

## My Experience as a WBCA All-American

by Mariah Chandler

While sitting in the Atlanta airport, anxious to leave and arrive in St. Louis, I was a nervous wreck. The flight had been delayed an hour and all we could do was sit there and patiently wait for it to arrive and load for departure. I felt as if we were never going to leave. Soon the plane arrived and we departed 15 minutes later. My Mother, Alicia Chandler, and older sister, Mikiela Chandler were traveling with me. I was so thankful to have them there because the trip wouldn't have been as much fun.

I was so excited and nervous to get to St. Louis. During the flight I was listening to music and thinking about how much fun I'm going to have. Being named as one of the top high school basketball players in the nation is a great honor and I took full advantage of this experience. People don't realize how blessed they are until God proves that He is real by making your dreams come true.

Pulling up to the restaurant to meet chaperones and the rest of the girls, everyone on the van appeared to be so calm. I will admit I was very nervous to meet and mingle with the rest of the girls. On the van with me was Mr. Gary, one of the chaperones, Krista Gross from North Carolina (my AAU teammate), and Nikki Greene and Waltia Rolle from Texas. All of our flights were delayed due to the weather condition, so we arrived together.

Once we finished dinner, we all went back to the rooms with our Nike gear. I roomed with my future teammate, Brittney Griner. Many know her as the dunking machine, but I know her as one of my best friends and my sister. She's definitely a big kid at heart and loves to have fun.

I woke up the next day feeling great and looking forward to wearing our fresh new Nike outfits. As a group, we all looked like a college team, and people in the hotel surely thought we were. At breakfast some of the other guests in the hotel asked us what time we were going to play on Sunday, the day of the Final Four games. Their mouths dropped with surprise when we told them that we were all in high school competing in the WBCA HS All-America game. You must keep in mind that most of our players were at least 6'2". I found it funny that many of them thought we were Oklahoma University. We then invited them to the game. The following day, we saw them in the stands watching us play.

That morning we visited the Arch. On television it looks amazing, but in person it's an amazing sight. During our visit we ran into the Louisville Cardinals, one of the Final Four teams.

Many of my family and friends know that I do not like heights, so going to the top of the Arch was a big accomplishment for me. The ride to the top was extremely frightening. I was in the cart with Waltia and Krista, who had a good laugh because I couldn't stop screaming. The fact that the cart was small didn't help either. The Arch is 630 feet above ground, so there is no turning

back when you reach the top. The view was exceedingly soothing to my heart and spirit, and I soon lost all alarm. It was really an amazing sight and a great feeling to share with the other 19 girls and chaperones. The whole time at the Arch, I couldn't help but reminisce on what God has done for me. I would have never thought that I would be amongst the top 20 girls in the nation, let alone playing on the same court as them.

After the Arch, we ate lunch and had practice at the Scottrade Center, the site of the NCAA Final Four. Wow!! I was beyond astounded. Having the opportunity to practice on the same court as the NCAA Final Four was just a joy. The court was so beautiful in person. We got a tour of what happens behind the scenes at the Final Four. We got to see the ESPN Final Four analysts that we dreamed of meeting one day. I was like a little kid in a candy store. Once the tour was over it was time to practice.

Each team had two coaches and a co-captain. Little did I know that our co-captains were going to be WNBA stars, Tina Thompson and Yolanda Griffith. When they walked in the gym, I couldn't help but to grin from ear to ear. Meeting those two women was remarkable. Having the chance to be coached by women in the WNBA, who have been in our shoes, grown up living their lives as we have, and obtained incredible knowledge, is a once in a lifetime chance.

The day of our game was one of the best days of my life. That morning, we had the opportunity to sit in on the State Farm Press Conference, which announced the State Farm All-Americans and the Wade Trophy winner. We got to be in the same room with former WBCA High School All-Americans. We were able to see these players rewarded for their success and hard work on and off the court. Maya Moore won the Wade Trophy. Seeing the joy in her eyes and knowing she came from a semi-similar background as I, was a tremendous blessing for me. I look up to those players and wish them continued success in their careers.

