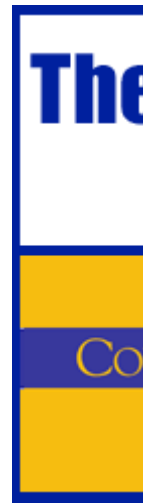




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Somers' 'Extreme' surprise: Take one

By **ROB RYSER**
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SOMERS

Gina Arena broke down when she saw the crowd.
 James Arena broke down when he saw the house.

Seventeen-year-old Casey Arena, the oldest of the six Arena girls, dried tears from her eyes after hugging celebrity television host Ty Pennington.

It was the quintessential Hollywood moment for the Arena family, who lost 6-year-old Jimmy in September to a brain tumor.

And for 45 minutes yesterday afternoon, surrounded by a cheering crowd of hundreds in the otherwise quiet neighborhood of Lake Purdys, it was a highly public Hollywood moment — the climactic scene for an upcoming segment of "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition."

Here, before a family that went through a 20-month fight to save a child who had never been to kindergarten, stood a brand new Colonial home. Almost three times the size as the family's old ranch, it was outfitted with everything from pink sinks in the girls' bathroom to plasma televisions.

"I love you," said the mother, Gina Arena, to the crowd, which was kept back by barricades in all directions, but still as loud as any crowd after seven hours of anticipation.

Outside the spacious barn-red home was a fully landscaped yard with a memorial fountain, featuring a bronze firefighter's hose nozzle and a statue of a firefighter.

Of all the community support that surrounded the Arena family throughout its ordeal, local fire fighters were perhaps the most central, organizing blood drives and honoring "Jimboy" as an honorary firefighter. His father is an ex-fire chief.

"It will be a nice way for them to always remember Jimmy — they can take it as he is looking down on them, blessing them," said John Doyle, director of technology for Alure, the

Airdate

"Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," featuring the Arenas' rebuilt house, will be shown at 8 p.m. May 14 on ABC.

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- The Arena family reacts to its new home on LoHud.com/view

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home improvement company that rebuilt the Arena home in seven days. "This is going to change their lives."

And, judging by comments yesterday from the neighborhood, this extreme surprise for the Arenas has changed hundreds of other lives as well.

"Everyone in this community has just bent over backwards to help make this happen," said Seth Selesnow, Alure's marketing director, who estimated that 80 Alure workers, 200 contractors and some 500 volunteers helped complete the new home on time. "It has been unlike anything we have ever seen."

Other donations to the Arenas included \$2,500 in groceries from ShopRite and summer camp scholarships worth \$50,000 from Camp Kiwi.

Who, asked neighbor Lisa Grosz, would want to miss this?

The Arenas stepped out of a long white limousine. The youngest daughter, Emma, clutched a Mickey Mouse doll and her mother wore a hot pink top and an olive suit. Each seemed unprepared for the size and the sound of the crowd.

Gina Arena lowered her head and cried even before the host goaded the crowd to shout "Move that bus" which was parked in front of the new home to block the Arenas' view.

The producers allowed the Arenas to hug loved ones — including grandparents — before corralling the family back onto the set that Buena Way had become.

Although there were multiple takes before the bus rolled away and before the family walked for good up the stairs and into the house, there was still plenty of energy and surprise.

Inside, two Arena girls who are New York Yankee fans found their rooms designed to resemble Yankee dugouts, with memorabilia that had been delivered by all-star catcher Jorge Posada.

And Gina and James Arena were shown the nursery for the child they are expecting this summer.

The family was not expected to sleep in its new house until tonight. Last night, the network planned to do taping at an undisclosed hotel with the Arenas.


The show is scheduled to air on Mother's Day.

"Yeah, there are certain things that are staged to create entertaining TV," said Alure president Sal Ferro. "But the love and the effort that my team put into this home is real."

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