



Photo by Kevin Hanson

Melanie Roach, backed by a photo from her Olympic performance, spoke to a group of Bonney Lake students Friday.

Roach brings a message of determination to help inspire young athletes

By KEVIN HANSON
The Courier-Herald

Melanie Roach followed a rocky road that included steps as a troubled teen and injured athlete before finding Olympic success and personal satisfaction.

Now, she's spreading a message of hope and inspiration to others.

After setting a U.S. women's weightlifting record in the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, Roach returned home to discover she was in demand as a speaker. Her tale of resiliency and overcoming serious odds apparently struck a positive chord with many.

The Bonney Lake resident is soon headed off to address a crowd of 400 at Brigham Young University and has already appeared at California's Loma Linda Children's Hospital. There is, indeed, a financial reward for some of her stops.

But Roach has also put in time before a variety of smaller, local groups as well.

"I do a lot for free," she said. "It's my opportunity to give back to the community. Besides, it's no fun if you keep it to yourself."

Friday morning found the 33-year-old Roach in front of perhaps 160 Lakeridge Middle School students.

"Did anyone watch the Beijing Olympics?" Roach asked, getting a sea of hands in the air as a response. Then, "Did anyone stay up until 1 a.m. to watch me lift?" A few hands were raised.

"I'm here to tell you it could happen to you," Roach said, launching into the same message she shares with both kids and adults. Success in any endeavor, she emphasizes, is simply the result of setting goals and working hard.

She quickly related the story now familiar to those who have followed Roach and her Olympic dream.

Originally a gymnast, she was convinced to give weightlifting a try after high school.

"I really was intimidated but I thought I'd try it," she said. Roach found that she enjoyed the competitive angle and, more important, that she excelled at the sport.

The Auburn High graduate quickly rose through the ranks of U.S. female weightlifters and suddenly seemed a "sure thing" to make the county's 2000 team and compete in Sydney, Australia.

Eight weeks before the Olympic Trials, however, she suffered a herniated disk during a competition and the back injury derailed all her dreams.

Roach tried to lift during the Trials, but her body prohibited it.

"I had to withdraw," she said. "Watching the other girls compete, I just sat there in tears."

Her athletic dreams were then shelved as Roach and her husband Dan went about the business of starting a family and opening Roach Gymnastics in Sumner.

"We had a very full life, but in the back of my mind, I still thought about the Olympics," she said. "But I would get in shape just in time to get pregnant again."

The family now includes sons Ethan, 7, and Drew, 6, along with daughter Camille, 3. A fourth child is due in August.

By 2005, Roach was busy with three children, a business that had 17 employees and a husband serving in the state Legislature, which entails a campaign every two years.

"I have no idea what made me think I could do it," she said, but Roach quietly announced to her husband she would like to return to competitive lifting. He quickly supported the notion.

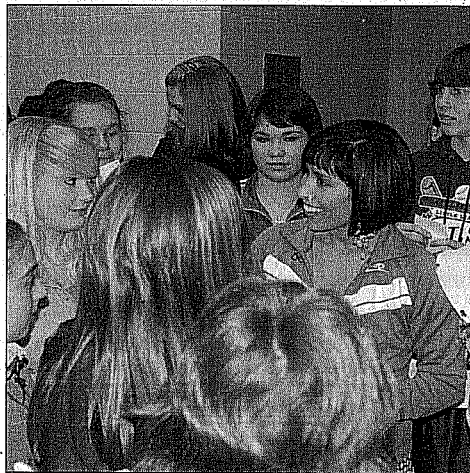


Photo by Kevin Hanson

Lakeridge students spent time getting up close with Melanie Roach.

Roach

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The next three years produced a whirlwind of success, with a quick break for back surgery that allowed Roach to reach her goals. She did not receive a medal at the Beijing Games, but met her personal goal of breaking the American record, something she had done 14 years earlier.

"I worked 14 years for six lifts," Roach told her Lakeridge audience, again hammering home her message of dedication and perseverance.

"Do everything you can, every day, to be prepared," she said, whether it's in the classroom or in athletics.

"Dreams don't become goals until you write them down," she added, encouraging students to aim high and work toward success.

The decisions they make now can go a long way toward determining what they can eventually become, Roach told her young audience, using her life as an example.

'Dreams don't become goals until you write them down.'

Olympic weightlifter
Melanie Roach

"In seventh grade, I was the kid no one wanted their children to play with," Roach said, revealing some personal details she hasn't often spoken of in public. She was on a destructive path, but turned her life around after discovering religion at 14.

On a final note, before she was swamped by youngsters seeking autographs, Roach emphasized that having a goal in life is crucial, but she has learned to enjoy each day as it comes.

"Enjoy the process," she said. "The day of the Olympics was perfect, but it was the 14 years leading up to it that made it special. Find joy in the journey."

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