

## **UNDERCOVER HIGH**

### **What is Undercover High?**

*Undercover High* is a docuseries filmed at Highland Park High School during the spring 2017 semester. The show highlights a program in which seven young adults (ranging in age from 21-26) embed themselves into the school community, as *students*, for a new perspective on teenage life and to attain a better understanding of the experiences and challenges today's high school students face on a daily basis.

The embedded participants – including a youth pastor, a former teen mom and others – all have varying personal motivations that drove them to participate and to want to help enact positive change.

By offering educational institutions across the country unprecedented insight, the goal of the series/program is to give voice to the school and community and to further conversation about the role of public education in America.

*Undercover High* will premiere Tuesday, January 9 on A&E.

### **Background on the Show:**

*Undercover High* is produced by Learning Tree Productions, a subsidiary of production company Lucky 8 TV.

The series' producers approached Topeka Public Schools about filming the series at Highland Park, and following several meetings with the school board, in which the project and its potential benefits to Highland Park and to other schools across the county were discussed in great detail, the board voted unanimously to grant access to film at Highland Park during the spring 2017 semester.

Prior to filming, Learning Tree Productions held several meetings with HPHS faculty, students and parents to explain the project and answer questions. Production also had a presence at various school events (basketball games, etc.) before filming began, where they set up a table and had producers available to provide info about the project and distribute appearance releases to anyone interested in participating.

## **OTHER FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **Why Highland Park?**

Highland Park quickly emerged as an ideal fit for the project. A mid-sized school in a mid-sized city, production found it emblematic of high schools across America today. The school also celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017, a great milestone for an institution.

These factors, plus the historical importance of Topeka when it comes to education (Brown vs. Board of Education), locked the decision to film at Highland Park.

**What were the students, faculty and community told about the production?**

All students, staff and parents were aware the show was being filmed, and their participation was voluntary. Production held several meetings prior to filming with school officials, parents, students and faculty members to explain the project, goals for the series and the production process – including that participants (from outside of Topeka) would be immersing themselves into the school community.

**Were hidden cameras used in this project?**

There were no hidden cameras involved in the production of this project. All filming of students was done with camera crews.

**When and how long did it take to film this project?**

The show was filmed during second semester of the 2016-17 school year. It was filmed from January 2017 to May 2017.

**What did participants share about their lives?**

All participants used their basic real life story including their first name, key parts of their family history and their life experience of high school. Participants did try to keep their age and some other details private as a way to keep the integrity of the program.

**Did the participants really attend school and do homework?**

Yes, and took tests! While their grades were not factored into our state assessments, they carried out the responsibilities of a real student.

**Did the students and faculty have to participate?**

No. Participation was on a voluntary basis. Those who wanted to participate had to sign appearance releases, and students could not be shown on the series unless releases were signed. If the student was under 18, his/her parent or guardian was required to sign the release.

**Did students know that the participants were over 18?**

In order for participants to get the most authentic and natural “student experience,” only select school officials knew their exact ages and identities.

**How were participants chosen: were they actors?**

Participants were not actors. Each of them come from different walks of life and entered the program with specific motivations for participating, based on their careers and past experiences. All went through extensive vetting and background checks. They were all also very closely monitored throughout by production.

**What supports were given to students who attend HPHS during and after the show?**

Production worked with two adolescent mental health experts, Dr. Alfiee M. Breland-Noble (a licensed psychologist) and Stacy Kaiser (a licensed psychotherapist), who were part of planning and monitoring the program – which included staying in touch with several students after filming and being available to discuss their experience, answer questions, etc. Dr. Breland-Noble and Stacy Kaiser were present at the school as the participants began their immersion and were in frequent contact with the participants throughout the semester - in person in Topeka and via phone - to monitor their experience, maintain an awareness of the students' experience and provide consistent support.

**If a participant learned about unsafe behaviors of students how did they handle that?**

If production or participants noticed unsafe behavior or were privy to information that might suggest a student needed extra support, both the school administration and one of the adolescent mental health experts were contacted to assess the situation. A school administrator would then connect the student with the appropriate resources and – depending on the situation – enlist school counselors, parents, emergency services or staff to keep an eye on the student. The administration and mental health experts would then stay in close contact to make sure the issue was addressed, while respecting privacy concerns.

**After production was over, what resources were available to students?**

At the conclusion of filming, the participants and the adolescent mental health experts were immediately in touch with the students with whom the participants had the most contact, to provide information on the participants' ages and full identities, as well as to answer questions and provide follow up, as requested. An open and direct line of communication was established between these students, production and the adolescent mental health experts.

Also, during the final stage of filming and extending into the summer, production implemented a three-month transition period, in which the participants' social media accounts stayed open so that students could continue to contact them and communicate. Roughly a dozen students used Facebook to continue communication with participants throughout the summer.

Beginning in the summer and continuing through the fall semester, production had calls and several in-person meetings with featured Highland Park students to address any concerns, answer questions about the show and prepare them for the premiere.

As the series airs, weekly check-ins will occur with the students featured in the episodes.