

8 QUESTIONS

with Al Roker

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The affable *Today Show* weatherman was a special guest at the Teens With A Purpose (TWP) Gala and Silent Auction held October 22 at the Waterside Marriott in downtown Norfolk. *The Health Journal* caught up with Roker at the event to discuss his role with the teen organization, his life before and after his 2002 gastric bypass surgery, and his plans to run the New York City Marathon on November 7.

HJ: *How did you become involved with Teens With A Purpose?*

Al: I've known [TWP Executive Director] Deirdre Love since high school. She told me about the group and I wanted to know more. With everything she described it fell in line with what I believe in—what I know a lot of people believe in—which is helping teenagers make the right choices. Not preaching to them, but letting them come to the decisions and the conclusions they need to come to. Through self-expression and creativity, these teens create a curriculum that preaches abstinence and self-control, fighting against teen violence and domestic abuse. And the things

control, fighting against teen violence and domestic abuse. And the things that are of concern to them and to everybody.

HJ: *With TWP, there is a big performance aspect—poetry slams, drama, music—as a way to address sensitive and emotional issues. What makes this approach effective?*

Al: I think by human nature we don't want to be lectured to, talked down to—you want to be talked *with*. You want somebody who speaks the way you speak, who thinks the way you think, who shares that same value set, who knows what you're talking about. You tend to be more receptive to something that you're more comfortable with, as opposed to an older authority figure talking down to or preaching to you.

HJ: *What drives you to work with children and teens?*

Al: The fact of the matter is that they are the future. From health to education—if we don't take care of these kids, we're in trouble. I think it's very important to look at it from that standpoint.

HJ: *Moving to your gastric bypass surgery, which you had in 2002, what in your life made the procedure worth doing despite the risks?*

Al: My dad was dying from cancer. A couple weeks before he died, he made me promise to take care of myself and lose weight because he wasn't going to be here to help me raise his grandchildren.

HJ: *Your surgery and the fluctuations in your weight were documented on the Today Show and on Dateline NBC. You had to make this decision and stick with it through the good and bad times on national television. How much did that publicity affect you?*

Al: You don't really think about it because so much of your life is lived in the public eye and it's just one more thing. It's like anything else—you don't do whatever it is you're going to do because you're on TV or

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Local beat

EVMS Celebrates National Physician Assistant Week

Two national leaders of the physician assistant (PA) field, Assistant U.S. Surgeon General Rear Adm. Michael Milner, and Robert Wooten, president-elect of the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA), spoke last month at Eastern Virginia Medical School (EVMS) during National Physician Assistant Week about the growing importance of PAs in the evolving health care landscape.

Maryview Cancer Program Recognized for Quality

The American College of Surgeons' Commission on Cancer has granted a three-year re-accreditation to Bon Secours Maryview Medical Center's cancer program. The cancer program was commended for having excellent quality of data submitted to the National Cancer Data Base; having very active and strong outreach, prevention and detection programs; and implementing improvements to the cancer program each year.

Planned Parenthood Launches New Campaign

Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Virginia (PPSEV) is launching "Birth Control Matters," an effort to raise awareness about the importance of

struggles and fears facing teenagers today. Topics like sexually transmitted diseases, domestic violence, and racism—spoken by young people to young people. In the past year, the organization has served more than 4,000 young men and women in Hampton Roads through workshops and events.

"The idea behind it was to make it peer-led," says Love. "I would direct them, but everything they did, it wouldn't be adults talking down to kids. It would be youth-trained; they give the information to their peers, they put a youthful spin on it."

This "youthful spin" has taken the form of music, poetry and drama. These performances are what Love calls "a vehicle to change lives." Peer educators take the facts and statistics and translate them into poetry, spoken word, drama and music.

Chinyere Onyrimba, a peer educator with TWP, speaks about her training: "We'll all get together and [the expert] will come in and speak about the certain STDs that are prevalent. She'll tell us the statistics on dating abuse, and all the things

protect themselves, how to do these things to make them themselves better."

Emeka, an avid writer, says his experiences with TWP have helped him build confidence since joining the organization three years ago. "Seeing myself now I've grown as a person," he says. "I've gotten into my poetry, my art, my love, and I see myself doing a lot more with TWP and making it into a big organization."

