

'The Girls from Ames' Buzz book follows friendship of 11 Iowa girls

By Mary Ann Grossmann

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Marilyn McCormack Johnson, Kelly Zwagerman and Sally Hamilton are among 11 women whose shared lives are tenderly examined by best-selling author Jeffrey Zaslow in his new book, "The Girls from Ames."

"We are just very normal people living our lives like most of America does," Johnson said in a phone conversation from her Stillwater home last month, just as "The Girls from Ames" was starting to get a lot of industry buzz.

But Johnson and her circle of friends who grew up in Iowa in the 1960s might not be living normal lives much longer, because the "The Girls from Ames" is taking off like a rocket. It will debut Sunday on the New York Times best-seller list, just five days after publication, and it has touched a chord with reporters from almost every major national magazine.

Johnson will be joined on the Barnes & Noble program by fellow Ames Girls Zwagerman, the group's free spirit who teaches high school in Faribault, and Hamilton, described as "smart and funny," who teaches in Spirit Lake, Iowa. Zaslow will offer his author's viewpoint.

Zaslow is known for his blockbuster book "The Last Lecture." But he was a Wall Street Journal columnist in 2003, when he wrote a piece about women's friendships. Soon he was inundated with letters and e-mails from women who wanted him to know how much their female friends meant

to them. He was most touched by a letter from Jennifer Benson Litchman, who wrote about her 10 friends who grew up in Iowa in the mid-1960s.

When Zaslow approached the Ames group about doing a book, the women weren't sure how to respond.

"None of us had ever entertained the idea of doing something like this," Johnson recalled. "Some thought it would be fun. Others were not so sure. But Jeffery was very generous working with us and talked through our concerns."

Zaslow took a year off to get to know this group of women who grew up in the heartland. He pored over their photo albums, yearbooks, letters and journals (Johnson has kept one since fifth grade), dug into their families' histories and spent a happy reunion weekend with them in North Carolina.

What drew Zaslow to these seemingly ordinary women?

"Once I called Jenny and spoke to her for a while, I had a sense that she and the ... other girls from Ames had a sweeping and very moving story to tell," he writes. "Born at the end of the baby boom, their memories are evocative of their times. Born in the middle of the country, they now live everywhere else but carry Ames with them. Their story is universal, even common, and on that level it can't help but resonate with any woman who has ever had a friend."

So how did these girls bond when they met as young children?

"For the most part, all of us were involved in school activities, and some of our older siblings were friends," recalled Johnson, described in the book as "the earnest, risk-averse" daughter of the town's beloved doctor.

"We loved to laugh. I don't think any of us took life too seriously. We liked to have fun but were also into academics. We liked one another and kept on, even through spats. But we were never a clique. We weren't stereotypical mean girls, and we did have other friends."

Now in their mid-40s, the Girls (they prefer that term) have helped one another through the births of 21 children, career successes, marriages, divorces, cancers, the death of one woman's child and the mysterious death of their friend Sheila at age 22.

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