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Olympian Bridget Sloan shares dream with Quad-Cities youth

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By Matt Veto

Five cousins formed a compact ring on the south side of the United Township gymnasium to chat among the homecoming pep rally revelry taking place on the court.

In the center of the human ring was 16-year-old Olympic gymnast Bridget Sloan -- "Bridge" to her cousins Jake and Ashley Barnes and Stephanie and Lindsey Garner.

The five relatives gazed at the fruit of Ms. Sloan's athletic efforts, a symbol of a goal fulfilled -- one Olympic silver medal. The medals caught the rays of sunlight beaming into the gym and casted shiny reflections onto the cousins' smiling faces.



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Photo: Paul Colletti

U.S. Olympic silver medalist Bridget Sloan is escorted to the center of the United Township High School gym as part of today's homecoming celebration. Bridget is scheduled to ride in the UTHS homecoming parade this afternoon and then sign autographs in East Moline.

The mini family reunion was made possible by an idea and convenient timing.

Ms. Sloan, a Pittsboro, Ind., native with many family members living in the Quad-Cities, was in town Friday with her mother, Mary (Cosgrave) Sloan, a 1978 UT graduate celebrating her 30-year high school reunion this weekend.

UT student council executive president Sarah Kauten bore the idea of an Olympic themed homecoming around Ms. Sloan's visit, and the plan fell into place.

Ms. Sloan served Friday as UT's homecoming parade grand marshal -- her fourth parade since returning from Beijing -- but made several additional stops across the area.

She visited six schools -- St. Malachy Elementary and Geneseo Middle School, Jane Addams Elementary and Seton Elementary, United Township High and Our Lady of Grace Elementary -- all that contain at least one of her 25 first cousins.

She talked about achieving goals, shared what it takes to get there, signed autographs and made new, young friends who aspire to be like their teenage hero.

"Dream, believe, achieve -- that's been my whole motto throughout my freshmen year of high school," Ms. Sloan said.

But her big dream, performing on the Olympic stage, was set long before she was a teen. Ms. Sloan said she actually took the time to write her dream down on paper in third grade: she

wanted to be an Olympian.

“That was the deciding moment that the Olympics were in my dreams,” she said.

Her mother admits that, at the time, she thought it was simply a third-grader being a third-grader.

“Every young athlete wants to be an Olympian,” her mother said. “And as she got older, I thought, ‘You could reach that goal.’”

The goal was officially met in July when she was named to the U.S. women's team. Ms. Sloan said the joy of making the team was overwhelming.

Equally overwhelming, she said, was knowing she would be the first to perform in the team competition -- and get a single vault.

The cousins watched that vault on replay in the UT gym shortly before Ms. Sloan was officially introduced. Pep rally organizers played a slide show of Ms. Sloan's Beijing performances, and then her vault that helped garner silver for the team competition.

Her cousins teased her for the intense look she took with her to the vault runway. After the video played through Ms. Sloan's vault, she shouted “I'm done!” relaying the feelings she had at that same point over one month ago.

Her relationship with her family, she said, has not wavered throughout the experience that turned a regular 16-year-old high school sophomore into a star recognized and mobbed for autographs everywhere she goes.

That part she's used to. And speaking in grade school and high school assemblies is a piece of cake, having already competed on the biggest stage that sports has to offer.

It's getting back to normal that is the next challenge.

“I'm catching up on school -- getting back in that and getting back in the gym,” Ms. Sloan said. “I've worked a little bit back in there.”

And she's not counting out the chance to fulfill her dream a second time.