

Building future leaders

Are there universal personality traits that characterise excellent leadership? Anna C Belfrage believes so. As chairman of Raoul Wallenberg Academy for Young Leaders she is part of changing the future.

TEXT AND PHOTO: CHRISTIAN VON ESSEN



Anna C Belfrage greets me in the lobby of a monumental concrete building where she works as a senior adviser at global communications and consulting bureau Kreab Gavin Anderson. The building turns out to be the former Czechoslovakian embassy, which explains a lot.

A short resume of Anna C Belfrage

After receiving a scholarship to study in the US after high school, Anna C Belfrage engaged in a music and dance group called Up with People, with which she practically toured the world for some 13-14 years. After an MBA in the UK, she went to Sweden and worked as a marketing manager at American Express, then CEO of Swedish lobby group Positiva Sverige and later for daily newspaper Svenska Dagbladet's Executive Club, where she managed a network including the 400 most prominent leaders and opinion makers in the country. Now she has concluded a decade here at Kreab Gavin Anderson, using her extensive network as a senior advisor and door opener to her colleagues.

Met with Kofi Annan

But we are actually here to talk about her spare time, part of which she spends with her honorary (and pro-bono) assignment as Chairman of the Raoul Wallenberg Academy for Young Leaders. It was during the SvD Executive Club years that she met with the then UN Secretary Kofi Annan during his visit to Stockholm. It so happened that she also met with Kofi Annan's mother-in-law, who is Nina Lagergren, sister to the world-famous Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who helped thousands of Hungarian Jews during World War II, and whose fate has been cloudy ever since he was captured by the Soviet army on that cold January morning in 1945.

Anna C Belfrage and Nina Lagergren got along well. In 2001 it was decided to create something valuable of his heritage for future generations, the Raoul Wallenberg Academy for Young Leaders. It was founded by the Raoul Wallenberg Committee in collaboration with Stockholm School of Economics, Viktor Rydberg high school and the leadership coaches at Mgruppen – The Swedish Management Group. Anna C Belfrage was appointed chairman in 2005.

"We decided to create the one and only leadership education targeted at high school students," says Anna C Belfrage in one of the conference rooms at Kreab Gavin Anderson.

The soul of Raoul Wallenberg

For ten years now the academy has had courses of one week intensive education each year, thus far pushing the limits for more than 500 talented Swedish teenagers. After completion they are all added into the increasingly strong alumni network. But what does this gesture of helping the elite even further up the ladder have to do with Raoul Wallenberg?

"Well, the more I learn about him the more remarkable he seems," she says with admiration. "He is a great role model for young people – he had an interest in humanity, culture and languages, and he must have had quite a strong moral compass. He stood up against the authorities to care for the weak."

So the leadership education is not intended as pushing the envelope for silver spoon careerists. – "The soul of Raoul Wallenberg shines through every step of the way, including a focus on civil courage, ethics and multi-culturalism."

"The point is that you have to know yourself before you can become a great leader, and once you get there, you have to believe in making a positive difference for other people. You will also learn that you can't do everything on your own. People can create beautiful things, and you can lead these people in the right direction."

Anna C Belfrage thinks it is frightening to see how fast we forget our role models, and she is happy to instill some of Raoul Wallenberg's soul in the participants.

"It is important to show young people these role models and what they stood for," she says. "This is a truly meaningful, fun and stimulating mission for me, and I am very happy to give new generations the best possible start in their lives."

Facts

The young leadership program in August 2012 will coincide with Raoul Wallenberg's 100th birthday, and will include 48 students. In the beginning it was only students from the schools Tensta and Viktor Rydberg, but today some 25 schools have joined the program. Every student will apply together with his or her school. The week, including accommodation, costs SEK 12 000, but the funding is usually sorted out between the school, sponsors, scholarships and the Academy.
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