

THE PROMISE: LIFE, DEATH AND CHANGE IN THE PROJECTS
EPISODE 7, BONUS
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MERIBAH KNIGHT: Welcome to the bonus episode of The Promise! I'm Meribah Knight from Nashville Public Radio.

This project was reported and produced over the course of a year, so a lot's happened. We wanted to catch you up on the people who are still *in* Cayce. But in checking back, we tripped into some news, and we were reminded, yet again, of how difficult it will be to pull off this massive overhaul.

So let's get into it.

I think the obvious the place to begin is, well, right where we started.

VERNELL MCHENRY: And I am sitting and sipping on a pineapple spritzer. With the little umbreller. I do travel away from here. I just don't sit here. I be traveling away from here.

MK: That's Ms. Vernell. We met her in Episode one. We went to the grand opening of Barrett Manor, Cayce's first new building in more than half a century.

VM: my people already down here ... I'm glad I didn't overdress...

MK: It was a big deal. The building, with 70 apartments, mostly for seniors and the disabled, was the first big step in Cayce's redevelopment. On the tour, there was even a woman who broke down in tears, overwhelmed by how nice everything was. And, initially, Ms. Vernell had been excited about Barrett Manor, too.

VM: It's just so beautiful I just don't know how to act. I'm like a child in a new candy store.

MK: But after realizing there was no place to sit outside and connect with her neighbors, she began to worry that she'd feel shut in by the tiny apartment. Ultimately, she decided not to move into the new building.

Nearly a full year later, I caught up with Ms. Vernell on a warm sunny afternoon in early Spring. And, as usual, she was sitting outside. This time in front of Cayce's community center.

MK: Oh it's so nice out.

VM: Oh, it's beautiful. It is beautiful. So how you doing this beautiful day?

MK: I am good, yeah.

MK: I am just following up, like what's new?

VM: Well, new, I have a new home. ... Good morning ... alright

MK: She had to move into a new apartment, at least it was new for her.

VM: Well, I had to move into because we had a bad sewage problem under my building, under and next to my building. So I had to, alright how you doing? So I had to move out because they condemned the building.

MK: Old pipes broke and the leak was so bad that everyone in her block of apartments, 8 in total, had to to get out.

MK: Hi Ms. Gloria.

VM: I like your new hair girl.

MK: OK. So.

VM: It was the sewage. The sewage was, um, the odor and the bacteria or whatever was coming into my apartment. And so they condemned the building.

MK: And didn't they offer you a spot in the new building again?

VM: Yes, they offered me a spot in the new building. But I didn't want to take it. I still didn't want to take it. Not yet. [laughs].

MK: So after everything Ms. Vernell had been through, she ended up moving anyway. But she still declined a spot in Barrett Manor. Choosing instead, another old, dimly lit unit in the project. Across the street from her old apartment, but at least she kept her stoop that she was so concerned about.

MK: So even though you're across the street from your baby Quell, and Malika and LeTay and Fat Daddy, do you still see them?

VM: I see them every once in a while. Sometimes I'll come on out and come up and I'll see everybody standing out and we'll talk and hey and how ya doing? And all that.

...So do have people around me still that I know. I Ms. Connie, she lives about two doors up. I miss my old friends though. I am just gonna really tell you I miss my morning coffee with my friend Ms. Yolanda. We used to have our coffee every morning. But we'll get back to it. Once the weather break and I can get out more, then I'm gonna get started back. I am gonna get started back advocating for my neighborhood. I am gonna let you know. I am getting ready to get back on the road ok?

MK: As we sat outside, enjoying the weather, she pulled out a letter she'd gotten from the housing authority. Ms. Vernell is profoundly dyslexic so she often will ask people to read things to make sure she didn't miss any details.

VM: This is what I don't understand. OK.

MK: So when did you get this letter?

VM: I think I got it two days ago and I didn't realize that I had had it in the mailbox. Is it something I've got to fill out?

MK: Important resident notice. Dear Resident, please come to the management office at or before 4pm, bring this notice with you. It says you have to sign forms but it doesn't say which one....

