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BFFs tell all in 'The Girls From Ames'



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"The Girls From Ames" tracks three decades of friendship, tragedies, secrets, laughter and love among childhood friends.

By **KIM ODE**, Star Tribune

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When the movie "10" came out, a group of high

school girlfriends in Ames, Iowa, decided that Karen, the one with the longest hair, should be transformed into Bo Derek. For hours, they braided, giggled, gossiped. When they finished, Karen swung her head around and around, reveling in the era's hottest look -- until she noticed that the smiles had turned to smirks.

The braiders thought that Karen was being vain. Karen, in turn, was shocked at their change of heart. Looking in the mirror, she saw that her braids were amateurish and pretty awful, but didn't want to complain and hurt her friends.

Friendships among teenage girls can churn like no others, leading to thundering dramas. But, like a storm, the drama passes. Eventually, the others owned up to feeling a twinge of jealousy. Everyone said they were sorry and went home for supper, best friends again.

So went one day in the more than 40 years of friendship between these girls, now grown to women. It's described in "The Girls From Ames," (Gotham Books, \$26), Jeffrey Zaslow's decidedly -- sometimes uncomfortably -- candid account of 11 women who grew up in the central Iowa city. (A famous cheer: "Ames High aims high!") At times, the book has an almost anthropological tone -- a sort of Margaret Mead amid the cornfield keggers -- from the various research studies that Zaslow cites about women's friendships.

For example, an Australian study tracked how

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women with close female friendships outlive women with fewer friends by 22 percent, and that these friendships had more impact than close family ties. Such research lends gravity to what could have been one long stroll through a high school yearbook.

Journals and journeys

The project began several years ago when one of the women wrote to Zaslow, a features columnist for the Wall Street Journal, about the value of women's friendships. That led Zaslow to ask if the women, now in their late 40s, would share their story.

Two of the "girls from Ames" now live in Minnesota: Marilyn Johnson raises her family of three in Stillwater, and Kelly Zwagerman, now of Northfield, teaches journalism and composition at Faribault High School. Both said they were on board with the idea from the get-go, but that others were less sure.

Throughout the process, the 10 women talked to one another about what was being revealed, partly because one person's story sometimes unavoidably bled into another's life.

For instance, Johnson recalled some tension around lending Zaslow her diaries -- journals she'd kept from fifth grade through college. They described incidents involving some of the other women, incidents that they themselves hadn't

revealed to Zaslow. Now here he was, asking for their side of the story, leading to a sense that confidences had been betrayed. Johnson said they appealed to Zaslow's sense of fair play.

"He did let us read [the manuscript] and take out things that were not significant to the character of the book," Johnson said. "We all came back around together because there's a real unconditional love between us, but also because this is what real life looks like."

Zwagerman was perhaps the most candid about her life, partly because that's just the way she is, but also because she respected Zaslow's credentials. His prior book was the bestselling "The Last Lecture," about a dying professor's final message to his students.

Zwagerman said "The Girls From Ames" is a book about their lives, "not a book about what we want our lives to be." In an e-mail, she wrote: "I chose to share very personal information because I thought it was important to be honest. 'The Girls From Ames' is about friendship, but it is also about the journey each of us has taken individually."

Rattling the skeletons

That meant relating some outrageous, even controversial, events, but Zwagerman has no regrets about being upfront. "There are plenty of skeletons dancing in our closets; some of mine

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found their way into the book," she said. She added that what she told Zaslow was nowhere as brave as what others shared about tragedies in their lives, including the death of a child, divorce, miscarriage, cancer.

Johnson said one theme that emerged for her was how "you are an extension of your family." Her father was a beloved doctor in Ames and she was, by her own definition, "kind of a goody two-shoes. I never wanted to offend anyone." Yet she decided to tell all because she thought people could learn from her teenage mistakes, such as having a party while her parents were away, and the unnerving consequences that followed her drinking until she passed out. But she also shared the difficult-but-good decisions she's made, such as seeking medication for her depression.

Zaslow has said that he became interested in this particular group of friends because their experiences seemed universal. "I thought a book about them would resonate with any woman who has ever had a friend," he said on the book's website, girlsfromames.com. There's a video of the girls there, as well as a link for people to leave stories of their own friendships.

Zaslow also acknowledged some tense moments in the process. "The girls were not always happy with me. Feelings were hurt. Uncomfortable issues were raised." But he ended up always impressed by how they settled the rifts. "This book project tested their friendship. But their

loyalty to each other really moved me."

Friends from the ground up

Zwagerman has found herself wondering why some people maintain childhood friends.

"It was so easy to make friends when I was younger, but now I rarely allow someone into my life as a friend," she said. "It takes a lot of work, getting to know someone from the ground up. I wonder if we have stayed together because we allow each other so much breathing space? Certainly we can close that gap at any time. Since we are all spread out across the nation it's pretty tough to get on each other's nerves."

Zwagerman and Johnson expressed hope that "The Girls From Ames" will inspire other women to renew their commitments to their friends. Toward that end, the group has decided to found a scholarship at Ames High School for a female student. It's in memory of one of the "girls," Sheila Walsh, who died in 1986 after falling from a building in Chicago.

They've already decided from whom the nominations should come: not from teachers or administrators, but from the student's best friends.

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