

Infectious is a perfect word to describe Annie Woolbright.

The New Hope High School senior brightens every room she enters and relies on her spirited personality to turn strangers into friends.

Woolbright's ability to command a room may explain why she was such an effective setter for the NHHS volleyball team. Woolbright was slated to play that role again in 2023, but sometimes things just don't click.

As a result, NHHS volleyball coach Allison Woolbright, who also is Annie's mother, tinkered with the lineup and tried Annie at libero. Even though the initial move didn't stick, Annie wasn't deterred and asked her mother if she could try the position again.

"Our defense was kind of struggling, and I asked coach Woolbright if I could try libero one more time for the match against Fayette," Woolbright said. "I did it and it just stuck."

The position change went so well that a coach from the Jones College volleyball program asked Woolbright if she was interested in playing for the program, which will play its inaugural season in the fall of 2024.

On Friday, Woolbright made it "official" when she announced her decision to play volleyball at Jones College in a signing ceremony at NHHS. Woolbright, who already had signed a National Letter of Intent, said it was "surreal" because she has dreamed about playing volleyball in college ever since she started playing.

"It is really all about community and the team around me," Woolbright said. "I wouldn't have been able to get where I am today if I didn't have such a supportive coaching staff, team, family and friends and, obviously, God."

Woolbright played an integral role in helping NHHS advance to the semifinals of the Mississippi High School Activities Association Class 5A

tournament, where it lost to Lafayette 3-0. The run extended a string of success that involved Annie and her sister, Kensley, who recently completed her freshman season as a member of the Itawamba Community College volleyball team. Kensley played libero for NHHS in 2022 while Annie played setter.

Annie admitted she felt a little resentment having to move from setter to libero, but she said everything worked out because she is going to Jones College as a defensive specialist/libero.

“I think in a way it was a blessing in disguise that I just didn’t realize initially,” Woolbright said, “but at the end of the day God works in mysterious ways. I am very grateful I was able to step into that role and play it so well and get an offer to play.”

Allison Woolbright has attended plenty of signing ceremonies throughout the years and traveled many miles with her daughters for extra-curricular activities. Alex was a dancer, while Meredith played softball at Mississippi University for Women. She said she is extremely proud as a parent and as a coach to see Annie get an opportunity to continue her volleyball career.

“She has worked extremely hard,” Allison Woolbright said. “She has grown up playing. She is very knowledgeable about the game and observant. She watches what is going on on the other side of the net and she knows the calls.”

Even though Annie Woolbright’s position change didn’t click immediately, she discovered she could thrive as a libero because the position asks someone to throw themselves into the job and to do everything possible to keep the ball off the floor, which bodes well for someone with an infectious personality who can command a room.

“I have always had the mentality that every ball is gettable and if you keep that in your head you can get to as many balls as you can,” Woolbright said. “When I moved to libero, I knew if I wanted to stay there and we wanted it to work I had to give it everything I had. I worked extra and I talked to Kensley about what I could do become a better libero and player. I really love being a libero, and I feel like I can play with a little tension off my shoulders.”