MK: Please come to the office to sign the RAD packet before the date listed above. If these forms are not signed before this date your lease may not be renewed. We'd better go!

VM: OK.

MK: The deadline was today. With hours to spare, we went down to the management office, now in the new building, Barret Manor.

[GETTING OUT OF THE CAR]

MK: And Ms. Vernell went in to sign the papers she'd gotten that note about. It was interesting to be back in the building. I hadn't spent much time there since it opened nine months earlier. It seemed clean, still bright and shiny. Still lots of cameras. I was actually able to catch up with the woman who had started crying on that tour so many months back. Her name is Pauline Hunter.

PAULINE HUNTER: They new building has been like, like, it's going to sound crazy. But it's like Cinderella to me.

MK: Pauline ended up moving into an apartment on the 3rd floor with an amazing view of downtown. She decorated it with homey little trinkets from Goodwill, family photos and

inspirational quotes. She pays \$68 a month. And being that she was homeless, living in her car before she came to Cayce a few years ago, this all feels totally surreal.

PH: Like, you know, how the odds are against you. There is no hope. But now I feel like a princess. And, I can look over downtown Nashville. It's like the girl who was in the tower and couldn't ever get nowhere. But she never gave up. And at the end here you go, this is it, this is my castle. And it's my home.

MK: For Pauline, this is the best thing that's ever happened to her. Short of giving birth to her two children. Today, she looks out her window, she sees a city growing, transforming before her eyes. And for the first time, she feels like she's a part of that growth. Because she's making progress, too. And just like she did 9 months earlier, she gets really emotional.

PH: I wake up and I sometimes have to pinch myself to see if this is real. And this is real for me. This is so real. And I am so grateful. I am sorry I didn't mean to cry. Doggonit.

MK: It's clear that for Pauline, nothing but good things have come from moving into Barrett Manor. But many residents are on edge. Because there are some changes happening around Cayce that feel...heavy-handed. Downstairs in the management office, Ms. Vernell had spent more than a half hour filling out the 48-pages of paperwork. The stuff she'd gotten the letter about. She said an employee took her through the document, pointing out each section to sign, initial and date. They explained a handful of what was in it, but didn't read the document word for word.

Everyone is calling this paperwork the RAD packet. RAD is the acronym for Rental Assistance Demonstration, which is the federal program behind Cayce's \$600 million overhaul. And around the office, the packet was all the chatter. One woman was worried because every adult in the household had to sign it, and her son was away at college. She bought him a bus ticket home but was anxious he wouldn't make it by the deadline.

I got my hands on my own copy of the packet later that afternoon, since Ms. Vernell signed it but wasn't given a copy to take home. A troubling fact that I'll touch on a bit later.

At any rate, signing the packet was mandatory for *all* Cayce residents. Management had some meetings the week before. And put out flyers. It wasn't a new lease, per se. But a slew of materials that, among other things, included a revised set of House Rules. 42 in total. They included steeper fines for late rent, a ban on pets unless granted special permission. There are stricter limits on guests, cleaning rules, paint color requirements, drape color preferences, a ban on playing in the hallways. They'd also banned small wheeled vehicles. Which may seem like a throwaway item, but if you go to Cayce on a warm Friday evening, you'll see tons of kids getting rides on 4-wheelers. The older guys will drive around the perimeter of the courtyards for hours, giving them each a spin. It provides endless entertainment, not to mention a cool breeze on a steamy southern evening.

What's more, when I asked the housing authority if the new market rate renters would have to sign this packet, they told me *NO*. It was *only* for low-income tenants and they "hadn't tackled" the house rules for market rate folks. Not yet at least.

Now, everyone knows living in public housing means following some pretty strict rules. And I don't want to give the impression that market rate renters won't have to follow regulations of their own. But the fact is, no one knows what those are. And that in itself feels unfair, precarious, residents say.

Looking at this agreement. Something Big Man had said to Wolfgang, his wealthy neighbor, kept echoing in my mind. How the city might be just fine with squeezing out residents they'd rather not have around.

Big Man: Now, I mean, I can't say what they gonna try to do. They gonna try to weed 'em out. That's what I call it. You weed out the ones that's barely making it to the one's that's trying to make it.

