

# Omigod, it's **GABBY**

Olympic champion dazzles young gymnasts and a brave little girl

By Lisa Reisman  
Special to the Times

**A**T PRECISELY 6:30 ON AN otherwise unremarkable Thursday evening in downtown Madison, a high-pitched voice rang out into the chill air. "Thirty minutes," it squealed, sending a ripple of excitement through the crowd of approximately 800 stretching down the Main Street sidewalk.

Thirty minutes until the first female athlete to win both the individual all-around and team gold medals in the same Olympics, would grace R.J. Julia Booksellers to promote her debut memoir "Grace, Gold, and Glory: My Leap of Faith," the story of her against-the-odds journey to triumph in London this summer.

Thirty minutes before Gabrielle Douglas, the 4-foot-11, 94-pound package of rocket-fueled energy who took away the breath and stole the hearts of an entire country over the course of a few days in early August, would materialize.

About the only person showing any semblance of calm in those electric 30 minutes was Sierra Preveza of Madison. While older sister Emalena, 8, bopped around and occasionally turned a cartwheel inside the cozy bookshop, the 5-year-old was lounging on an arm chair, engrossed in a children's book.

Sierra, who last week finished chemotherapy treatments for Wilms' tumor, a form of kidney cancer that typically occurs in children, is a gymnast like her sister.

In fact, her mother Kim Preveza credited her daughter's quick recovery to the strength she had gained through gymnastics. Still, "it had been one of those rough weeks," she said, adding that Sierra would resume lessons at Guilford's Nutmeg Twisters Gymnastics as soon as she's medically cleared.



Mara Lavitt/Register photos

Olympic gold medalist Gabrielle Douglas hugs 5-year-old Sierra Preveza of Madison, who is battling cancer, during her book signing at R.J. Julia Booksellers in Madison.

That's why it's not hard to imagine Sierra joining the army of "Gabby" Douglas faithful, fans who persuaded their parents to let them wait in line for hours on a weekday afternoon, who already know that the 16-year-old paints her toenails to match her leotards and virtually every other detail of her story but want to relive it — and reread it — in her own words.

Take Liza Mizejeski, 13, of Deep River, who stood by a bookcase not far behind the Preveza sisters. A gymnast since age 6, she's been flipping through Douglas' memoir in the three hours she'd already been waiting. "She's just had to overcome so much," Mizejeski said. "And from the very start."

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Olympic gold medalist Gabrielle Douglas signs her memoir for Deirdre Hackett of Guilford and Shannon Lewis of Madison.



# Gabby: Olympic champion dazzles young gymnasts in Madison

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Indeed, Douglas' early years might have come straight out of Dickens. She was born with a rare blood disorder that prevented her from processing protein and subjected her to a nagging, racking cough. Money was tight. Her father, an Air Force sergeant, was largely absent. At one point baby Gabby and her three older siblings slept in the back of a van.

Which only makes what she's done since then "more amazing," said Samantha "Sam" Conroy, Mizejeski's

teammate at Flip-Flop Gymnastics in Deep River. Despite the obstacles of bullying and racism the African-American prodigy endured in a largely white sport; despite the feelings of isolation and homesickness she battled, as well as the multiple injuries, "she's just so enthusiastic and makes it look so easy," said Conroy, referring to her nickname, the "Flying Squirrel," for the impressive array of aerial skills that had her weightlessly soaring, flipping, and twisting her way to gold.

It wasn't the hundreds

of offers that flooded in for the girl with the megawatt smile within hours of winning the all-around that was the reason for Shannon Lewis of Madison waiting with her sisters and cousins since 3 p.m. Maybe Lewis caught her on television at the Video Music Awards, flipping across the stage as Alicia Keys performed "Girl on Fire." Or saw the magazine covers, the talk shows, the hosting gig on "America's Got Talent," the appearance with Michelle Obama on "The Jay Leno Show."

It was far simpler than any of that. Watching Gabby compete in London, Lewis said, "inspired me to work hard. She proved that at such a young age, you can do so much. I just wanted to thank her for that."

At that moment, the line inched forward. A chorus of quavering "omigod omigod omigod" followed. Emalena Preveza quieted down. Her sister Sierra looked up from her book.

Clad in a sparkly bolero jacket, appearing even wispier than she did

among the Fierce Five that took the team gold, there was the Olympic champion, gracefully stationing herself behind the large oak desk where she would sign copies and pose for photographs for the next two and a half hours.

There she was, briefly sharing her new mission, with a poise and self-assurance that at once belied her young age and recalled the elegance and precision with which she navigated the all-around competition under the glare of intense pressure.

"I wanted to let people

know that no matter their color, nationality or gender, no matter where they're from or what they've been through, they can achieve their dreams," said the 2012 Women's Sports Foundation's Sportswoman of the Year, in explaining why she decided to chronicle her life.

As the cameras clicked, Sierra, having met eyes with the international superstar, perked up. A small smile spread across her face. "Just thrilling," said her mother Kim Preveza. "This is so great for her."