That afternoon it was game time. The lights were on and it was time to bring our "A" game. Both teams were ready to go out with a bang. From jump ball the game was in reach of whoever wanted it. The game was intense the whole time. Everybody wanted to go on the court and show that they were not only able to score, but defend as well. We all wanted to make our family and coaches in the stands proud. I had my college and high school coaches, family and friends in attendance.

After the game we had interviews. I was excited because I always see interviews on TV but never thought it would happen to me. Brittney and I interviewed together, giving each other high fives when mentioning our goals for our career at Baylor. This was our first time playing with each other, which may be an advantage for next year. We gave a preview of what may be seen in the next four years at Baylor. After the interviews, we all signed autographs and took some pictures with the fans. Saturday, April 4, 2009 was definitely a memorable day.

That Sunday, we went to Shriners Children's Hospital. We were able to interact and play with the patients there. It was awesome! They were so cool and loving. I was able to relate to them,

because I once had to spend time in a hospital. Having that emotional connection made the experience even better.

Following the Shriners visit, we got ice cream and headed to Hoop City, where we played interactive games and other fun activities. There were some interesting 3-on-3 games taking place as well. Some players got balloon hats, while other got their faces painted. Everyone was having a wonderful time. They also had an entertaining mascot contest, which was won by the Louisville Cardinal.

After Hoop City we attend the Final Four games. The atmosphere was amazing and the fans were funny! They were really into the game. The game between Oklahoma and Louisville was entertaining and shocking. I was surprised that Louisville won the game, but I wasn't disappointed in either of the teams because they played their hardest, just like Stanford did. They just happened to be up against the best team in the country, University of Connecticut. Overall the games were impressive regardless of the scores. I couldn't wait to tell my friends I was able to attend the games.

That night, I was kind of sad. I was enjoying myself so much, I didn't want to leave. I ate at great places, met basketball legends, and played in one of the biggest games in women's basketball!

I want to say thank you to the chaperones and other 19 girls for sharing these memorable moments with me. I'm one of the top 20 high school players in the nation. God gave me this honor to share this testimony with my friends, peers, and people in America. Without Him and my mother, I wouldn't be able to call myself an All-American.

In closing, St. Louis was an amazing city. I thank the selection committee for allowing me to represent the WBCA. I will not forget this journey nor will I forget the people who allowed me to receive this blessing.

Thank you all!

## **Nancy Walling, 2009 WBCA District Coach of the Year and Pflugerville (Texas) varsity girls basketball coach**

As a long-time high school educator and girls basketball coach, I have been fortunate to attend the Women's Final Four and WBCA National Convention numerous times. This year, my anticipation for the Final Four was enhanced throughout the "March Madness" because I knew that I would be attending the Final Four in St. Louis as a coach for the WBCA High School All-America Game. The game takes place in conjunction with each Final Four!

I was thrilled and humbled to be, first, considered for such an honor, and second, to be honored by my peers.

Yet, the full magnitude of the honor really did not hit me until I arrived in St. Louis, met the other All-America Game coaches and staff – and the uber-talented young ladies who were the 2009 WBCA All-Americans.

### **Thursday April 2**

Flying from Austin, I arrived in St. Louis that evening and was "picked up" ☺ by Gary Glascock. I was impressed that he knew who I was. I did not realize, at first, that not only was he the chair of the HS committee, but also a St. Louis native.

I was the final person to arrive that evening, and Gary and four All-Americans greeted me (Mariah Chandler, Krista Gross and two fellow Texans, Nikki Greene and Waltia Rolle). Our hotel was adjacent to the airport, so we quickly dropped off our bags, picked up our National Coach of the Year Linus McGinty and went to meet the rest of the group at J Bucks for a late dinner. Note: there will be much mention of eating, restaurants and food in this journal, because, as we all know, our athletes have to EAT, and when you are traveling with a team, off-court activities revolve around eating!

