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Grant's stature growing

Former NBA player co-authors book

BY MICHIE ANGERMILLER
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

At 5-foot-7, Trenton native Greg Grant was told he was too small to ever play basketball. Period.

"I was told I was too short to play for elementary school, then junior high school, High school, college," said Grant. "I was told I had no shot at ever playing in the NBA. At some point, you just stop believing it when you keep getting on the team."

Grant's father never supported his son's basketball dreams. He never saw a single one of his son's games, even as he continued his rise to the professional ranks.

Despite enormous obstacles, Grant was drafted in 1989 by the Phoneix Suns. He went on to play for the Sixers and the Knicks during his playing career, which lasted until 1996. He is now a role model for many Trenton area kids through his youth organization, 94 Feet Sports Academy.

Grant recounts his incredible story in his new book, "94 Feet and Rising: The Journey of Greg Grant to the NBA and Beyond." Co-written with Martin Sumners, who covered the NBA for 10 years writing for nba.com, the book chronicles the Trenton native's life as an undersized kid from the neighborhood that blossomed into a basketball star at Trenton State College (now The College of New Jersey) and catapulted into the big leagues, playing with or against superstars like Michael Jordan, Larry Bird, Scottie Pippen, Magic Johnson, Charles Barkley and Patrick Ewing.

Grant discussed his book last Thursday night at Houlihan's on Route 1 in Lawrence as he signed hundreds of books for fans, co-workers, family members and friends who came out in support of his autobiography, which was published by Xlibris on July 17. "I'm a modest guy," said Grant, as he sat at a booth happily socializing with a line that stretched deep into the restaurant. "I don't say too much about my business. But then I think about what's going on with kids today. Kids aren't believing in themselves because they are from Trenton. They have a single mom and their dad is not in their life. They use that as an excuse to not succeed. I want to show them that it can happen because I came from the same situation."

The idea for a book was germinating in Grant's mind as early as his playing days, when his coaches told him his story was one worth telling. He tried to write the book himself about four years ago, but reached out to Sumners for help.

"I knew about his story from growing up in Trenton," said Sumners. Although other players like Spud Webb were height-challenged by NBA standards, Sumners asserted that Grant's road was "harder."

"Not many people expected him to do it," he said.

Sumners was introduced to Grant through a mutual friend, who knew Grant needed help. Sumners had experience covering the NBA, and paired up with Grant, who provided the scribe with news clippings, interviews, and highlights from his college and NBA career. Sumners reached out to local luminaries such as Mayor Doug Palmer to pen quotations about Grant. Former Trenton State College basketball coach Kevin Bannnon, wrote the forward.

Bannon himself came out to support his former player and smiled proudly as he surveyed the room.

"I am thrilled at the turnout of all of the people that came here to support Greg and recognize what a special person he is," Bannon said.

What Bannon remembered most of Grant, who he mentored while the young player was working at a local fish market, was his work ethic.

"He had a passion for what he did and it made him good," he said. "It inspired everybody around him to be better because he set such a high standard."

People from all walks of life came out to cheer Grant's accomplishment, including his aunt, Debra Coleman of Ewing. Coleman proudly pointed out the page in the book where Grant lists all of his relatives.

"Here I am on page 12," she said.

Ella Jones, Trenton fondly remembers when Grant played in her backyard with her twin daughters as a child.

"He was a nice young man," she said. "He was very respectful and gave us no trouble."

Pat Donahue, director of the Bonner Center at The College of New Jersey, works with Grant in various youth programs.

"What's remarkable to me about Greg is that after all his success in the NBA, on any given day you can find him in a classroom at Hedgewood working with The College of New Jersey students just talking to kids in the city so they can have a brighter future, and that's amazing," he said.

Grant talks a lot about family in the book, discussing in detail his marriages and six children, including Amber Grant (23), Jameen Bennett (22), Jasmine Grant (17), Tavian Grant (2) and stepsons Austin (18) and Ryan (15) Witter. He is married to Hope Witter, who worked the room at Houlihan's, snapping photos and setting up books.

According to Amber, growing up in an NBA family was "normal," and she was proud of her father.

"A lot of people came out to support him and I'm happy about that," she said.

Grant will host another book signing at the Barnes and Noble on Route 1 in West Windsor on Oct. 1.