

Topic 14

People who change our lives

One in four US teenagers say they are more influenced by celebrities than people they know. In a recent poll they said musicians, sports stars and actors were important role models. But who has influenced the celebrities? Who were their heroes and role models? Who inspired them to reach the top of their chosen professions?

The power of family

Many celebrities cite the influence of their families in their success. Suzanne Collins, who wrote *The Hunger Games*, says her father, a US army officer, was an inspirational person. When she was a child he took her to battlefields and told her what happened there. "He felt a great urgency to tell his children about war," Collins says. Now she is a writer, and the theme of war and combat dominates her novels.

Billionaire businesswoman, Oprah Winfrey, says her grandmother had a dramatic effect on her early life. Despite being poor, Hattie Mae Lee raised Oprah until she was six years old. "I am where I am today because my grandmother gave me the foundation for success," she says. Lee taught Oprah to read and passed on a love of books.

For the writer George R.R. Martin, it was the family pets that were a source of inspiration. He had a number of pet turtles that lived in a toy castle. "I pretended they were all knights and kings and lords, and I wrote stories about them." Many turtles died, so he pretended they were killing each other in sinister ways. His *Game of Thrones* fantasy is also full of sinister plots.

The best of friends

Sometimes success comes from hanging out with the right people. Matt Groening, the cartoonist who invented *The Simpsons*, had been drawing cartoons throughout his youth, but was never paid for them. "I didn't think I drew well enough, but I knew it made me happy," he said. Then everything changed. He met Lynda Barry, another art college student. She was selling her comic strips to newspapers, so he decided to try doing the same thing. The decision changed his life.

Anthony Padilla and Ian Hecox became friends in high school. They created a comedy website *Smosh.com* that was originally intended as a forum for their high school classmates. The popularity of their YouTube videos rapidly spread beyond their small circle to millions of viewers from all over the world.

Talented teachers

Zac Efron has starred in a string of Hollywood hit movies. He says his passion for acting came from his drama teacher Robyn Metchik. “She pretty much embodied drama for me all through my high school years,” he says. She was also the person who got him his break-through role in Disney’s *High School Musical* movie.

Darla Johnson, a dance instructor, helped singer-songwriter Beyoncé rise to fame. She noticed the shy child’s talent: “I hummed a song and she finished it. Well, it blew me away. I told her to sing it again. She wouldn’t sing it again because she was... well, she was very shy. So, I promised her a dollar. And, she sung it again – I was floored. When her parents came to pick her up, I told them that she can sing. She can really sing.” She was right. Today Beyoncé is worth \$350 million.

It’s the people around you

25% of the American teenagers who took part in the survey might be surprised. Many celebrities say they are inspired by ordinary people. Not super stars.