Most of the staff and team was already eating (of course!) so we said quick hellos and joined them. I introduced myself to the other all-star coaches, Craig Mortensen and John Larsen. I also met the other two committee members, Robert Mosley and Stacy Bilodeau and our wonderful WBCA intern and host, Sallie Gordon.

After dinner, we piled back into our three vans, which would become our cozy "home away from home" throughout the weekend! I found it humorous how the guards rushed to the vans to get to the front seats, while the "biggs" at 6'5, 6'6 and 6'8 (you get the picture) literally FOLDED themselves up to cram into the back seats of the vans!! Yup, the guards were quick, quick, quick, on and off the court!

At the hotel, with everyone rejuvenated and a bit sleepy after our meal, we went to a conference room, had our first team meeting. At this time we were introduced to Daniella Trujillo and Dana Hinman. I was excited to be around such a prestigious and talented group of young ladies, and thrilled that I was getting to be a part of the WBCA's High School All-American weekend.

Almost as exciting and as important, was getting our “product” from our game sponsor, Nike. Coaches are just as excited as the players when we get new gear. It was like Christmas for all of us. I want to especially thank the WBCA and Nike, the gear provided to the team, coaches and staff was quite distinctive and incredible!

Why did I use the word “distinctive”? You’ll see later on!

### **Friday April 3**

Naturally, the day began with food! We all met for a team breakfast, enjoying the buffet in the hotel, and then the girls were off to watch the famed NCAA video.

After the video loaded into our vans and headed off to the first of our scheduled “fun” activities. As you can probably guess, we went to the famed St. Louis Arch. Friday was a beautiful, crisp sunny day and provided a prime background opportunity for lots of great photo taking! I am never far away from my digital camera (in another life, I would like to be an adventure photographer!), and I was taking every opportunity to capture the moments!

We went inside the Arch and got ready to ride in the tram to the top. Needless to say, if you’ve been to the Arch and on the tram, you know that the All-Americans were about to have a real interesting experience! The tram cars are very, very small, with a ceiling capacity of, oh, maybe five feet! Because of the popularity of the Arch, they ask that five people climb into each car for the ascent and descent! At 5-9, I had to crouch to get inside the small cabin of the tram car, so imagine how amusing it was to see our “biggs” literally fold themselves into the cars! Yes, it was very humorous and we all had some great laughs about it! I hope the camera crew got some great shots of the All-Americans climbing in and out of these cars!

At the top, we admired the beautiful views and again took plenty of pictures. We made our way down to the bottom of the Arch, spent some time going through the museum and met some future basketball stars (middle school girls).

We left the Arch and walked into the downtown area. Again, it was a beautiful day and a nice walk.

Guess what? It was time for another meal! We ended up at “Caleco’s,” an Italian food restaurant where I got to experience my first fried ravioli, a St. Louis specialty. This Texan gives fried ravioli a “thumbs up”! It would be a great appetizer in our restaurants back home!

I also got to meet Mary Thompson, the Nike representative who serves as Nike's Girl High School and Elite Youth Basketball Manager. She joined us and ended up spending the rest of the afternoon hanging out with us. What a treat for us, since Mary does such great work as an ambassador for girl’s basketball!

After lunch, we headed off to the Scottrade Center, the site of the Women’s Final Four. Our staff and players were in for a wonderful treat! First, our four coaches (Linus, John, Craig and myself) decided to make the 10-block walk and enjoy the beautiful weather. It was great to get to chat as well, comparing notes on basketball, our teams and our All-America players as well!

We went to the Scotttrade back entrance to wait for the girls to arrive and got to see some familiar friends and faces. Leaving the facility was members of the NCAA Media Coordination Committee, publicists from colleges who assist in the media operations at each Final Four. These are folks I have had the privilege of getting to know over the years - Tam Flarup (from Wisconsin), Langston Rogers (Ole Miss), and Patrick Auerbach (Southern Cal). I gave them all big hugs and made plans to catch up with them later.

