

Tina Levene

Holiday, Florida



Florida Recovery Schools of Tampa Bay, Inc.

Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Tina Levene:

Tina Levene’s relocation to Florida is a story we’ve heard many times before. After yearly vacations in the Sunshine State for nearly a decade, Tina and her husband, Warren, decided on a freezing cold day in January 2009 that they had enough of the Ohio winters. As Tina shared, they were also given four remarkable signs that their decision was the right one.

“What Warren didn’t know about our trips to Florida, was that I was secretly applying for jobs down here,” Levene shared with a laugh. “On that particular trip back to Ohio in 2009, we were going through the West Virginia Mountains and I said to him, ‘What’s it going to take for us to move?’. He said we weren’t in a position to move because of his job, our dream house, and the fact that our dog had a history of running away from home – he was worried he would try to run back to Ohio. Well, not

long after we got home, he lost his job, our dog died, we lost our house and I was notified that I got a job in Tampa. Needless to say, these were all very clear signs.”

At the time, Levene was working as a social worker in the fields of drug prevention and education. In fact, ever since graduating from college – ten years prior – she dedicated her life to helping others overcome addiction and get back on their feet. For Levene, the decision to become a social worker in the first place was one influenced by her own experiences.

“My major when I first started college was Interior Design because I wanted to make money,” Levene said. “I ended up failing out of college because of physical and emotional childhood trauma that ultimately led to an addiction. It was a very dark time in my life. I was eventually readmitted to school and, while giving a presentation, my professor took me aside and said, ‘You need to work with children’. I changed my major right then and there and my life was changed forever.”

The job that allowed Levene to relocate to Florida was a position as the Florida State Prevention Specialist for Mothers Against Drunk Driving. A year later, she took a position with the Hillsborough County Department of Children's Services and also became a licensed Therapeutic Foster Parent. She then spent seven years with the Department of Juvenile Justice – working with victims of human trafficking and runaway youth. It was during this time, when Levene was inspired on several occasions to do even more for our younger generations.

“I realized there needed to be a specialty school for students dealing with addiction and trauma,” she said. “I also had another ‘sign’ type

experience three years ago when Warren and I and our son sold everything and briefly moved to a North Carolina mountain top and built a tiny home. We were originally thinking about doing a camp for teens struggling with addiction, abuse and trauma, but it ended up being the worst decision ever. After six weeks without electricity and running water, we came back to Florida with our tails between our legs.”

Levene continued, “After that experience, I was more focused than ever. When we got back to Florida, I looked up and connected with a recovery school in Jacksonville – the first of its kind in Florida. I met with the Executive Director and explained my vision for a similar school in the Tampa Bay area. He was very helpful and has been a mentor of mine ever since.”

Florida Recovery Schools of Tampa Bay, Inc. was officially formed in January 2020. By May, a full board of directors was established and Levene assumed the role of Executive Director in August. The first high school – Victory High School – was established earlier this year and is scheduled to start classes in January 2021. The high school will offer mental health support to students and families and recovery support for addictions, trauma and depression. Working with the Pasco County Sheriff’s Department, Levene identified a “hot spot” near Holiday – where overdose numbers are higher than normal – as an ideal location for the school.

To date, funding has been one of Levene’s biggest challenges. Nevertheless, she’s actively applying for grants and foundations and she’s utilizing her network to spread the word and find additional funding sources.

“In the one month I’ve been Executive Director, I’ve spoken with 561 people about what we’re doing,” Levene said. “I’ve met with County Commissioners, the Opioid Task Force and many other coalitions. I’ll be speaking to the Rotary club next month and I also joined the Pasco County EDC network to make new connections and find additional resources. We’ve also had a lot of community support. Bay Care, Advent Health, the Central Florida Behavioral Health Network, the Sheriff’s Office, New Port Richey Police and the Drug Treatment Centers are all onboard.”

In addition to the work she does with Florida Recovery Schools of Tampa Bay, Levene is also a national speaker and author on the topics of staff development and training, leadership, self-care and wellness for organizations that employ social workers, law enforcement and therapists. She’s also been hired by Johnson & Johnson and other private corporations to speak to their employees. Levene even spent time as a radio show host and a host of her own TV show called Tina Talks Truth.

“I just love teaching people a new way of life,” she said. “They don’t have to just be complacent. It saddens me to see people when they’re dragging their feet and they just settle. It could be physical, spiritual or emotional, but they often just settle for their circumstances. We should be empowered by our circumstances. I love to encourage them that there is hope. They need to understand that they have control over what they’ve been through.”

Levene continued, “When it comes to addiction, 50% is genetic and the

other 50% is environmental. Regarding the generic component, there is such thing as an addictive personality. There are certain things that light up in the brains of people that struggle with addiction. When it comes to environmental, we're usually talking about some kind of trauma. As a result, these kids haven't been taught the right way. They're not bad kids, they just haven't been taught. I'm a survivor myself and I've been in recovery for 22 years, so I understand what they've been through. I really want to teach society and the community that these kids need our support."

Looking ahead, Levene's ten year goal is to have additional high schools in Pinellas, Hillsborough and Manatee Counties. Her long-term goal is to have recovery high schools in all 67 Florida counties.

What advice does Levene have for aspiring entrepreneurs interested in starting a non-profit? First and foremost, get incredible leaders and experts on your board of directors," she said. "That is a must. My expertise is not accounting. My brain doesn't work that way. I have a CPA that's a Treasurer on our board. We also have an attorney on our board, business minded people, those in the faith community and those in the mental health community. Having these people on our board makes a huge difference. Also, communicate with everyone and think outside the box. Share what you're doing with everyone. By sharing who we are and what we're doing, I've opened so many doors to speak and share about the school. As far as how to get great board members, asked plugged in friends for referrals. Take advantage of your network."

Levene continued, "Lastly, being successful in business and life is all about building relationships. I love this quote from Zig Ziglar that says,

'The Fortune is in the follow through'. I apply that in all areas of my life. Sometimes the follow-through is a phone call, an email, face-to-face or simply connecting someone with a resource or contacting someone and just saying, 'hey, I was thinking about you'. It's about building and maintaining meaningful connections."

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