

## **findingBLANK: Helping Youth Find Their Purpose—And Their Place in the Community**

**By Amber Horton**

### **Abstract**

Focused on the Greater Cleveland, Ohio area, findingBLANK is a non-profit organization that designs and implements youth development programs centered around the arts. Each year, findingBLANK offers an array of services to nearly 300 high school students attending Maple Heights High School and approximately an additional 1,500 youth. Through arts education and cultural programming, we aim to help students increase academic performance and attendance, improve social skills, reduce risky behavior, and establish a strong relationship with the community.

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Arts education in school and out of school is becoming widely unavailable in public schools, and this is not happening in a vacuum. The same communities facing a reduction in arts education are seeing an abandonment of social infrastructure, too. This includes recreation centers, parks, and even sidewalks and stoplights—critical resources for creating a nourishing and safe environment for young people. Combined, this makes it inaccessible for low-income families with children to find positive youth development programming, particularly during the critical time of the day when many parents are working. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 69% of two-parent families and 71% of single parents report that their work schedules leave their children in need of supervision after school.<sup>1</sup>

Founded in 2016, findingBLANK strives to help fill that void in the Greater Cleveland, Ohio area. Our mission is to give youth a voice to creatively express themselves and strengthen the community. We offer free arts programming through a carefully curated youth development model targeting low-income, high-crime communities. Specifically, we provide afterschool, summer, and in-school programming, hosting guided workshops, quarterly retreats, and one-off special events. Our curriculum has covered a range of interest areas including painting, poetry, hip-hop, dance, songwriting, and guitar, to name a few. We also incorporate career and college readiness, and weave in lessons around mental health, self-esteem, and confidence. Finally, we make sure to always provide meals or snacks. This ensures students are nourished and ready to participate and addresses potential food scarcity students and families may face.

findingBLANK has grown significantly over the years. What started as a dream to improve the community soon transformed into one of its staples. Our first-ever “findingYOURPASSION” afterschool program in 2017 had a total attendance of two students. Despite this, we kept going. By the following year, we gained the support of school staff, the school board, council members, and community members. Because of this, we were able to initiate a six-week arts education for 25 students. Since then, findingBLANK has grown tremendously, partnering with schools and other organizations to reach nearly 2,000 students each year. We have encountered countless challenges throughout our journey, but with resilience, passion, and dedication, we have been able to grow. And this growth is the direct result of community support and funding. It is not just findingBLANK’s vision, but a community

vision to provide safe spaces where youth can express themselves and continue to spread their wings to grow and prosper.

Currently, our primary target area is the City of Maple Heights, Ohio, where the child poverty rate is 37%, well above the national rate of 21%.<sup>2</sup> Maple Heights has an experienced increasing gang presence in recent years, particularly among the “Heartless Felons,” a juvenile gang that originated within the juvenile detention centers throughout Ohio. Furthermore, the city is home to a large transient population. Not only do these factors disadvantage students and families, but they also contribute directly to funneling kids into the school-to-prison pipeline. We must interrupt this destructive ecosystem.

Research shows that students engaged in structured activities are more likely to refrain from engaging in gang involvement and other risky behavior. So, Maple Heights’ lack of social infrastructure where youth can gather and engage in positive pursuits in school, after school, and during the summer presents a tremendous opportunity.

At findingBLANK, we understand that effective programming means meeting people where they are—and not expecting them to come to us. Most youths are not seeking out risky behaviors to engage in; it often happens when they are idle. So, we work to be a more convenient and appealing option than unsafe alternatives. We offer everything at no cost in public spaces like schools, libraries, and parks to make our services readily available. Time and time again, we have seen that, when given a choice, many young people will choose to engage in a positive activity instead of something destructive. Adapting our strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic, we mirrored the hybrid model of many schools and incorporated Zoom meetings into our approach. By relying on existing social spaces and making findingBLANK the most convenient option, we deter students from risky behavior and bring them closer to the community by fostering connections in shared spaces. Furthermore, this engenders a shared appreciation for these spaces in our students, strengthening the community and encouraging longevity.

In addition to prioritizing a community-centered approach and convenience for students, we also heavily consider the needs of parents and families. This is particularly relevant when it comes to our afterschool and summer services, when the safety-net provided by school is minimized, and more pressure is on parents to keep their kids on track. In a 2001 study providing afterschool programming for families who had not previously had access, 60% of parents said they missed less work than before, and 59% said that it supported them in keeping their jobs.<sup>3</sup> In economically depressed areas like Maple Heights, this is of great importance. By prioritizing the needs of parents and families, we get buy-in from them which increases a student’s likelihood of sticking with us and makes findingBLANK an even more welcoming and appealing environment.

Furthermore, it creates a ripple effect in the community. Not only are there economic gains due to parents’ increased ability to work, there are social gains from parents being less stressed and more connected. We encourage this further by connecting families with community resources. We connect them to resources at our sites like the library and schools and other spaces like clinics and non-profits. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this was critical as families were concerned with things like acquiring school meals during remote learning, voting, and getting vaccinated. Though we put students’ needs first, we work to see the big picture. Their lives are much bigger than what we see during our time with them. We take our role as a hub and networking space for students, families, and community members very seriously and incorporate this into our planning and strategy.

findingBLANK is a MyCom partner, and we continue to work closely with the city council and school board. We receive the bulk of our funding through private donations and local grants. Furthermore, we rely on donations of food, spaces, volunteers, and more from area businesses and community members. This not only provides us with crucial resources it also strengthens community ties for our organization as well as students and families. We are extremely thankful for our community's support and partnership. Without their faith, trust, and guidance, findingBLANK would not be successful.

In our time providing youth who would otherwise not have access to arts education creative and engaging ways to learn, our appreciation for the power of students, families, and community has only increased. We look forward to many more years of growth for findingBLANK and, most importantly, the community.

### **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup> U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed June 23, 2021, <https://www.bls.gov>.

<sup>2</sup> Census Reporter, accessed June 23, 2021, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US3947306-maple-heights-oh/>.

<sup>3</sup> New Faith Temple Community Development Corp., “‘Next Step’ Afterschool Program,” *New Faith Temple*, 2015, <https://www.nftcdc.com/next-step-after-school-program>.

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### **About the Author**

**Amber Horton** is CEO of findingBLANK, which she founded in 2016. Then a recent graduate of Otterbein University in Ohio, Horton had participated in a study abroad program entitled “Social Change, Social Peace, and Social Movements in Central America.” Without realizing it at the time, that is where findingBLANK originated. While abroad, Horton had the opportunity to immerse herself in local urban and rural cultures. She also worked and volunteered at orphanages, non-profits, schools, afterschool programs, and co-operatives, and spoke with local activists and politicians. However, above all else, Horton had the opportunity to self-reflect through writing which turned into a blog called “findingBLANK.” She explored her own journey of finding who she was through travel and connecting with others through writing. Upon returning home and graduating that following year, Horton turned her blog into a non-profit focusing on positive youth development to help youth find their passions (their “BLANK”) through expressive art forms.