers don't have to worry as much about making sure they provide a "Romper Room" type of environment.

"It's much more academic," Frederick explained. "It's definitely not like the kindergarten I went to. We start off, 'bang,' with letters. By the end of the year, we're doing reading groups. I almost say this is like a half day of first grade."

Of course, kindergarten still is a three-hour block attended by small children.

"We have a lot to squeeze into those three hours," Reid emphasized. "And their 4 or 5 years old... who, as Reid said, 'milk a lot. You need to hear about their day.'"

First, a story

After meeting Cara, Robbie and the other afternoon kindergartners, the class marched into the school, hung up their backpacks and filed into Room 104. In front of every student was a can of Play-Doh, with Frederick instructing them to make shapes with cookie cutters. Cara made a blue butterfly.

Frederick then read an appropriate book for the day, titled "Miss Kindergarten Gets Ready For Kindergarten."

"Anybody bug their mom or dad before they left today?" asked Frederick, after citing a particular passage of the book.

"I did," said Cara, whose normally outgoing personality was starting to emerge with every minute.

Before long, the class participated in its first song, its first recess, its first snack time and its first birthday celebration. Megan Finn turned 5 on Monday. Marking the occasion, they sang "Happy Birthday to You" and ate tasty cupcakes brought to school by Megan, who wore a cardboard birthday crown.



Faster: During recess, Christina Duncan gives Cara a push on the playground swings.

It's time to go: The slightly reluctant new kindergartner and her mom walk out to the bus stop. With a few minutes before the bus was to arrive, there was enough time for Amy to give Cara a few more words of advice and comfort.

Who mo? Couldn't be: With teacher Dawn Frederick and kindergarten classmates listening, Cara stands up and says her name at the appropriate time during the singing of "Who stole the cookies from the cookie jar?"



Twins from page A1

and the 20 other kindergartners. In fact, on the playground, they weren't stuck together like glue anymore, as they seemed to be in the classroom earlier in the morning.

"Their mom told me this is their first school experience," said Murray about the twin twins. "And they seemed pretty

happy, smiling a lot."

The first day of school included some time getting to know each other, and sampling some of the various play and learning stations — including a sand table.

Murray also emphasized various playground rules, such as to not throw rocks at others.

Meanwhile, one of Murray's

goals is to make sure Danielle and David are dealt with as individuals, and not always be considered part of a "twin" package.

"I make a point of catering to each child's individual needs. I want to make sure they both express themselves as individuals."

Cara Lazare's busy, eventful first day of kindergarten went like this:

- 8 a.m. Woke up.
- 8:15 a.m. Breakfast, a waffle topped with whipping cream and a cup of milk.
- 9:30 a.m. Watched the children's show, "Blue's Clues" with brother Jarrett.
- 10 to 11 a.m. Cleaned her room, took a bath, got ready for school.
- 11:30 a.m. Received a special gift from her mother, a heart charm on a necklace to wear to school.
- 11:45 a.m. Hugged her dad, who came home from work.
- 11:50 a.m. Grabbed her dark blue backpack and walked through the front door.
- 11:58 a.m. After having several photographs and videotape taken, Cara, and next-door neighbor Robbie Minelli watch as the school bus pulls up to the curb.
- 11:59 a.m. The bus leaves for the first day of kindergarten at Wood Creek Elementary.
- 12:50 p.m., or so. The bus arrives at school, where teacher Dawn Frederick and teaching assistant Stevey Reid await.



Slower: Back in the classroom a few minutes after recess, it's time for a rest break.