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Olympic swimmer, small town prepare to part

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GRANBURY, Texas - This small North Texas town threw parades, renamed buildings and earmarked the phone book cover for its Olympic champion.

Granbury also gave Dana Vollmer allergies. Intense, eye-swelling allergies.

Cedar trees pervade in Granbury, a town of 8,000 about 40 miles southwest of Fort Worth. Equally abundant is the attention Vollmer has bore since returning from Athens last September, when she became the homegrown star of the U.S. women's 800-meter freestyle relay team that won gold and smashed swimming's oldest record.

But unlike the cedar pollen in Granbury, the spotlight didn't wane after a few months.

"It took a little time getting used to it all," said Vollmer, 17, her brown-dyed hair still wet from the first of her two daily workouts.

Vollmer is making her last preparations for the World Championship trials that begin April 1 in Indianapolis, where she'll be reunited with many Olympic teammates. It's one of the last meets Vollmer will train for in Texas before her likely move to the West Coast this fall to begin college.

Most peg Stanford - where her Olympic coach, Richard Quick, runs the swim program - as where Vollmer will end up. She has also taken visits to USC and California, with Florida and Tennessee lingering as contenders.

At any of those schools, chances are Vollmer won't be recognized. She figures to blend in on the large campuses, her celebrity dwarfed by the school football and basketball stars whose games are nationally televised.

In other words, nothing like her presence in Granbury.

"The guy who played Chewbacca in Star Wars lives here," said mayor David Southern, who has lived in Granbury for 25 years. "But as far as personalities who have conquered the whole community, Dana is by far it."

Granbury is a conservative town that balks at its reputation as just another Dallas-Fort Worth bedroom community, preferring the "micropolitan" label the Wall Street Journal stamped on the city last year. Twenty percent of its residents are retired, many work for Lockheed Martin in Fort Worth, and almost everyone showed up in 2000 when CNN arrived for a live broadcast as part of its millennium coverage.

That segment aired once. Video of Vollmer's homecoming parade after the Olympics, on the other hand, replayed on a loop for months on the city's cable-access channel.

The parade was just the beginning. Vollmer has thrown out the first pitch at a Texas Rangers game, was grand marshal of the Indy Racing League's Chevy 500 at Texas Motor Speedway and went onstage to introduce country music star Montgomery Gentry at a concert.

The city renamed its outdoor pool facility the Dana Vollmer Swim Center, and a local artist submitted plans for a 20-foot replica of her gold medal to hang on the outer cafeteria wall of the high school.

Student council member Sarah Harvey helped table that proposal.

"Dana likes that people are proud of her, but that it took it to a new level," said Harvey, one of Vollmer's closest friends.

Vollmer, who will graduate a year early, enrolled at Granbury High after two years of home schooling that were necessary for her intense training before the Olympics. It was a period that left Vollmer lonely and isolated, feelings best expressed by a T-shirt she often wore that read, "Don't ask, I have practice."

She hoped high school would reconnect her socially. Instead, most students were intimidated by her celebrity.

She was dateless for the homecoming dance, where boys dared each other to approach Vollmer under poorly cloaked whispers. When one finally mustered the courage, he was rewarded with more than a dance: he's now Vollmer's boyfriend.

Vollmer's departure will mean a return to normalcy for her mom, too.

Cathy Vollmer was a full-time teacher before quitting when Dana started home school. Along the way she became her daughter's manager, coordinating appearances and the glut of media requests. But she was recently able to resume working as a tutor.

"I'm going to have to find some classes to take or get some new hobbies to fill the time," Cathy Vollmer said.

Then there are those in Granbury perhaps looking forward to a post-Dana era. The city's newspaper, the Hood County News, has published comments from anonymous readers who say they've heard and seen enough.

Rather than get upset by the remarks, Vollmer emphathizes.

"It sometimes gets to where I really try and think about stories I haven't told before, just so I'm not saying the same thing over and over," Vollmer said.

Soon, she'll leave Granbury and make new stories someplace else.

Perhaps somewhere without cedar trees.

ON THE NET

Dana Vollmer's site: www.danavollmer.com

USA Swimming: www.usaswimming.org

City of Granbury: www.granbury.org