Written by Carol Pomeday
Wednesday, 04 May 2011 14:05

Diane Lorge was surrounded by (seated, from left) Liam Lucas, 2, Vera Minor, 1, Maggie Zirbes, 4, (standing) Maggie's twin Abby and Madison Lanser, 3. Photo by Sam Arendt

Diane Lorge, one of the area's first licensed in-home day care providers, has been nurturer, teacher and daytime mother substitute for 75 children. She gets a lot of "I love yous" from the kids.

Four-year-old Maggie Zirbes gave Diane Lorge a big hug and said, "I love you. We had a good day today."

Then she skipped out the door to go home with her mother and twin sister Abby.

"Things like that convince me I want to keep doing this," said Lorge, who has operated a child-care center in her home for 26 years and was one of the first licensed in-home child-care providers in the area.

She's been a second mother, nurturer and teacher for 75 children from 50 area families. Her early "kids" are now embarking on careers and starting their own families.

Lorge was particularly pleased when a college student she took care of years ago said she's planning to be an early childhood educator because of her influence.

The Zirbes twins have been with Lorge since they were 5 months old.

"I was a new mother and very nervous about leaving them," their mother Andrea said. "Now, I drop them off and never worry in the least. Most days, the girls are pushing me out the door because I've stayed too long. They're always happy when it's a Diane day."

Lorge, who is licensed to care for eight children in her Port Washington home but usually only has six, said she never expected to be in the business for 26 years. She planned to get a different job when her daughter was old enough to go to school.

Instead, she discovered she loved nurturing and teaching young children. Recognizing she often spends more time with the children than their parents do, she is committed to making it a good experience for the children and their parents.

"They're little for such a short time. You want to make sure they're having a fun, happy learning experience," Lorge said. "Having fun is big for me. They have so many years to go to school. I want them to always want to keep learning."

Lorge got into the business, as many child-care providers do, when her daughter Kristyn was born. She saw an employment ad that read, "Bring your baby to work with you."

The ad was for a lead preschool teacher in a child-care center. The owner paid for Lorge to get an early childhood education degree from 4C for Children, a resource, referral and training center in Milwaukee that serves southeastern Wisconsin. She's taken numerous courses, seminars and workshops since then.

Lorge set up the preschool program at the center and hired staff, but the long days — 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. — were exhausting. She could visit her daughter in the infant room, but it wasn't the same as being home.

So she set up a child-care center with a preschool curriculum in her home. She strongly supported efforts to licence in-home, child-care providers and often served as a mentor to those seeking certification. She lived in Saukville at the time, but moved to Port 17 years ago.

"I took what I liked from the day care center and changed what I didn't like," Lorge said.

"One of the things I didn't like was dividing the children into age groups. Here, siblings are together and the little ones learn from the older ones."

Her daughter Kristyn was initially enrolled in the program and helped with the children when she

was older.

“Being an only child, I think it was helpful for her to have kids to play with during the day and her alone time with me in the evening,” Lorge said. “Later, she became my little teacher.”

Kristyn, who works for a jewelry company in Madison, said it was fun having other kids to play with.

“It was a win-win situation,” she said. “Not having any brothers or sisters, it was fun to have them there. When I got older, my mom could come to my school events.

“She’s very calm, very collected and she’s great with the kids. I don’t have that patience.”

Lorge likes to credit her daughter’s early preschool experiences for her academic success. Kristyn earned degrees in business and sociology from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in three years.

Through the years, Lorge shared the joys, celebrations and sorrows of her children’s families.

When her husband Butch was diagnosed with cancer four years ago and died a year later, the children’s families shared her grief, changing schedules if she needed to take her husband to medical appointments.

When her husband was unable to work his foundry job, he often held and fed the babies and read to the children.

“He loved holding the babies,” Lorge said. “The children enjoyed it, and he got a new appreciation for what I do.”

Lorge had previously cut her child-care program from five days a week for 10 to 12 hours a day to four days a week from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. The center is closed Wednesdays. That helped when her husband was ill.

“I picked Wednesday because I only had two kids that day. It was the least disruptive to my families, but it turned out to be ideal,” Lorge said.

She was surprised at how willingly her families adjusted to the change.

“A lot of grandparents enjoy taking care of their grandchildren one day a week. I’ve even had mothers arrange their work schedules so they have off Wednesdays,” Lorge said.

“It rejuvenated me. It gave me my energy back.”

Lorge stayed open even when her husband was confined to bed. When he died, several people urged her to get a job where she would be with adults.

She’s happy she ignored the advice.

“There is nothing like children’s hugs and kisses and saying ‘I love you’ to make you feel better,” Lorge said.

“The wide-eyed innocence they have makes you forget all the adult stresses in your life.

“I think the children can tell that I like what I’m doing — that I really like having them come here.”