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Working for the W: Meriden's Keia McFadden

By Adam Wittenberg , Record-Journal staff

It's all star week in the WNBA, and Daakeia McFadden has been putting in extra time to get ready.

"I don't usually work this late," she said Wednesday evening after spending nearly 14 hours at the league's headquarters in New York. "I'm normally out of here by 6 p.m."

A basketball star and three-sport athlete at Platt High School, McFadden, who graduated in 1999, has climbed the success ladder since she left the Silver City to play Division One basketball at Canisius College in Buffalo, N.Y.

The 26-year-old graduated with a marketing degree and worked for the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass., and Golf Digest in New York before earning her master's degree in sports marketing last May from New York University.

McFadden, a 5-foot, 6-inch former point guard, then parlayed her academic success and sports background into a job with the WNBA, an 11-year-old women's league affiliated with the NBA.

A research project and a college connection helped her get her foot in the door.

"I did my final project at NYU on the WNBA's target marketing, specifically concentrated toward collegiate female basketball players," said McFadden, who goes by Keia. "I did a survey to figure out if we're consuming the WNBA, and if not, why."

McFadden's conclusion was that more research was needed, but one of her former coaches heard about the project and arranged for her to discuss it with Kristin Bernert, the league's vice president of team business development.

Michelle Collins, who coached McFadden at Canisius, had coached Bernert when she was at Siena College near Albany, N.Y.

McFadden, who won class athlete, most popular and class clown in high school, quickly made a good first impression.

"I really identified right away that I would eventually want Keia to work at the league office for me or at some place in the organization," Bernert said. "She has a very nice demeanor, it's clear she's very intelligent and, knowing her former coach, she also has a strong work ethic."

Bernert, who later hired McFadden as the coordinator of team business development, said she often considers former athletes, but not necessarily the most talented ones.

"I don't always look for the ones for whom it came easily," she said, "but the ones who had to work for it."

McFadden, who was raised by a single mother, fits that description.

"My daughter didn't know me"

She was born two months before her mother graduated from Platt in 1981.

"It's probably unheard of that my kid would be that successful with all those obstacles," said Linda McFadden, who played basketball at the school until her pregnancy.

Faith in God, a focus on education and a strong work ethic have helped both mother and daughter succeed.

Linda McFadden was born to a single mother in South Carolina. Rose McFadden married another man, Alphonso Sanders, two years later, but Linda McFadden kept her mother's maiden name.

In similar fashion, Linda McFadden passed on her name to her daughter, along with a passion for school and sports.

"Any interest that she had, I backed her 100 percent," Linda McFadden said. "Whether it was letting her go to basketball camps or take drum lessons, she'd find out for herself what she liked. The schools have a lot to offer. I told her it was important to be well rounded."

Linda McFadden put off her own dreams of playing college basketball and getting her degree to raise her daughter. When she tried out for the team in her first year at Virginia State University, the coach said he would give her a scholarship if she came back the next year.

Instead, she returned to Meriden to raise Keia, who had been staying with Rose and Alphonso.

"God blessed me so much more with the kid with the decision I made," Linda McFadden said. "It scared me when I came home from college and realized that my daughter didn't know me."

Keia McFadden played basketball, volleyball and softball at Platt, and captained the Powder Puff football team her senior year, but she didn't get any attention from college scouts until she played for a state Amateur Athletic Union basketball team the summer before her senior year.

Her performance, and her academic standing at 21st in her class, created enough buzz that more than 30 schools expressed interest, including Brown, Princeton and Yale in the Ivy League.

Even so, some staff at Platt doubted that McFadden would play for a Division I school or earn a full scholarship. Only one Platt alumnus, Kelly Penwell, who played at the University of Hartford, had made it to a Division I school before McFadden.

"I confronted a teacher who told her she would never make it to a four-year school as a woman," Linda McFadden said. "I said, 'You never tell my daughter what she can and cannot do. With drive, determination and belief, you can accomplish anything.' Otherwise we wouldn't have people as successful as they are today."

Discovering the WNBA

At the WNBA, Keia McFadden helps the league's 13 teams sell tickets, raise revenue and promote themselves.

She runs a national sales competition between team representatives to see who can sell the most season tickets, mini-plans and group packages. McFadden also conducts training and clinics to help the teams with their efforts.

The league doesn't release attendance numbers, per its policy, but its Web site, www.wnba.com, reports that attendance topped 2.5 million in 2001, and has consistently averaged more than 9,000 per game.

That's about half the normal attendance at an NBA game, but some of the teams, such as the Connecticut Sun, play in arenas that seat fewer than 10,000, which is considerably smaller than any NBA venue.

Kim Callahan, who runs the independent fan site www.womensbasketballonline.com, said league attendance has dropped in recent years, based on her tracking of numbers reported in box scores for individual games. By her count, league attendance has dipped below 8,000 per game, but NBA Commissioner David Stern told the Sacramento Bee this month that WNBA attendance would be up this year.

The regular season, which includes 34 games for each team, ends in August, with the championship set for September.

Television is another issue.

The league used to offer a pass plan to televise all out-of-market games that were being broadcast. Now those games are available through video streaming on the Internet. This year, only 91 of its more than 200 games will be televised, although fans can watch those same games for free online if they have broadband service.

Stern acknowledged the need to publicize the league better nationally and drum up more media attention, but told the Bee it has staying power and more network exposure than Major League Soccer or the Arena Football League.

McFadden knows there are skeptics, and she used to be one of them, but "one season following the league made me do a total 180." "My boyfriend would call it having a chip on my shoulder every time I defend the league," McFadden said. "There are a lot of people making statements, negative statements about the league and what it's about, the talent pool and who's at the games, without having touched the sport."

While women outnumber men in the arenas, the television audience is about equal, according to a league report. The league is popular among children, and girls today can aspire to become professional players, McFadden said.

McFadden never thought of joining the league once she got to college. She played well at Canisius and is ranked 18th in school history in assists per game, but a pro career was out of reach.

"I thought about playing overseas, as some of my old teammates are still doing," she said, "but it's a tough market for a guard who's five-feet-six."

"I'm ready! I'm ready!"

McFadden has adjusted to life in New York, although she said Meriden will always be her home.

She still talks daily with her mother, who practiced with her growing up and helped her strengthen her left hand when she was in high school.

"She would make me play her left-handed," McFadden said. "I knew I was good when I could finally beat her with a left. I remember thinking, 'I'm ready! I'm ready!'"

Her father, Jerry Robinson, lived in Hartford while McFadden was growing up. They became closer during her playing days at Platt and have continued to build their relationship, although Robinson now lives in South Carolina.

Linda McFadden says her daughter has inspired her to go back to school. The elder McFadden works as a credentialing analyst at Aetna, but is taking paralegal classes at Middlesex Community College.

"My daughter got her master's in sports marketing, and it's a wide-open field," Linda McFadden said. "I'd like to work for the federal government and focus on giving people their rights."

For the younger McFadden, who left Thursday for today's all-star game in Washington, D.C., there's plenty of work to be done to promote the league.

"Before I came to know what the WNBA was about, hands down I would have wanted to work for the NBA," she said. "At this point, I think I'm meant to work for the W. It means more to me."

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