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-Grace Brooks, 11

## a coach's good graces

by **JESSICA EMERSON**  
online editor-in-chief

Volleyball coach Robin Holland's giggle fills the small space inside her white Toyota 4 Runner. Eyes still pointed toward the road, she glances over at the passenger seat while junior Grace Brooks dances poorly to Beyonce. Fulfilling their daily routine, they drive home in laughter. Holland and Brooks have adjusted to mold a new definition of family.

"We communicate, and she's like my daughter, but she's like my little sister too," Holland said. "It's a blurred line. Because I do take care of her, but she has a real mom and a good mom. But, Grace is also like my little sister. She loves my kids and my husband loves her unconditionally."

After losing her father at a young age, Brooks' family dynamic took a new form. The absence of a father figure allowed Holland to become a prominent role in Brooks' life.

"I became close with Robin after a rough day in eighth grade athletics because I was upset about my dad," Brooks said. "She came in and saw me crying, and she hugged me and told me things would be okay. Ever since then, I just held on to her."

Seeing Brooks' heartbreak and longing for her father unknowingly inspired Holland to fill a void.

"When I told her I loved her she said, 'Do you really love me?' And I was like, 'Of course I love you,' you know you say you love kids all the time, and you do. You love them

because they are your students and you care about them," Holland said. "But I truly loved Grace as a person, and I knew she needed me."

As Brooks' coach, Holland teetered the line of discipline and compassion.

"She played for me, and she tested every nerve that I have," Holland said. "She was so difficult. At the end of the day, she'd always hug me and tell me that she loved me and I felt the same."

Over time, Holland grew to love Brooks like a daughter, viewing all her achievements and passions with pride as a mother would.

"Seeing her grow up playing basketball, every time she touches a ball I'm proud of her," Holland said. "She took swimming lessons this summer. She was so afraid of the water and watching her learn to do something for the first time—it was nice to see her being proud of herself."

Pushing her to succeed on and off the court, Holland has opened doors for Brooks that may have not been possible before.

"She tries to find all the hardest classes for me to take so I can be a little bit smarter," Brooks said. "She created opportunities that my family wouldn't be able to give me. I have a good family, but she created more opportunities for me. She's helped me get better at basketball. I went to DisneyWorld and SeaWorld because of her. Wherever she goes, I go."

Holland being a mother of two children, Major, 4, and Blakely Grace, 2, Brooks has grown to be a positive influence to their growth.

"My husband worked a lot when they were very young and Grace helped me immensely," Holland said. "She helped distract one while I did something with the other one. She really does teach them things that big sisters teach little kids. She's building something with them I hope will last."

As Brooks has been influenced by Holland, Brooks has in turn taught Holland understanding as well.

"She has taught me patience," Holland said. "She taught me to laugh a lot, or to laugh more. She kind of prepared me to have a teenager. She taught me to be tough. Teenagers can say some pretty harsh things, but they don't mean it. I've tried to teach her that your words hurt, and that whatever you say or do affects people."

Although she isn't family by blood, Holland treats Brooks as her immediate family, cherishing all of the time that they have been granted.

"I know our time is limited," Holland said. "I didn't get a lifetime with her, but I try to hold on to every little memory because I wasn't given as many as her real family members."

With only three semesters left in high school, they will have to shape a new dynamic as college approaches.

"I don't feel like it'll change much. I'll still probably have to remind her to do her homework and wash her clothes," Holland said. "But she's already growing up and maturing, and I can see her trying to get her independence a little bit. But Grace isn't going anywhere, she still has a place at our house and in our hearts."