

Left Behind at the School Bus Stop

From: Kristina Sussman

Sent: Sat 8/12/2006 6:41 PM

To: Mom Sussman; Dad Sussman

Cc: Andy Sussman

Subject: FW: Westford Online Bus Registration Confirmation

It's official! Leda is signed up to take the bus. Not sure 100% on the number, but I think she'll be on bus #23. Very exciting!!!!

This email from my daughter-in-law started me thinking about children going off on the school bus for the first time as Leda, their older child, approaches her first day in Kindergarten. Indeed, I have a photograph in my study of each of our three children getting on the school bus for their first day of Kindergarten in Lincoln, framed with an old Boston Globe editorial about first days on the school bus titled, ominously, "That First Break". It is indeed a "break" for the child and for the parents too.

On my morning "power walk", I have over the years watched a young mother walk her three children—two older boys and a younger sister—down the hill to the school bus stop. In the early years, only the older boy would board the bus; time went by and the younger boy boarded the bus, leaving only the "baby" looking longingly after her brothers. Then, one bright September morning, it was her turn! And on that particular day, *both* Mom and Dad walked the three children to the bus stop. The bus came and the three jumped aboard, with nary a backward glance as near as I could tell.

I continued on my walk up the hill which passed by the home of this family and then, as is my usual route, reversed my direction and went back down, meeting the parents on the way back to their house. They were walking hand-in-hand looking rather stunned and a bit teary. I said "Good morning" but they barely noticed me. On other mornings, the mother would give me a big greeting; on this morning, their "baby" had taken a step toward independence. There was no child left at the bus stop to walk back up the hill with.

I was reminded of an equally bright September day in 1975, when, our youngest, Craig, went on the bus for his first day of Kindergarten,

following Kerri and Andy, who had first done this in 1973 and 1974, respectively. No backward glance from any of them either. My wife, Henri-Ann and I stood alone at the end of our driveway -- yes, there was a school-bus stop called "The Sussmans" in those days -- similarly stunned. I think I said something poetic like "Where the hell did everybody go?" We hugged, shed a tear or two, and then moved on, as had our children, to the next phase.

I say to my now-grown children and others with young children, perhaps to the point of boring them, "It goes fast—grab these years while you can—they will grow up soon enough". But the "first day on the bus", as only one of many growing-up events, has a special poignancy. We haven't dropped them off--- as for pre-school—*they* have left *us*, if only for a few hours. And we await *their* return, now possessing a new measure of independence from those left behind at the school bus stop.

Joseph Sussman
September 7, 2006

Joseph Sussman is a professor of civil and environmental engineering and engineering systems at MIT and a resident of Lincoln since 1972.