

Gold Medal Mom

SYDNEY, Australia (AP) – Yolanda Griffith already is a gold medalist in teammate DeLisha Milton's eyes: a gold medal-winning mom.

Milton stands in awe when she thinks about what Griffith has overcome to play in the Olympics as a member of the U.S. women's basketball team.

Griffith has gone to college, worked odd jobs and played professional basketball, both in the United States and overseas, all while bringing up her daughter, Candace, as a single parent.

Mother and basketball player. It's the ultimate double-double.

"She's just a super mom," Milton said. "And I know it's hard. She fights a lot of battles that we as non-parents don't face. She's missing a lot of those precious moments."

Those battles started a long time ago.

A high school wonder in Chicago, Griffith signed at Iowa, where Vivian Stringer had built a national power. Though she wasn't eligible to compete as a freshman, Griffith was young, eager and talented. She would get to play for one of the nation's most widely respected coaches. Stardom seemed imminent.

Then she got pregnant.

Faced with a potentially life-altering choice, Griffith chose to be a mother. She also chose to continue playing basketball, despite the extra hardships that would follow.

"I knew eventually it would pay off for us," Griffith said. "I never wanted anything to be given to me. I want to earn things. I just felt that if I would continue to work hard, do what I need to do on the court, be respectful off the court, that things would happen. And eventually, things did happen."

But only after a rocky journey that would have forced someone less determined to turn back. A basketball player. A student. A part-time worker. A full-time mother. Could it all be done?

Even Griffith had doubts.

"You're thinking, am I ever going to be able to do it? Will I ever get used to it? You do eventually. But in the beginning, I didn't know which direction I was going to go.

"But because of my family and the support they gave me and always letting me know they were going to be there for me, that made me work even harder to try to make a better life for her and myself."

It began at Palm Beach Junior College in Florida, where Griffith played from 1990-92 and became an All-American. She didn't want to disrupt her daughter's home life, so Griffith moved on to Division II Florida Atlantic. In her only season there, she averaged 28.2 points and 16 rebounds.

All the while, Griffith worked odd jobs to keep herself and Candace fed and clothed. One job stands out.

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Griffith worked for a repossession company, mostly in the office. In a pinch, however, she was called on to take possession of a car, dicey work at best, dangerous at its worst.

"You talk to the individual on the phone and they're whooping and hollering, being angry and upset, saying that it's our fault," said Griffith, who then had to go see that person.

"But it's not our fault. You've got to pay the bills. There's a lot of sad stories out there, a lot of different things happen. But I mean, this is my job. That's what we had to do."

After three years in Florida, Griffith was offered a contract to play pro basketball in Germany. Finally, she was going to play for pay so she and Candace packed their bags for Europe.

Griffith played in the European leagues from 1993-97, then came home to play in the newly formed American Basketball League, created after the dizzying success of the 1996 U.S. Olympic team.

As it turned out, the ABL just made it convenient. Griffith, who now plays for the WNBA's Sacramento Monarchs, was coming home anyway.

"We were ready to leave Germany," she said. "Candace was missing her cousins and she wanted to come home. It was going to be my last year over there. I think I really made my mind up to leave because of Candace. She really wanted to come home."

That's the way Griffith does things. Candace, now 11, comes first.

"She doesn't waver on that," U.S. coach Nell Fortner said. "Candace is her No. 1 priority. When she can get Candace situated, she can play basketball. But that doesn't happen until Candace is OK."

So where is Candace now? With mom, of course. A friend flew over with her and they arrived last Saturday, Candace sleeping the whole way. Anyone making that trip would wish they could be so lucky.

Griffith counts herself lucky, too, though this is a case of someone making their luck. Despite all that could have held her back, just look at her: She has a college degree, plays professional basketball and is in the Olympics.

"I mean, what else could you ask for?" Griffith said. "Just have a little patience and things will work out for you."