

# Clothes encounters — blazing a trail with Blake Gifford

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The competition in the influencer world is fierce, with countless individuals vying for time and attention. But it's easy to see why Tulane Law School alumna Blake Gifford (L \*15) has become such a success, on top of exquisite taste, she exudes the type of authenticity that can't be bought — or faked.

Part of her achievement may stem from the unique approach she brings to her brand [Signed, Blake](#). "I really take the approach of bringing my full self to my platform and bring my full self very authentically. [My followers] know that I grew up in foster care. They know any struggles that I've had with self-confidence and body image.

"I call the people that follow me my 'cousins.' We have a very familial sort of

interaction with each other. I think of it as less about being an influencer and more about being a community,” says Blake.

Indeed, Blake’s story inverts the Kardashian archetype. Born in Columbus, Georgia, she was transferred into the foster care system by the time she was 8. She lived in a series of group homes until she landed at Georgia Industrial Children’s Home in Macon, Georgia.

Throughout, she excelled in school, heading to Spelman College when she aged out of foster care and later attaining her Master’s in Social Work from New York University and her juris doctorate from Tulane Law School. “Influencer” as a career wasn’t anywhere on her radar.

In fact, when she started her first blog, the term “influencer” didn’t exist. As she was set to graduate from Spelman College with a major in psychology, her plans for the future weren’t yet set in stone. The blog was a way of working through that. “I started this space where I was talking online about what I wanted to do next, just trying to figure that out.”

Blake had always had an interest in fashion, and her early posts included thrift store finds that she would DIY into eye-catching looks. “Being a new college graduate, I didn’t have a lot of money to find things, so I shopped at thrift stores to find things. I put that on the site as well. I would always get these random comments, ‘Oh, I love this. Could you show me how you styled this?’ or ‘What did it look like before you DIY-ed it?’ That is how it became a fashion blog. It kind of just naturally evolved.”



After graduation from undergrad, she moved from Atlanta to New York to pursue her MSW. But the idea of law school remained on her mind. Since childhood, her self-advocacy had led the adults around her to comment that she should be a lawyer.

“Coming out of undergrad, I wasn’t quite ready to take that jump and went the social work route because I did want to make an impact and be of service.

“My second year [at NYU], I was doing therapy sessions at Riker’s Island, and I would hear the stories that these guys would tell me about their lawyers not showing up for court, or just things that I felt were heartbreaking. That was the push that I need to finally apply to law school.”

Blake received a Dean’s Merit Scholarship to Tulane Law School and came to New Orleans intent on becoming a public defender. As she faced the challenges of law school, her fashion blog continued — and proved a solace. “In law school for me, there was so much self-doubt. It’s such a new process and a new way of learning and competing with your classmates that you don’t necessarily have to contend with in undergrad. It can really shake your confidence. I always felt like, ‘Well, at least I

look pulled together.’ And if I look pulled together, maybe I can figure the rest of it out when I get there,” says Blake.

She spent her first summer interning at The Bronx Defenders and quickly realized that the work was taking an appalling emotional toll. “I realized that I didn’t know that this was something I could do for the rest of my life and be sane and mentally and emotionally sound in the process.”

She altered her course to focus on intellectual property, and a friend in marketing suggested she turn her fledgling social media presence into a brand. “It was rough in the beginning, but I started making enough money to sort of sustain myself and then eventually enough to build an actual career out of it and hire a team ... but it was certainly a slow burn and build and very, very rough in the beginning,” she says.

Today, Signed, Blake has more than 125,000 followers on Instagram, and her clothing collection with Amazon the Drop proved an instant sellout.

“My primary goal was creating a space where black women could come and feel very valued, because that was something that I really immensely struggled with. Black women, both online and off, we are often sort of relegated to the back of the line, even within social movements. I just love having this space where black women feel so celebrated, and they feel so seen.”

And she puts her Tulane Law education to good use in the process. With herself as the product, it’s essential that Blake be a shrewd negotiator. “The final product is glamorous, but creating it is not so much. It’s a lot of emails, a lot of contract negotiations, a lot of deliverables and negotiating rates.

“I think I’m in a bit of a different position than most influencers because I didn’t seek this job out, it wasn’t something that I aspired to be. Also, I have a law degree, I have a master’s in social work. At the end of the day, I always feel more empowered to walk away. I’m able to confidently say no to a lot of opportunities that I feel don’t align with who I am or don’t align with the message I want to send.”

Tellingly, she brings the same commitment to uplifting others and thoughtful analysis of cultural inequality to Signed, Blake that she brought to her social work on Rikers and her legal work for the Bronx Defenders.

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