

CALEDONIA – Liberty Hughes knew in the eighth grade she wanted to play basketball in college.

As much as Hughes believed in herself, she acknowledges not everyone shared that confidence.

“People would be like, ‘You’re too skinny or too small,’ but it never fazed me,” Hughes said. “I know me, and I know what I can bring to the table, and I just work with it.”

Hughes’ self-confidence was a driving factor throughout a high school career that started at Caledonia High, moved to Hamilton Attendance Center and then back to Caledonia.

On Wednesday, Hughes’ belief in herself provided a tangible return when she announced she will play basketball at Northwest Mississippi Community College in Senatobia.

“I don’t really care what people think,” Hughes said. “My grandparents pushed me no matter what, and my coach, coach (Ame) Walker, pushed me and made sure I stayed on my game and did what I was supposed to do.”

Hughes, a 6-foot guard/forward/post, did that and more as a senior this past season. She provided leadership with seniors Cadie Wright and Kylee Jones and averaged 15 points, 7.6 rebounds, 1.5 assists and three steals. Hughes also shot 41.1% percent from the field and 70% from the free-throw line in district play for Caledonia, which finished 15-10 and lost to

Tishomingo County in the first round of the Class 4A state tournament. The finish marked the first time in school history the program advanced to the state tournament.

Walker knew Hughes from her freshman season and knew she had the potential to make an immediate impact on her return. Her belief proved correct as Hughes played multiple roles (ballhandler, defender, post player just to name a few) and provided a great example to follow.

“Every aspect of the game she contributed, and that is even off the court,” Walker said. “I just don’t know if I can say enough about Liberty.”

Walker saw Hughes’ confidence lift her above the haters and doubters and to the point Wednesday where she officially realized her goal to play in college. She pointed to Hughes’ family for setting the standard and instilling the determination to make things happen.

“I grew up and raised where if somebody was better than me the next time out, they weren’t going to be,” Walker said.

“Liberty is that kind of kid. She is determined to be the best the next time out. I never had a doubt that the next level was a place for her. I really believe Northwest is getting a steal. I think Liberty can play even at the next level after that.”

Walker believes in Hughes because she knows her influence on a program and on teammates isn’t limited to the court. She said

Hughes not only wants to be the best, but she also strives to make everyone else better. Walker feels that mentality played an integral role in the team's success this season.

"We never missed a beat, and she picked up and was a leader from the word go," Walker said.

Hughes said she knew immediately Northwest Mississippi C.C. was for her after visiting Mississippi Delta C.C., Holmes C.C. and East Central C.C. She credits her teammates for helping her fit in and helping her push the program to new heights. Individually, Hughes feels she matured in her ability to stay calm on the court and to focus on what is important.

"Coach Walker is not going to play with me," Hughes said. "I know I have it in me to push myself and to do better. If I want better for myself, I have to push myself. I can't have anybody else do it for me."

Hughes believes her maturation will continue at Northwest Mississippi C.C. She will move to the next level buoyed by the confidence she proved her haters and doubters wrong by being herself.

"Growing up, people would always say something to me about basketball," Hughes said. "I don't like chaos, so when people would talk, I just let it be because, like I said, they're not me."