MK: One item in the packet, separate from the house rules, is a note about a new policy, that allowed the housing authority to come inspect the inside and outside of your apartment...two times a year. It reads:

"Inspections are essential to help generate a "positive image", which is most often measured by the question we ask ourselves as we drive by other communities: "Would I want my family to live here?""

This language really struck me. Because it made it sound like people in Cayce have choice about where they decide to live, like they're driving by all these apartments. Weighing their options. But the fact is, for most people Cayce is hardly their first choice of housing. More often, it's their *only* choice. So *who* was asking this hypothetical question? "Would I want my family to live here?" Was it Cayce tenants? Or, was it the more affluent ones the housing authority so desperately needed to lure in.

During the days following the announcement of the RAD packet, I couldn't go anywhere in Cayce without hearing folks talking about it. Even Big Man brought it up when I visited.

MK: Hello!

BM: Hello.

MK: How's your day today?

BM: I don't really know. Been alright. It's been a good day. Been a good day. Been a good day, I guess.

MK: Big Man had recently been in a pretty bad car accident. Everyone was fine, but his truck was sort of beat up and had been in the shop for weeks.

MK: So Big Man you want to give me an update?

BM: On what?

MK: I don't know your life.

BM: No truck, truck trying to get these folks to fix my truck. They ain't doing that. Insurance didn't drop me. As far as anything else. They finna change over. They said they was changing over everything to what a new thing called RAD. Yeah. So, that's gonna be..might be a plus side might be a down side, I don't know.

I mean, it's strict to a certain point. Where they are basically telling you what they want you to do. How they want you to act. That's basically you telling me, I'm a child. You gotta tell me what to do, while I'm paying you money to live at. Huh.

MK: Big Man and his wife Narketta pay a little over \$650 a month for their 3-bedroom apartment in Cayce. Cheap by most standards, but a stretch for their family.

MK: I did think a lot about what you said when we talked to Wolfgang about they're weeding them out.

BM: Yeah, I mean, that's you could see that from the get go. I mean, that's how they say it, gentrification, gentrification, we're going to improve! Hold up. Improve how? Cause you see that's the whole point. You supposed to be helping out the neighborhood. That's not helping out the neighborhood.

MK: A couple weeks later I went to see Ms. Vernell. She said that on the weekly bus to Walmart, everyone was talking about the packet. It seemed that rumors were already spreading that market rate renters weren't going to have to sign it. Which in their minds, meant a double standard was emerging. Plus, no one knew when the new rules were going into effect. The housing authority never told them.

VERNELL MCHENRY: We did a survey on the bus, how the bus is running. Then I asked everybody how do they feel about this new change over. They are feeling good about us moving into something new and everything about that. But they are not OK with why is it different rules for us as a people than it's going to be for people that's getting ready to move in. And see to me that's discrimination.

MK: It had been two weeks since Ms. Vernell signed the agreement, and she still hadn't received a copy. So I brought over mine to show her.

MK: It's 48 pages, does this look about as thick as..

VM: Yes, it does. Yeah.

MK: Now these are the rules. These are the house rules do you see? Hold on.

VM: Yeah, I see. OK, RAD House Rules.

MK: This is the thing about the rent.

VM: Ok, so it's a dollar a day after the 5th. Or what is that. Or is that \$5 on the 6th.

MK: No, if the rent is not paid in full by the end of, by the 5th day of the month the landlord may collect a fee of \$5 on the 6th day and \$1 each additional day the rent remains unpaid during the month it's due. Not to exceed \$30 in a month no exceptions.

VM: This does not, what is the word. This does not...

MK: Apply.

VM: Apply to market rate. That's not right. I don't understand that. I don't understand how you gonna do that.

MK: So did they take you through and explain all of these.

VM: No, no. Like I said, all they did to us is they explained about the 5th of the month.

MK: Charging \$30 or even less for a late rent payment may not seem that onerous. And maybe market rate renters *will* face hefty late fees. But no one knows. And when all Ms. Vernell sees are these big letters in all caps that say *THIS DOES NOT APPLY TO MARKET RATE*. Well, it sounds to her, and others, like people are being treated differently based on their income. In addition to the rent, Ms. Vernell said management also explained rules about tidiness.