For Love, and peer educators like Emeka and Chinyere, the medium is just as important as the message.

"There are [other] organizations that approach these issues in different ways," says Love, "and they are essential to the change we are trying to see come about, but the missing piece is what we're doing—[getting] young people talking to young people in a way that no adult could possibly do because we can't stand

"We've given them younger people who have gone through so what they've gone through so they can see there's a way out."

—Deirdre Love, founder, Teens With A Purpose

Her phone conversations with long-time friend Al Roker sparked his interest in TWP. Roker asked how he could help.

"He's very committed to helping us," says Love. "It's amazing—his voice, his presence, his believing in it—because he has watched us grow over these few years. He's impressed with what we've done in a short amount of time and he's encouraging to the youth. They all talk to him because he calls and checks in and meets with them every year."

Through the support of Roker and others, Teens With A Purpose continues to grow. Love plans to start satellites in other cities like

Richmond and Atlanta. But with any

Virginia (PULSE) is launching Birth Control Matters," an effort to raise awareness about the importance of making prescription birth control available at no cost under the new health care reform law so that all women may find the method that works best for them, and to help reduce the number of unintended pregnancies. PPSEV provides reproductive health care to women, men and teens across Hampton Roads. For more information, call (757) 499-7526 or visit www.ppsev.org.

Beazley Foundation Donates \$1 Million to Cancer Center


Beazley Foundation recently donated \$1 million to Eastern Virginia Medical School's new cancer research center, which will be named in honor of long-time foundation board member Leroy T. Canoles, Jr. The center will be housed in the medical education and research building under construction on the EVMS campus, and its program will build on the medical school's work toward developing new cancer diagnostics, identifying biomarkers that indicate certain cancers and enhancing the understanding of other forms of the disease.

on dating abuse, and all the things that are affecting the generation now. We're able to take the information we're given and give it to those who are willing to listen to it."

Chinyere, 17, and her brother, Emeka, 16, both attend high school in Norfolk. "We're able to talk to people who are our ages and younger and let them know what's going on in the community," Chinyere says. "How to

possibly do because we can't stand eye-to-eye with them. We've given them younger people who have gone through what they've gone through so they can see there's a way out."

In 2007, the grant funding the ministry ended, but Love refused to give up. She established a partnership with Access AIDS Care and Norfolk Parks and Recreation, and TWP soon officially became a non-profit.

Richmond and Atlanta. But with any non-profit, community support remains the greatest need. Interested parties, both individuals and organizations, can sign up to volunteer or make donations on the TWP website, www.twpthemovement.org. 

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because your husband or your wife says, "Oh, you have to lose weight"—it's you as a person who has to make the decision for yourself. It doesn't matter if it's drug abuse or weight loss or alcohol abuse or domestic abuse—you are going to effect change when you're ready to change.

HJ: *And now, as you look back on it, do you feel a sense of accomplishment or success?*


Al: There's no destination—there's always a continuum journey no matter what. You don't stop and say, "OK, I'm done," you keep moving. For now, I am not a success, but I am successful in what I've been doing. Could that change, sure, but if it does it's a constant process.

HJ: *You're running the New York City Marathon on November 7th. What does completing the marathon mean to you?*

Al: I won't know until after I've done it! It's one of those things—every Monday folks show up at the Today Show with their medals and you think, "Oh, I want to do that," but you don't think you really can. This year I'm working with a nutritionist and trainer out of Chicago, and so far it's going pretty well.

HJ: *What advice could you offer the millions of Americans who are struggling with their weight?*

Al: Don't do it for anybody else. Don't do it for your kids or your wife or

your husband; you have to do it for yourself. When you're ready to do it, you'll do it. 

Al Roker is the television weather anchor for NBC's Today Show as well as an author of cookbooks, children's books and novels. His second novel, Midnight Show Murders, is set for publication in November.

Author Jason Liebler is a Norfolk-based freelance journalist. A Portsmouth native, he is a graduate of Old Dominion University, where he currently teaches English composition and literature.