Next out was UConn coach Geno Auriemma, whom Linus knows because he has a former player (Meghan Gardler) on the current Husky team. Linus made some introductions while Geno proceeded to immediately go to his trademark humor and sarcasm. He made fun of our all-white warm-ups, asking if we just escaped from the “lonney bin”, a reference to the movie “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”.

Have I forgotten to mention our white outfits? Yes, Nike “hooked” us up with some great gear, but we were all white and bright all weekend long! We stood out in our warm-ups, white t-shirts and white shoes and got several comments from people throughout the weekend on our “look”. Of course all the time I’m loving it because people were constantly asking who we were. I’m sure that our average height of 6’3” didn’t have anything to do with it either.

The team arrived and piled out of the vans. We all went into the Scotttrade Center, meeting up with Sue Donohoe, the NCAA Vice President for Women’s Basketball and director of the Final Four. Sue gave us a great behind-the-scenes tour of the building. She gave us a lot of interesting facts about how far the women’s Final Four has come. The most impressive parts of the tour were seeing the massive undertaking that ESPN does to cover the event. There were so many ESPN trucks and technicians and logistics. The media “piece” of the puzzle is... wow, what an undertaking!

We finally got to the court and our All-Americans became the first team to get to practice on the Final Four floor! Of course we took time for more pictures while we were checking everything out. At that time our Nike co-captains arrived, WNBA stars, Yolanda Griffith and Tina Thompson. Just when you were thinking things couldn’t get much better, we get to meet these great basketball talents! We even talked Yolanda into practicing with us because we were short one player. What a personality! Getting Yolanda out on the court playing with the girls was fun to watch. She and Tina made it a really special experience for all of us. The girls absolutely loved them being a part of this special weekend/game. I was in awe at my opportunity to work with this talented group of players. It is a coach’s dream to have that much talent assembled before them! The fact that our group of players were really hard-working and fun-loving made the experience more special.

At the end of practice, some of us “old-timers”, sorry Mary Thompson, that included you too, got into a game of “knockout” with the All-Americans. Gary and I didn’t last very long but kuddos to Mary - she made it to the finals! Mary didn’t win but represented “us” well. The game of “knock-out” is always fun and a good bonding experience. It definitely brought out our competitiveness!!!

Guess what time it was now? Right, time to go eat! We went to Union Station to eat at the Hard Rock Café. By the end of the meal, we realized we had been gone all day and I think that everyone was ready to get back to the hotel for a little R&R in order to get ready for the big game the next day.

**Saturday April 4<sup>th</sup>:** WBCA HS All American Game Day.

We got up and had breakfast at the hotel and loaded up the vans for another full day of activities. Again, we were going to be gone all day, so we all packed up ready for the big event.

Our first stop was downtown St. Louis for the WBCA/State Farm All-America Team announcement and press conference. The High School All-Americans took seats in the front row for the announcement. The top 10 players in the nation were introduced, and six of them were playing in the Final Four for UConn, Louisville, Stanford or Oklahoma! What an exciting event and opportunity for these high school girls to get to watch the ceremony and be a part of it. You know that they're thinking that they would like to be up on that stage someday.

I kept thinking, what wonderful role models Courtney, Maya and the other eight All-Americans are for our young players sitting in the front row.

Then we all went to Washington University, the site of the All-America Game. We arrived with all of the ESPN crews and WBCA staff getting ready for the game to be televised. I hope people know how special it was to have such great women's basketball broadcast pros as Debbie Antonelli and Beth Mowins calling the HS All-America Game!

I loved the Washington University facility. It's an impressive Division III school with a great athletic tradition. The arena is a small and historical venue. A wonderful gym for a HS All-Star game. It had the old wooden bleachers coming right up to the court and a lot of national championship banners for women's basketball hanging. You could feel the excitement in the air as we had our team shoot around for about an hour.

