

TOP 20 TRAINING

WILLOW SWEENEY FLAHERTY

The Unstoppable Willow Sweeney Flaherty of Top 20 Training

By Cassidy Swanson

Recently named one of the Top 5 Under 40 by the St. Cloud Times, Willow Sweeney Flaherty, co-owner of Top 20 Training, is unstoppable. A wife, mother, business owner, teacher, motivational speaker, trainer, author, and occasional actress for GREAT Theatre, her reach extends well past St. Cloud, MN where she lives with her husband, Brian, and their two young sons.

Flaherty attended the University of St. Thomas and began her first career as a social studies teacher. A fellow teacher had recently started a new program called Thinking, Learning, and Communicating (T.L.C.), stressing the importance of social and emotional intelligence, and he asked her to be a part of it. "Little did I know then that my background in sociology would be the most helpful in my second career of speaking on social and emotional intelligence," she says. Flaherty quickly joined the team. "As good as the information and skills were for students, it became apparent that the exact same skills that students need to grow up to be happy and successful were what educators needed to be great at their jobs."

With so many schools interested in their curriculum, the team became a professional development company in 2002. She co-owns Top 20 Training alongside Tom Cody, Paul Bernabei, Kevin Brennan, and Michael Cole. Following the start of the company, she co-authored the first of four books. Each book focuses on enabling children to tap into their own resources to build a wonderful life, with the fifth book for adults on its way.

Top 20 Training, well received around the country, provides training and materials to empower leaders, teachers, parents, and students to develop their potential. Together, they've trained over 500,000 leaders throughout the United States, and they've recently begun working in Canada. Flaherty recently trained a whole staff of a U.S. Congressperson. "I hope this is just the beginning," she says. "I want to share our work on social and emotional intelligence with our nation's elected officials."

As a speaker and trainer, Flaherty hopes to increase success at work and overall enjoyment of life. "Lots of us are raised to believe that as long as you get A's in high school, you'll grow up to be happy and successful. As I get older, I realize that isn't true," she says. Top 20 Training has 17 different content pieces they train on, focusing on how we think, learn, communicate, and feel about ourselves. Flaherty focuses a lot on energy. "I think people are hired and fired



Photo courtesy of Pete Pederson

based on energy. We can teach people how to do stuff, but it's really, really hard to get someone who brings a lot of negativity to work to stop." Her solution? "Stop talking about each other behind each other's back! Don't go along with the spin of negativity that people bring to you," she says, strong in her beliefs.

So, how does Flaherty find her own peace? "I have always found fulfillment in the service of others," she says. Flaherty also focuses on the phrase, "Keep Your Day." She continues, "Life is full of conditions that come up that invite us to become crabby and stay that way, but we don't have to. I don't like flat tires, running late, or rude people, but I refuse to give my perfectly fine day away. I've decided to make the choice to Keep My Day."

With an amazingly supportive husband, a team that always has her back, and a successful project with a great initiative, she doesn't allow stress to bother her. "When you get to do what you love—what you are supposed to be doing—and you remind yourself how thankful you are to have it, you just keep going."

To learn more information about Willow Sweeney and her team or to book a corporate or educational training please go to www.top20training.com

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