VM: Another one of the rules is, like I said, keeping your house clean. Is one of the biggest rules. The outside of your apartment.

MK: She's right. In the documents about inspection, it dictates how to keep your house. About regular mopping, about regularly washing your dishes, and how to store your food.

VM: It seems like they're dealing with children instead of adults. And if you're gonna treat us like children than most of them are gonna, what, act like children.

My thing is like this, if you're gonna have rules. ... There shouldn't be different rules because people have more money. You make more money than I do. We both gotta have a roof. And we are both looking to be each other's neighbor and get along with each other. That is the way I look at it. And my neighbors on the bus, you know, they want to discuss it. Their main concern is why is it going to be different?

MK: It comes down to a trust issue. The fact is, the housing authority has done little to earn anyone's trust around here. Cayce's been pushed aside, neglected by the powers that be for decades. This is the story of public housing in America. The crumbling apartments. The peeling paint. The poor ventilation. The moldy walls. The decrepit playgrounds. Cayce is littered with broken promises. Big and small.

And the newest promise is to build a harmonious community, where everyone will live as equals regardless of what's in their wallet.

Which is why I understood where Ms. Vernell was coming from. How could the the housing authority be so sure about how low-income tenants must behave, yet still be mulling over their requirements for market rate? That basic fact, to Ms. Vernell, signaled something profoundly unequal. A feeling of us and them.

I kept thinking back to what Housing Director Jim Harbison had said so candidly and thoughtfully in our last interview.

MK: So when you said things keep you up at night, what keeps you up at night?

JIM HARBISON: I think the main thing is will someone of higher income be happy with someone of middle income, be happy with someone of lower income living side-by-side. I believe it in my heart, but I worry.

MK: All these new rules, they seemed to be the direct manifestation of Harbison's worries. If they could just keep the low-income folks in line. If they could get them to conform, then maybe this big experiment would work. But It seemed like the beginning of an incredibly toxic dynamic. If the goal is to have people live side-by-side, as neighbors, regardless of income, shouldn't everyone be treated the same?

While I was with Big Man, talking about the new rules and such we went to go pick his son Man Man up from the bus stop. As we waited, I followed up with some of the other questions I'd gotten from listeners and friends. Specifically, what was happening with the house he'd been trying to get in Dickson.

BIG MAN: Well that right there is no more. I couldn't come up with the piece that I needed. I couldn't come up with the ends that I needed to do it. Because it hit it right along the time that we was, what you call it, in a bind. And we was trying to get stuff together for the kids and everything. Get them ready for. And that kind of fell through. I am not mad about it. I am always going to look for something. I am going to get my kids up out of here. I ain't studying that. I am going to get them away from around here. I am not going to let that bother me because I lost one. I am not going to let that bother me. I am not going to sit here like they say, 'You can't cry over spilled milk.' Well they don't know that was cocoa. Extra chocolate. So yes, I am going to kind of cry. But I mean, that's neither here nor there.

MK: The other thing I, and others, wondered about was the status of Big Man's business ideas. Before Wolfgang died, he was helping Big Man start a demolition hauling service. So what was the deal with that?

BM: Oh, that right there. I am gonna have to put that on the back burner. I mean everything is happening. It's like they say when it rains it pours. All my luck it was good, until...

MK: I knew what he meant.

Soon, Man Man's bus arrived ... (SOUND OF BUS PULLING UP)... and we headed back to the apartment. Taking up on Big Man's stoop. We needed to talk more about Wolfgang, about his death and Stephanie's murder. It had hung over us for months. A low dark cloud we'd both been trying to reckon with. The dichotomy of the man we thought we knew. And genuinely liked. The good neighbor, willing to help in whatever way he could, had stunned us all. Killed his wife and then himself.

I'd gone by their vacant house before seeing Big Man. Stood outside, stared at it for a while. It looked sort of sullen, cheerless. The shades were drawn. The garden unkempt, neglected.

