

Basketball star proves herself off the court

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Followers of the high school girls' basketball scene in the Flower City know Catherine Robinson's name well.

Over the past two years, she helped lead Our Lady of Mercy High School's hoop team to a 44-4 record and one sectional title.

Robinson was named to the Section 5, Class A all-tournament team after both seasons, and this year — even though Mercy lost in the title game — was named the tourney's most valuable player after scoring 39 points and hitting seven three-pointers in the championship game.

But Robinson is more than a basketball player.

Ask her, for example, and she'll tell you she's a poet.

*I've been running these river banks
for two hungry, lonely years now
without smooth shoes to comfort my
journey...*

from "Running for Freedom"
by Catherine Robinson

"It feels like I'm in a different world when I write — like (I'm) letting off pressure," Robinson said. "I write about things I never thought I'd write about."

Robinson began writing during the past two years, her eyes opening to a world beyond basketball, beyond the inner-city neighborhood where she has been raised by her grandmother.

She began living with her grandmother when she was three years old. Her mother lived across the street from the grandmother — Katherine Robinson, after whom Catherine was named — and the younger Robinson spent more time



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with her grandmother than at home.

"At night, she'd leave home and come over here (at) two or three o'clock in the morning," the grandmother recalled. Finally, the elder Robinson suggested that the child simply live with her.

Thus, young Catherine grew up apart from her mother. She also grew up out of touch with her father, Willie Grimes, who she learned only recently was a basketball standout at East High. Grimes led the Orientals to a sectional title in 1968, and was recently described by East Coach Sal Rizzo as "the best guard I ever had."

Robinson expressed regret that neither one of her parents has played a significant part in her life, and acknowledged that regret is part of her motivation to succeed.

"I think I'm trying to prove something to my mother and father — that they really had something and they didn't know it," she said.

Catherine discovered basketball during the seventh grade, when she began to spend her free time practicing on the court. But that free time was limited less than a year later when her grandmother had to have one of her legs amputated. Catherine then took over the housework and cooking.

Meanwhile, Robinson decided to go to Mercy after learning that the school's basketball team had gone 24-1 in 1986.

But she was only able to stay at the school one quarter.



Catherine Robinson (right) and her grandmother share a special relationship. Katherine Robinson, after whom Catherine was named, has raised the Mercy student since she was three years old.

Her grandmother's illness grew worse, and the elder Robinson wanted to return home to Florida. So Catherine went with her.

"I missed (Mercy) a lot, but my grandmother meant more," Robinson said.

She completed her freshman year at a Florida high school and, when her grandmother got better, returned to Rochester and once again enrolled at Mercy.

As a sophomore, Robinson played for the junior varsity team — which finished the season a perfect 18-0 — and met varsity coach Kathy Boughton for the first time. Robinson acknowledged that the no-nonsense, demanding Boughton frightened her so much that, at the end of the season, she declined the coach's offer to play for the varsity.

Boughton, meanwhile, was already beginning to assess Robinson's potential.

"I can remember watching her as a player on jayvee and thinking how one-dimensional a player she was," Boughton said. "She was a great shooter, and that was it."

Nevertheless, Robinson did go out for the varsity her junior year, and became an instant starter. "She probably developed a good work ethic faster than any player I've ever coached," Boughton said, adding, "Through all of her hard work, she's become a very self-disciplined person."

That self-discipline emerged in other parts of Robinson's life as well. Through the school, she was given a job as a cook in the infirmary of the Mercy sisters' motherhouse. On weekends, she is responsible for preparing and serving the meals.

Her work-ethic stood out in the classroom as well.

During Robinson's junior year, she met English teacher Linda Boesl, who encouraged her to write. Boesl also began to suggest writers she might read — particularly black writers.

Robinson began to read everything suggested to her. "As she reads what black writers have done, she sees what her own task as a writer is," Boesl said.

Through the process of reading and writing, Robinson also began to discover her own black heritage. Many of her own poems, she noted, deal with slavery and freedom. She



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Catherine works weekends at the Sisters of Mercy infirmary, cooking and cleaning for the nuns there.

To Langston Hughes and Mattie Michaels and All the Others

*Yes, because her dream had left her
sight Mattie awoke to a new spirit
with new eyes. The dreams of the
others ... all gone too were hers, she
knew.*

*With the Youngers from that other
tale and you and me not far behind,
with that plant in one hand, a jock in
the other, with the world on her back,
no less, we come together and tear
down*

*down
down that wall
that image of death
of "dreams deferred."*

Catherine Robinson

began to ask her grandmother if any of their ancestors had been slaves. "I feel like I am what I'm writing," Robinson observed.

In addition, Robinson discovered "strong and appealing female role models," in the literature, Boesl observed, noting that "she's really concerned with women who parent."

That parenting role comes through not only in the way Robinson helps her grandmother and through her work in the infirmary, but also through interacting with her younger siblings — who all grew up with their mother.

She still drives them to school. And even at Mercy, Boesl observed, "she's very protective of the younger students."

That parenting role also influences Robinson's future plans. She has been contacted by a number of colleges because of her prowess on the basketball court. She wants to remain close to Rochester, however, so that she can get home on weekends to care for her grandmother.

Currently, St. Bonaventure tops the list of schools she is considering.

After college, Robinson wants to continue writing. She would also like to coach and teach. Robinson said she would like to give to her students what she has received from her teachers and from basketball, observing that the sport "gives you a level head — a strong inner being."

Boesl has no doubts about how far Robinson can go. "She's terribly ambitious," Boesl said. "She has a sense of what she wants to do, and what she wants to give back."

Robinson, too, has given notice about what she wants to do. In one poem she declared simply, "... we come together/and tear/down/down/down that wall/that image of death/of 'dreams deferred.'"