

We Are Family

An Interview with Michele Campbell, Executive Director, LeBron James Family Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE *As the executive director of the LeBron James Family Foundation, Michele Campbell is able to implement her decades of experience in higher education into thoughtful, family-focused initiatives that connect with the inner-city students and families that need it most. Through the Foundation, which aims to positively affect the lives of children and young adults through educational initiatives, Campbell brings LeBron's vision to create positive and lasting change in his hometown to life through daily and long-term interventions rooted in research and driven by passion. Under Campbell's direction, in 2011 the LeBron James Family Foundation began working on the high school dropout crisis facing the Akron community and launched its core I PROMISE program in partnership with Akron Public Schools. This deep-rooted initiative targets the district's lowest performing students and provides them with the programs, support and mentors they need for success in school, following them all the way through graduation. Campbell's guidance*



Michele Campbell

has helped grow this thoughtful and powerful program to more than 1,600 students that has culminated in the opening of the I PROMISE School, a groundbreaking public school that takes an innovative approach to educating the whole child and their entire family; the I PROMISE Village that serves as transitional housing; the upcoming I PROMISE Housing that will be 50 units of affordable housing; and House Three Thirty, an innovative center focused on providing job training, financial health, and family programming for the entire community. Campbell earned a Bachelor's degree in business management from Ashland University, a Master's degree from Kent State University's Higher Education Administration, and a Doctorate from the University of Akron as a Doctor of Education.

Will you highlight the history of the LeBron James Family Foundation and how you define its mission?

With a commitment to redefining community and building stronger families, the LeBron

James Family Foundation invests its time, resources and passion into creating generational change for kids and families through a focus on education and co-curricular educational initiatives. Since LeBron started his Foundation when he entered the NBA in 2004, our focus and mission has evolved in a way we never dreamed of. We are now serving more than 1,600 students and their entire families through our I PROMISE program that provides opportunities and life-changing resources for those who need it most. Our work rooted in a “We Are Family” philosophy has not only changed the trajectory of our community in Akron, but also created a model that the country is now looking to as a viable way to engage your community of stakeholders, partners and peers to create something bigger together.

Will you provide an overview of the work of LJFF and discuss the I PROMISE program?

What started as a Foundation to do good in LeBron's hometown has grown into a movement to redefine what a community and family looks like. Through our I PROMISE program, we serve students and their entire families by providing them with the fundamental resources, wraparound supports and family programming they need for success in school and beyond. In 2018, we built all of our family-first programming and academic interventions into the groundbreaking I PROMISE School that has created a new model for urban, public education. Since that time, and in direct response to our families' needs, we've layered in additional resources including higher education and family support at the I PROMISE Institute, transitional housing at the I PROMISE Village, long-term affordable housing at the upcoming I PROMISE Housing, job training and financial health programming at House Three Thirty, and several hands-on supports in between. From scholarships and employment opportunities to once-in-a-lifetime experiences, we work hard every day to create and provide what our families need to be successful.

How did LJFF adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the pandemic?

The pandemic was a challenging time for everyone, and especially our students and families. With schools closed, we had to find a way to stay connected with them while also fulfilling basic needs that school typically provides – things like breakfast and lunch,



LeBron James celebrates the opening of the I PROMISE School in Akron, Ohio

“I believe in order for us to ultimately be as great as we can be as a nation that all of us have to go back into our communities and lend our hand. It starts brick by brick. It starts person by person. Family by family. Kid by kid.”

LeBron James

structure to the day, emotional support, and a sense of community. We knew we needed to respond immediately, so we established a 24/7 hotline that our families could call any time with any need – things they would typically have access to in our Family Resource Center at the I PROMISE School – and our team began doing deliveries. Academically, our educators took learning online and did an amazing job of finding ways to keep students engaged and learning as best they can. We also started delivering weekly hot meals to every single family in the I PROMISE program,

making sure they had dinner on the table while also checking in on them and having that in-person touchpoint. The weekly deliveries across the city quickly became a tradition that sparked hope and joy during a really tough time. Now that we are getting back to our more typical routines, we’ve kept that accessibility open for our families that grew stronger together through it all.

How critical are metrics to measure the impact of LJFF’s work?

For us, metrics and data are secondary to the daily impact we know our work needs to

have, because our families depend on it. We of course are incredibly proud of our students’ academic successes and seeing so many of them, who were once counted out as third graders, now thriving in college. We’re proud of the number of parents who have earned their GEDs through our I PROMISE Too program. We’re inspired by the high volume of families tapping into and engaging with our resources offered at the I PROMISE School’s Family Resource Center. We of course track how many meals served, scholarships awarded, families served in our transitional housing,



LeBron James brings his “330 Ambassadors” from Akron to give back in each All-Star city



LJFF's "We Are Family" philosophy guides every layer of LeBron James' work

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academic progress, and many other important factors so we can see where the gaps or areas of improvement are. But how do you quantify a life changed, a day made or a dream sparked? Those are the intangible things we believe make a difference.

Will you discuss LeBron’s passion and commitment for the work of the Foundation and how deeply engaged he is in its efforts?

The work of the LeBron James Family Foundation is the direct result of LeBron’s experiences growing up in his community and his passion for giving back to the place that gave so much to him. Our work with students and families is a product of his vision to make a difference and use his platform to uplift others along the way. With his day job now on the other side of the country, he’s empowered his team in Akron to navigate the day-to-day work that makes it all possible. He’s of course always excited to hear how his students and families are doing, and he’s the first to celebrate their successes or encourage them during a challenge. This work truly is his legacy and we are all humbled and inspired to be a part of it.

Did you always know you had a passion for this type of work and what makes the work so special for you?

There are so many things that make this work special to me. It’s honestly almost impossible to put it all in words. This is my life’s passion. Helping families believe in a better future for themselves, seeing students strive to be more than they ever thought possible, or even just being there for someone and helping them make it through another day is the work I am honored and privileged to do every single day. The fact that other communities and other cities are coming to Akron, Ohio to learn and see how we do what we do is the cherry on top. It shows that how we’re serving our families in a whole new way is catching on, and that others believe it will make a difference in their community as well. To change the world is a

lofty goal to have, but to see it in action – one person, one family at a time – makes me believe it is possible.

What are your priorities for the LeBron James Family Foundation as you look to the future?

Over the years, our work has taken us in so many directions we never dreamed of. Opening a public school, running transitional housing, building permanent housing, creating our own Institute on a college campus – these are all things we’ve leaned into because they are what our families need. As we continue to dig even deeper, we’ve learned that what our families need in order to be more successful is job training and work experience. To answer that need, we are currently in the process of

renovating a multi-use community center we’re calling House Three Thirty to provide unique experiences and resources for the community where our I PROMISE students and families can get that hands-on job training in whatever area they are interested in. House Three Thirty will be a hub for employment in retail, hospitality, engineering, event planning, and many other sectors, as well as a space for financial health programming and community gathering. Getting this massive community center up and running is our immediate focus, and while we never really know what the future may hold for our work, we can promise it will be whatever our families and our community needs because that listening and responding is what drives all of this. ●



LeBron James works with I Promise students at The University of Akron