We had a pre-game lunch at the St. Louis Bread Company and spent some time out on the patio soaking up the sun and resting before we headed back to the gym.

We got back to the gym and got ready for team photos. I can't wait to see how they turned out!

Finally, it's game time!!! Before the game and team introductions, the head of the WBCA, Beth Bass, made a presentation to myself and the other coaches. What a great memento to be presented with, when just being a part of the whole experience would have been enough.

The girls were then introduced, along with our honorary captains, Tina and Yolanda. The ball is tossed and we're under way! The stands are packed with fans and a lot of college and high school coaches. It was a "who's who" of women's basketball, for sure!

You can get a recap of the game from all of the media coverage but what I want to focus on was the exciting final minutes of the game! We, the Blue Team, managed to hang on and win by two points, 79-77. The White Team and Blue Team traded baskets in the final minutes, but we prevailed! It was exciting and fun for everyone involved. Coaching with Linus McGinty was an honor for me and I can also tell you that when Yolanda is finished with her WNBA career, she's going to make an excellent coach! She was very involved in all aspects of our game plan, and we had a blast working with her!

The coaches voted for the MVP. The WBCA National Player of the Year, Brittney Griner (headed to Baylor), was our Blue Team MVP and Notre Dame bound guard Skylar Diggins was the MVP for the White Team. These were hard choices, since there were some very good performances, but both honors were well-deserved!

Post-game the All-Americans stuck around for media interviews and an autograph session. The fans were lined up for what seemed like miles to get the girls' autographs! Seriously, if I hadn't been presented with an autographed ball, I might have gotten in line myself!

This group of girls are special young ladies, not only talented on the basketball court but first-class in their actions and behavior. Congrats to their high school coaches and their families. They will be household names in the women's collegiate basketball circles in the upcoming years, and I cannot wait to follow their careers!

Our post-game was at Ozzies' so we could watch the men's Final Four semifinals. Then, it was back into those white vans and onto the hotel to get ready for another full day of activities on Sunday.

I personally opted out of the activities scheduled for Sunday with the other coaches. I had friends in town, along with my Pflugerville assistants, Patrick Hinson and April Ellickson, and I felt I needed to spend some time with them and catch up with them about their impressions of the WBCA convention and what sessions they attended. I was torn about not spending a little more time with the All-Americans, but I felt like I needed to split my time.

The All-Americans went to the local Children's Hospital for some community service work. This type of activity is priceless for both our All-American Team members and I'm sure for the kids in the hospital as well. Great call by the WBCA for making this important visit a part of the team itinerary!

My experience in St. Louis extended through the championship game. I just want to thank the WBCA, Nike, and everyone involved in putting on a first-class event for the High School All-Americans and game coaches. I am blessed to have one of the most rewarding jobs in the county, and my St. Louis experience caps off a wonderful year.

# **A Boy Named Ryan**

by Stephanie Holzer

My name is Stephanie and I'm eighteen years old. This year, as a senior in high school, I received the honor of being named a WBCA High School All American. As a member of this team of caliber athletes, I was given the opportunity to visit an orthopedic hospital called Shriners Hospital for Children. As we walked into the hospital, few people knew that I have been, and continue to be, a long term patient of an orthopedic hospital with a condition not new to the patients in Shriners' care.

Since a very young age I have had bone problems in my right leg. During my growing stage my right leg was not in alignment and my leg was valgus and recurvatum. In translation, one part of a limb bent or twisted outward away from the midline and the other limb swayed and hyper-extended backwards. Because of this my right leg was an inch and a half shorter than the left. I needed not only one corrective surgery, but six. In order to fix my deformity, I had to wear a device known as a Taylor Spatial Frame. For my personalized need, this frame consisted of 6 nails, 2 screws, 1 wire, 3 brackets and 6 struts that would be holding my leg together. This took the place of 2 inches of bone the doctors planned to take out of my tibia and fibula. I give you this description so you can get an idea of the pain I felt, internally and externally. However, upon arrival at Shriners Hospital for Children, I didn't know that I would be taking the first step to my emotional recovery.

