

For at least an hour, the New Hope High School softball “team mom” didn’t have to do anything but smile.

While iPhones and cameras flashed in front of her and relatives shuffled back and forth making things just right, Ajah Mills took it all in. She was in her element, surrounded by loved ones and, most importantly, other role models and mother figures who encouraged her to chase her dreams.

On Tuesday, Mills shared the realization of her dream with family and friends as the senior infielder/outfielder signed to play softball at Mississippi Delta Community College.

With as many as 10 mothers, grandmothers, god grandmothers, aunts, and female friends of the family at the signing ceremony, it was easy to see why New Hope High assistant softball coach Ryan McTaggart described Ajah as the “team mom”.

“She is always a comforting force for our girls,” McTaggart said. “She makes sure everybody has what they need, everybody is where they are supposed to be. She is a leader on the field, of course. She is just always there. She is very dependable for our girls and they trust her.”

Mills said she agreed with McTaggart’s description because she tries to help and motivate her teammates. She said she also preaches about God and hopes she is a strong-minded role model who sets an example.

Mills played softball as an eighth-, ninth- and 10<sup>th</sup>-grader at Hartfield Academy in Flowood. She said most of her family already lived in the Columbus area, which made her transition to a new school and a new group of teammates easier last season. Mills said the process of becoming a team leader as a junior just happened naturally and has continued this season.

Mills joins teammates Adi Dueitt (Northwest Mississippi C.C.) and Zoe Goodman (Itawamba C.C.) in signing to continue her softball career.

This season, McTaggart said Mills, who used to hit only from the right side, has added slapping to her repertoire. To slap, a right-handed hitter switches sides and tries to hit the ball while moving forward out of the left batter's box. Slappers often try to beat the ball into the ground and use their speed to reach base or beat infielders playing in with well-placed hits.

McTaggart said Mills' speed makes her well suited to be a slapper.

"She is super quick, so if she can just get the ball on the ground she has a good chance to be safe," McTaggart said. "It seems like she can see the ball better from that side. If we can just get her on base, she is very likely to score."

While Mills continues to grow as a player, McTaggart said she has had a bigger impact for her teammates as a role model. Arquetia Mills, Ajah's mother, credits her mother, Vernessa Hayden, for being the biggest influence on Ajah. She said she learned so much from her mother, which is why Ajah sees Vernessa when she sees her.

"She has always been a humble kid," Mills said. "She doesn't ask for much and doesn't require much, but my mom is my role model, and my mom has been present in her life the entire time. I think for both of us my mom has been the female force who has molded us to be humble and to try to help others and to try to help other peoples' circumstances and just to try to encourage other people to be better and to do better, and even when they aren't doing their best or if they feel they aren't doing their best or if they feel they aren't doing their best, to keep striving for that."

That positive energy was present in the multipurpose room during the signing, as female and male role models, including Ajah's father, Christopher Mills, moved in and out to get special pictures with Ajah. Through it all, Ajah kept smiling with a positivity that was infectious.

"Like I said, she has always been humble and always tried to be positive," Mills said. "With all of us being present in her life and being mothers – and fathers – and showing our support for her, I think that is the icing on the cake."