Across the street, where the park used to be, Cayce's first mixed income building was fast under construction. I noticed the basketball courts, the ones Stephanie had been so worried about. How if they were torn down the kids would have no safe place to play ball. They were gone.

It turns out, Big Man, still shaken by the whole thing, had had his own moment with the house, too...

BM: I went to the store and I was coming back and I just stood there. And you know how you say, you can ask questions but you'll never get the answer. But, I mean I just asked. I asked for myself. Why?

MK: But wait, so you stood in from of the house and you asked him why he did it?

BM: Yeah. It ain't like I got an answer, but I mean it was just. It was something for me to get off my chest. That's basically all it was. It was like something I had to do, but I didn't understand why I did it. But it was just felt like it was something I had to do.

MK: We talked for a little while longer. About the new rules outlined in the RAD packet, and about the series in general. Big Man was happy with it, overall, but he was frank with me: He is where he is. And I am where I am. What did all this do? The months of interviews, sharing his life with a bunch of strangers on a podcast. After all this, how was anything around here really going to be different?

BM: I ain't going to lie to you. I ain't even gonna joke with you. I'm gonna quit beating around the bush. It's like, most of it, I done heard before.

MK: And I couldn't argue with him. This was his life, of course he'd heard it before. I just told him people were moved by his story. That hopefully listeners can relate to Cayce, in a new, deeper, more empathic way. That maybe, they better understand the high stakes of this project, and the people most at risk if it fails. In fact, some folks had reached out, they wanted to help get Big Man and the family out of Cayce. But, as usual, he seemed skeptical. A bunch of people offering assistance from afar, it didn't sit well with him. And what about the rest of the neighborhood? He said. Who was going to help them? Who was going to get them out?

And since this is the bonus episode, I'd be remiss if I didn't give updates on some of the other people you met in The Promise.

Officer Matthew Cammarn, who was assaulted in Cayce. He is still on the force. He recently found love, and got remarried. She's a police officer, too. A newly minted one. Fresh out of the academy.

Tonya Shannon, who grew up in Cayce and got some gone as fast as she could. She's also engaged. She visits her mom less these days, since she recently had gallbladder surgery. And she's a doting mother to her youngest son, who is still in high school and a standout on the track team.

Art Boissiere, who you met in Episode 6. The market rate tenant from John Henry Hale. He says things have calmed a bit around the neighborhood. But he's still unhappy with management. And says he and his wife are in the early stages of looking for a new home.

And Emilio Hughes, his neighbor. Well, Emilio has been fighting his diabetes, his health isn't all that great, all the while still staring at those damn fish. And yes, they are still alive.

MK: I wanted you to sign off.

BM: Oh, ok.

MK: Since this is the bonus episode I just wanted you to leave us with a final thought.

BM: Final thought. I would say God made a beautiful day. But naw. It's a great day for me. I got to express another part of my feelings. I hope you all enjoy this episode. This might be the last time, naw, this ain't going to be the last time you hear from Big Man. Trust me, this ain't the last time you gonna hear from Big Man. But, we gonna leave you all with this parting note. Do good by yourself before you do good by others. That way you can do good by others. As long as you do good by yourself. Thank you.

MK: Alright Big Man.

BM: We end this show with that note. I would tell you to roll 'em fat and smoke 'em slow, but no, we can't say that on there.

CREDITS:

The Promise is a production of Nashville Public Radio. Editing for this episode came from WPLN's Blake Farmer and Anita Bugg. Tony Gonzalez also helped. This episode was written and produced by me, Meribah Knight. Sound design by Tony Gonzalez.

Our music is by The Insider, Anenon, Gangi, and Fleslit, all found through the Free Music Archive. Go to our website, wpln.org, to see photos of Cayce and listen to previous episodes.

Thank you again for listening to The Promise. I had no idea how this podcast would be received. But it's been pretty remarkable. All of your emails and comments. Thank you so much. And while this may feel like the end, I want to tell you that we are not done telling the story of the James A Cayce homes. If you subscribe to this podcast, don't be surprised if you see the occasional story update. I hope we can do more episodes. Because, really, this story is just beginning.

Emilio Hughes: ... and they just survive. They're like me, you know, they just hang in there. They just hang in there.