What I went through doesn't seem real. When people ask about my scars on my knee and leg I tell them what happened as if I were reciting a speech, in which I keep my emotions secret.

I know I am strong because I have become able to compete in high level athletics after going through long years and hours of recovery. I know I am a fighter and that I will continue doing what I love and what I need to do until I feel otherwise necessary. However, overcoming these obstacles does not mean I have dealt with my issues. In this case I am not strong.

The morning I visited Shriners Hospital for Children I realized I had not faced my scars. As I stood outside the recreational playroom I struggled for a breath because I was an emotional wreck. My tears were not for me or what I went through as a child, but they were for the children that were inside waiting for me to play with them. I can deal with injury when it happens to me, but I cannot deal with it when other people have medical conditions, especially children. I didn't know if I would be able to go into the room and interact with the children that were braced with the same contraptions I once had. I didn't want to make them feel bad because I was upset. This was about them, not me.

A few minutes later I went into the bathroom to splash some cold water on my face and to try to gather up my emotions. At this time a boy named Ryan was making his way down the hallway towards me. Ryan had undergone the same medical surgery I did as a child. My first reaction was to suck it up. I had to. I didn't want this boy to think

anything was wrong with him because I had a hard time dealing with it. My thought was just to put on a smile and get through it. As soon as Ryan opened up his mouth I didn't have to try to get through it. Right away his bubbly personality had me laughing. Ryan made me feel comfortable when I was supposed to be comforting him. Shriners had given Ryan the mental strength and courage to face the world with a positive view, something I had not been able to do. A minute after meeting him he challenged me to a game of air hockey and started trash talking about how badly he was going to beat me. He was right! He also beat me in multiple games of a basketball shoot-off. After taking pictures, we did an interview together to inform people of the great kids at Shriners and the difference they make in people's lives, just as he had made in mine. Ryan had me laughing the entire afternoon, and the best moments were off camera when we were talking like two regular teenagers. Ryan is a very outgoing boy. He kept joking about giving out his cell-phone number. He was such a stud. The other WBCA All- Americans and I didn't seem to mind! His personality lit up the room.

I was asked to write about my experience at St. Louis' Shriners Hospital for Children because they knew I was connected. I went to Shriners to hang out with a few kids and hopefully brighten up their day, but a fourteen year old young man with brown hair, glasses, and a crutch made a difference in mine. When we do things in life we don't know what experiences will stick with us and what little things - even something as small as an air hockey game, will drastically impact our lives.

My idea was to scribble down a few things from that morning on my plane back home to Pennsylvania in order to recall this experience at a later moment. But as I started writing a few sentences I kept going. I realized that I would never forget what I did that morning. The young man who crutched down the hallway to me was no longer the injury I could not face, but it was Ryan. His strength gave me hope and a renewed sense of self confidence. I had been through very rough times throughout the duration of my time in my Taylor Frame. Whether it was gestures, stares, mean words or certain things that happened, I was broken down internally as a person. Ryan was the start to my reconstruction. If he could come to terms with what happened to him and be ok with it, there is no reason I couldn't.

Ryan gives back to the younger children at Shriners who have gone through the same thing. He acts as their role model and guide, and that day he was mine. In a continuous chain of support, many patients like Ryan help other children going through their same situation. I chose to write my personal experience at this hospital for the same reason Ryan came down that hallway. Hopefully through this Ryan and I can help someone else come to terms with their problem, whatever their situation may be. Shriners Hospital for Children is a non-profit hospital that provides care at no charge for children eighteen years and younger and is a hospital that produces kids like Ryan. Something tells me with that he's going to be ok.

Thanks for making a difference in my life, Ryan.

Stephanie