



Walnut Avenue Elementary School teacher Kara D'Amato instructs her transitional kindergarten students in the same classroom she attended while a kindergartner at the Chino school.

Walnut Avenue Elementary School teacher conducting class in same room she attended as kindergartner

Forty-one years ago, an eager little girl in pig tails and frilly socks stood in front of Walnut Avenue Elementary School for a first-day-of-school photo.

Recently, she stood in the same place, but this time as a teacher at the Chino school.

Kara D'Amato (Kara Harmon in 1975), said it was "surreal" when she stepped back into her old kindergarten classroom in 2014 to teach transitional kindergarten students. She believes the counter is still the same one that she sat on while her

teacher Mrs. Gasman tested her. She remembers the metal “tunnels” on the playground, the place where she sat in the classroom, and the field where she and her classmates played “Duck, Duck, Goose.” She remembers feeling excited on the first day of school, and was not nervous because she had previously attended preschool and her parents often drove past Walnut Avenue Elementary.

D’Amato, formerly known as Mrs. Sesma in the Chino Valley Unified School District (CVUSD), said she doesn’t think her current students “get it” when she tells them she was once a student in the same classroom. “I don’t think they believe that I was ever little,” she said.

From a very early age, D’Amato wanted to be a teacher. “My dad was a teacher at Ontario Christian at the time,” she said. “I always enjoyed school, always had good teachers, and I played school with my dolls.”

Growing up, she lived on Benson Avenue, less than a mile from Walnut Avenue Elementary. Across from her childhood home, a field of corn grew in what is now the Target shopping center.

She attended Walnut Avenue Elementary from kindergarten through fifth grade, Borba Fundamental for sixth grade, and the now defunct Fundamental Middle School for junior high. She graduated from Chino High in 1988.

D’Amato’s first teaching job in 1997 was the fourth grade at Borba Fundamental School in Chino. She also taught kindergarten at Borba. In 2006, D’Amato helped open Chaparral, where she taught fourth grade. In 2009, she returned to Borba, where she taught first, fourth, and fifth grades. In 2013, she joined the staff at Walnut Avenue, teaching transitional kindergartners for a year in a different classroom. In summer 2014, she returned to her old kindergarten classroom.

“I feel like this is where I’m meant to be,” D’Amato said of the grade she teaches, as well as Walnut Avenue Elementary. “I definitely feel like this is a strong place; there is a heart here.”

In the early 2000s, D’Amato and her parents were all employed by CVUSD at the same time. D’Amato and her mother, Trish Harmon, a retired emergency room nurse, were at Chaparral Elementary School in Chino Hills as a teacher and a health technician, respectively. D’Amato’s father Jerry Harmon also taught at

Briggs Fundamental School in Chino, and was an administrator at Ramona Junior High in Chino and Townsend Junior High in Chino Hills.

D'Amato's favorite part of teaching is that moment when "a light bulb goes on" for students when they understand the concept she is teaching.

She also loves when she sees or gets a visit from former students. "I've gone to a wedding already, a baby shower, and a couple of graduations," she said. A former student took her order at a fast food restaurant, another was her waitress, and another a school photographer on the job at Walnut Avenue Elementary.

One of D'Amato's most memorable students was 8-year-old Adrian Briones who died of leukemia in 2006. D'Amato, who visited Adrian several times in the hospital, is still friends with his family.

D'Amato regrets not visiting her own kindergarten teacher Mrs. Gasman, who she remembers leading students in art projects, reading simple rhyming books, and pinning notes onto kindergartners' clothing with straight pins.

D'Amato also remembers doing lots of arts and crafts, learning shapes, numbers, and letters, singing songs just for fun, and listening to books like "Sam, I Am" in kindergarten. Now, songs must have an educational message like the one she taught her students about following rules in class. Kindergartners today must be able to recognize 30 words on sight and transitional kindergartners must know 10 sight words. Today's kindergartners must also be able to write a sentence and read books.

"Those things that are now deemed unimportant, I wish we could still do," D'Amato said of arts and crafts, creative play, and singing for the simple joy of singing. She laments that most children don't get to try out a musical instrument until they are in fifth grade. She tries to incorporate some arts into her teaching at least once a week because she "feels it's important for education."

She is happy that elementary students now have access to computers. She has six computers in her transitional kindergarten class, and her students also visit the computer lab on a regular basis. The transitional kindergarten students learn how to use the mouse and play simple games that teach the basics of using a computer. D'Amato said many of the students at Walnut Avenue don't have access to computers at home.

D'Amato is also happy that Walnut Avenue has incorporated a character-building program in which students symbolically fill buckets with the nice things they say or do for others. "We recognize kids who are good bucket fillers," she said.

D'Amato's parents often volunteer in her classroom. The children call them "Papa Jerry" and "Grandma Trish."

"I never had children, so I tell (my parents) that these are your grandchildren," D'Amato said, smiling.



Kara Harmon getting into the family's Ford Pinto for the drive to school on the first day of kindergarten at Walnut Avenue Elementary.



Walnut Avenue Elementary seemed very big to little Kara Harmon on her first day of school in 1975.



Teacher Kara (Harmon) D'Amato in front of Walnut Avenue Elementary School in 2016.



Kara D'Amato and her students sing a song about class rules and following directions.



Students in Kara D'Amato's transitional kindergarten class sing a song for a guest.



Teacher Kara D'Amato has the rapt attention of her young students as they prepare to learn a new lesson.



Walnut Avenue Elementary School teachers (from left) Michelle Luparello, Kara D'Amato, Kim Kessler and Elizabeth DeLaCruz all attended the Chino school as children. They are pictured at Walnut Avenue's recent 50th Anniversary Celebration.