

Two women, two daughters, one dream

Written by Tom Fruehling

Monday, 28 February 2011 19:57 - Last Updated Tuesday, 01 March 2011 14:41

Two women, seemingly not so much alike.

Julie Saddler, 47, is a doctor, an anesthesiologist who started medical school at the University of Iowa in her early 30s, long after first getting her college degree in business and working as an airline flight attendant.

She lives in a big, new home on the outskirts of Marion.

Sylvia Dawson, 48, is a civil servant, a senior clerk in the office of the Linn District Court criminal division who began working there 31 years ago right out of high school.

She lives more modestly in the Polk elementary school district in midtown Cedar Rapids.

They've both been divorced for a number of years. They're small town girls, Julie from Anamosa and Sylvia from Alburnett.

Bonded six years ago through their basketball playing daughters, both will be in the bleachers Wednesday morning at the Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines for the girls state basketball tournament.

When the Washington Warriors play first, at 10 a.m. against Iowa City West, the two friends will be rooting for Sylvia's daughter, Tia Dawson.

Then, when the Lions of Linn-Mar take the floor with Ankeny at 11:45 a.m., they'll be clapping for Julie's daughter, Kiah Stokes.

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Two tall and slender girls, with much in common besides unique and similar-sounding first names.

Both are 17-year-old seniors, though Kiah is eight months older since Tia skipped second grade. They've been dribbling basketballs since kindergarten.

At well over six-feet, they're usually by far the tallest players on the court. They top their teams in scoring, rebounding and blocked shots as well as in that intangible quality called leadership.

Quiet and shy, you can barely hear them when they speak.

And they're smart.

Because they take extra credit advanced placement classes, both have grade point averages above 4.0.

Kiah will enroll this summer on an athletic scholarship at the University of Connecticut, a prestigious school with the premier program in women's basketball. She's not sure what her major will be.

Tia's off to Dartmouth College in the tony Ivy League, with most of the \$55,000 annual cost covered for her academics since sports scholarships aren't offered. She was most attracted to the New Hampshire school because of its strong engineering curriculum.

With record-setting, all-state high school careers left behind, the two tall and talented young women from the Midwest will head thousands of miles away to make their mark on the East Coast.

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"It will be an empty nest around here," says Julie, whose older son Darius Stokes is a freshmen basketball player at Iowa.

"But I think both Sylvia and I have always encouraged the girls to branch out and shoot for the stars. We want what's best for them to reach their potential."

Still, she admits, "I cried when I bought that plane ticket for Kiah for May 30, when she leaves. It finally hit me that this summer she'll be gone."

Sylvia will still have seventh grade son Noah at home. But she, too, looks at losing her little girl with a sense of both excitement and a little sadness.

She says the mixed feelings first struck when, out-of-the-blue, Tia received a letter of interest from Harvard University, no less.

"I thought, first of all, that it's so expensive. And also that it's so very far from home," Sylvia said. "Tia wasn't sure she was going to even play basketball in college. But when the offer came from Dartmouth, it was too good to pass up. They made it work."

For the two mothers, this week in Des Moines will signal a passage in their lives that have intertwined since Tia was recruited to join Kiah's elite Cedar Rapids Panthers AAU team back in the seventh grade.

The power-packed squad, it turns out, also included a Leah and a Bria.

"Such fun," Sylvia recalls. "But it was all new to us."

"Tia had only played Jane Boyd and Y basketball before that, never on a traveling team that

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went all over the state. But Julie was awesome, just incredible and a lot of support for both of us.

“Of course, I knew who they were. I was a big fan of Greg Stokes (Kiah’s father, Julie’s former husband and a former Iowa Hawkeye basketball star). I got his autograph once at the U.S. Cellular Center. I’ve always been kind of a Hawk groupie.”

For Julie’s part, she says she and Sylvia hit it off almost immediately.

“When you go to all those games, sit together that many hours in gyms and spend the weekends in hotels together, you get to know each other pretty well,” Julie said. “Sylvia is always so friendly and nice and always smiling. She never has a bad word to say about anybody.

“And she’s very pleasant to sit with. Unlike some parents, she never screams.”

They won’t be side-by-side, but instead in different sections, for Wednesday morning at least.

If it comes to Linn-Mar and Washington playing against each other in the semifinals Friday, the two women – the two friends – will still share the same dreams and emotions as always.

“We’ll be cheering for our daughters and their teams,” Julie says. “And we’ll be proud and happy for them.”