

by Amy Dvorak



little

# Person, big message



## Reality TV Star and ALA Annual Conference Speaker Motivates and Inspires Audiences

Many of you may know **Matt Roloff** from the television show **“Little People, Big World”** on Discovery’s The Learning Channel (TLC), but did you know that he’s speaking at the **ALA Annual Conference & Exposition** in May?

His story is truly an inspiring one. Roloff suffers from **diastrophic dysplasia** – a rare form of dwarfism. Yet he hasn’t let the many physical, emotional and social challenges related to his condition get in his way.

Roloff is the Past President of Little People of America and co-founded and serves as the President of the Coalition for Dwarf Advocacy. His entrepreneurial interests began at an early age and turned into a successful 25-year career in high-tech sales, product development and service. Roloff has a wife and four children and runs a successful pumpkin farm in Oregon. And as if that weren't enough, he has embarked on several international humanitarian tours and trips to support U.S. troops overseas – all while being filmed for a TV program. Whew!

I caught up with Roloff, and he shared with me how he manages to make this all happen, despite his extraordinary challenges.

"People are in control of the hope in their lives," he said. "And when you hope for something and obtain it, you can hope for something bigger and attain that. Hope is a very powerful feeling you have inside of yourself, and you can teach yourself how to have it."

Read on to learn more about Roloff's story, how he has overcome adversity and how you, too, can create an extraordinary and passionate life.

**ALA:** *Running Roloff Farms is a big part of your work. Why did you enter this business?*

**MR:** When I was a kid, we lived on a farm for a short period, so you could say it's in my blood. When I was young, it was a great place to head outside, and when I started my own family, I thought it would be a great for the kids. I originally bought it more for the kids to have a place. We always set out for a five-acre farm, and we wound up with a 34-acre farm. It was a shame not to turn it into revenue stream, so the entrepreneur in me looked at all the different ways to make revenue, and we ended up with pumpkins, and it's been quite successful for us.

**ALA:** *This is a perfect example – as we've seen over the course of the 200-plus episodes of "Little People, Big World" – of how you tend to take on a real "can-do" attitude. Where does this motivation stem from, and how can others develop this positive thinking?*

**MR:** Ever since I was a very young man, I've had a sense of hope opposed to hopelessness. I focused on what I could do – not what I couldn't do. I was very determined. I found that I couldn't go play baseball, but I could lie on my back and throw a ball in the air; so whatever I was able to do gave me a sense of accomplishment. That hope – if you channel it properly – turns into passion, and passion becomes its own motivating

energy. Somehow I learned to develop and control passion and to channel it into productivity. I would encourage others to take practical steps to developing passion. The practical way to do that, in a nutshell, is to dream, believe in your dream and have hope. How do you turn hope into passion and passion to action? Get your butt off the couch and get into motion. Motion creates more motion.

**ALA:** *As the Past President of Little People of America – and having volunteered at its national, regional and chapter levels for more than 20 years – why do you recommend that others get involved in volunteering with their professional associations?*

**MR:** I learned from a mentor many years ago to never stop learning, building and serving. Don't wait until you're retired; work some of the serving throughout your life, whether that's serving in your church or association. I ran for office with Little People of America at a time when I was at a peak in my career. It was a sacrifice to my family and put our income on hold while I focused on volunteering. It was extremely rewarding and led to some of the achievements we have now. Volunteering pays back ten-fold in your life.

**ALA:** *What message do you hope to impart to ALA members during your presentation at the ALA Annual Conference?*

**MR:** My main message is to dream, believe and achieve, and to explain how to go about living an extraordinary life. Some are OK with surviving and living ordinary lives, and that's only because they don't know how to go from an ordinary to extraordinary life. They don't know how to thrive – just survive. They get caught up with laundry and the next day's work. They don't always know that they are just a few inches away from making a transition to an extraordinary life. I think everybody would like to live an extraordinary life, and if people knew how close they were, they would take these simple steps. My core message is to have hope and resilience, and these are steps to living an extraordinary life.

**ALA:** *You say people are capable of living extraordinary lives, but what initial steps do they need to take?*

**MR:** I do believe you have to get passionate about something. Watching TV might make you passionate about that particular show. Next thing you know you can't miss the show next week, and then you begin recording the program. That's becoming passionate about something that's not productive. Get passionate about your organization and

sign up for a volunteer position in ALA, for example. Take on one small role, start at the chapter level, then regional, then international level, and soon you become passionate about that. And it's contagious. Catch the disease of passion about whatever it is, and that's where dreaming comes in. Once you dream and believe, you develop passion. People think that passion comes by accident, but you have to realize that you can actually purposely become passionate. Start reading about it, talking about it, getting involved and taking action, whether it's working in the backyard or volunteering. Teach yourself to be passionate, and your energy will take over from there and you can live an extraordinary life. Everybody can develop an opportunity. You can't sit back and wait for a lottery machine; you have to have a dream and chase it.

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**ALA:** *From someone who has faced much adversity, why is it important for law firm managers to incorporate diversity programs into their offices?*

**MR:** It takes all kinds of people to make world go round and to create balance in every opportunity. Someone in line at the bank who has multiple sclerosis or cerebral palsy could be the next person to hire you or the next person to connect you to someone else. You never know when that networking might come back and make your dream come true. You need to practice treating everyone the same and with equality. It's just the right thing to do. You want to have a diverse workforce, because different people bring all kinds of experiences from different cultures and backgrounds, and it becomes valuable. People have to look at it that way; they can't look at it as a

chore. You have to believe in your heart that people who are different bring value to your own personal dreams.

**ALA:** *You've overcome your share of personal obstacles. How can people achieve success when facing barriers of their own?*

**MR:** People have to have resiliency, which is a muscle that can be built. You do not have control over some circumstances in your life, such as losing a loved one or having a disability; but what you do have control over is resiliency. I taught my kids to stand tall, be proud, develop different skills and not let obstacles get them down. You can choose to have hope, and you can choose to be resilient and not spend time on “why me?” attitudes. That comes from one word: resiliency. Even if you're stuck in a bed and cannot move, you can choose in your mind to be resilient.

**ALA:** *Speaking of your kids, your sons Zach and Jeremy are in college now. In what ways have you encouraged them to pursue their dreams?*

**MR:** Probably more so than the average family, we have encouraged our children by exposing them to many different things, from exotic travel to my trip to Iraq to support the troops there. Our kids are always encouraged to do their own thinking and to chase their dreams.

**ALA:** *What did you hope to achieve by having your family's story aired on TLC?*

**MR:** It's our mission in life to educate people about dwarfism, and this was also to desensitize America and society to the differences of little people and, in fact, all differences. Being a little person was a metaphor for all types of differences. Our clear objective was to see if we could convince society. I think people initially watch the show in a voyeuristic manner, and now they turn it on and don't even notice we're little. Also, our audience shifts with story shifting. And when that happens, we have a new audience to the issue of dwarfism. I think we continue to achieve as the audience grows and shifts. ♦

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**DON'T MISS** Matt Roloff's session, “Living an Extraordinary Life within You,” on Thursday, May 6, from 9:45 to 11:30 a.m. at the ALA Annual Conference in Boston. He'll share with you his inspiring stories, humor and tips for you to achieve your potential and to aspire to an extraordinary life.

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