Episode 1: A Tale Of Two Schools

By Meribah Knight

> **[ROARING APPLAUSE]**
> **JOHN F. KENNEDY:** Thank you very much. In a time of tension, it is more important than ever to unite this country.

Meribah Knight: On May 18, 1963, President John F. Kennedy arrived in Nashville, Tennessee, to deliver the commencement speech at Vanderbilt University, one of The South's most prestigious colleges. More than a hundred thousand people lined the city's streets to greet the president and watch his motorcade pass by.

It was Kennedy's first visit to Nashville since becoming president.

And The South was convulsing in racial unrest.

> **BULL CONNOR:** You can never whip these birds if you don't keep you and them separate.

MK: A week earlier, Bull Conner had unleashed fire hoses and dogs on demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama.

> **BC:** You've got to keep the whites and the blacks separate.

MK: You've probably seen the images.

Up until now Kennedy had done and said little on the topic of race relations. And he was widely criticized for it. But seeing what was happening in Birmingham had galvanized the president. A month earlier Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had penned his Letter From A Birmingham Jail. The president could avoid the issue no longer.

> **JFK:** This nation is now engaged in a continuing debate about the rights of a portion of its citizens.

MK: Just five days before this speech, 1,000 black high school and college students took to Nashville's streets in solidarity with Birmingham. But also, to protest segregation here. Still very much a part of this city.

Black protestors linked arms outside white-only restaurants and lunch counters. They marched. They were arrested. White youth threw rocks and bricks and bottles at them. Nashville's mayor implored the city to "not become Birmingham." But still, he refused to propose an ordinance barring segregation.

JFK: We live in an age of movement and change, both evolutionary and revolutionary...

MK: This was nine years after the U.S. Supreme Court desegregated public schools with Brown vs. The Board of Education. And Nashville's schools were still almost completely segregated.

It was time for all of that to change, Kennedy implored.

JFK: But the educated citizen knows how much more there is to know. He knows that knowledge is power, more so today than ever before.

MK: So why start with this speech? Because 57 years later in 2020, here and across the country, some schools — many schools — don't look all that different than the day Kennedy made this speech.

And that — *that* — is something worth talking about.

[SCENE CHANGE TO FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL]
[SCHOOL BUS STOPS]
UNIDENTIFIED STUDENT: Oh, I see Maria!
UNIDENTIFIED STUDENT: I miss y'all. This whole summer I wanted to see y'all again. I'm so happy…
RICKI GIBBS: What's up man, how ya feeling? Ready for fourth grade? Aight.

MK: It's August 5, 2019. The first day of school at Warner Elementary. And standing inside its front entrance is the school's principal Ricki Gibbs.

RG: Hey good morning Granny how are you today?
GRANNY: Fine how are you today?
RG: Aww everything is everything.

MK: He's wearing a freshly pressed navy-blue suit with a colorful bow tie.

RG: Hey, hey, good morning, good morning. Your hair is beautiful! Morning brother!

MK: In addition to a fresh coat of paint and new classroom furniture, this school year brings lots of new faces to Warner. Like 4th grade teacher Dr. Hughes.

NIKKI HUGHES: I see somebody I met on Friday. Grab you some breakfast Dinada. Grab you some breakfast, love.

MK: There are also the new students. The kindergarteners.

[MARIAN WOOD SINGING]

HEATHER WOOD: Okay, Marian, you're forgetting your backpack.
[MW CONTINUES SINGING]

MK: And there are the newly minted upperclassmen. The fourth graders. Like BJ.

BJ: Hey Ms. Knight.
MK: Nice haircut.
BJ: Thanks.
MK: How was your summer?
BJ: Well…it was, uh, a few down days and a whole bunch of up days.

MK: Even Principal Gibbs is new. Relatively. He took over as principal in the middle of last year.

RG: Boys and girls I want to welcome you to school on this beautiful Monday morning.

MK: And last year was a rough year for Warner. In fact, the last few years have been rough for Warner. It's lost so many students it's not even half full. Gibbs is the fourth principal in six years. A few months ago, it landed on Tennessee's list of lowest performing schools.

It's also one of the most racially and economically lop-sided schools in Nashville. Warner is almost all black *and* all poor.

But Principal Gibbs has plans to change Warner. Big plans.

RG: Brooks! Tell me something good man. Look at that haircut. Look Brooks! You're going the wrong way. You're in third grade now. Hold on, do you know which third grade teacher you have?

MK: You're listening to The Promise, a podcast from Nashville Public Radio. I'm Meribah Knight.

This season on The Promise, we take on one of the most contentious topics in America, what is deemed the "Great Equalizer," but more and more feels like the Great Divider*:* public education.

Since Kennedy spoke that day in Nashville, progress was made to integrate schools. But it was also quickly undone.

And today, cities across the country are grappling with that same uncomfortable truth.

The once-promising decree of Brown vs. The Board of Education has unraveled. And new battles over school integration are being waged in cities and states all over — Maryland, Virginia, Dallas, New York, and, yes, in Nashville, Tennessee.

SELENE BIGNALL: There is no other term to describe it but black and white, rich and poor.

MK: And to tell that story, we'll start here, at Warner Elementary in Nashville.

BJ: Oooh, K'imari, you lookin' fresh.

MK: In a neighborhood that's been at the center of a battle over equity and race for nearly 70 years. And a school that is fighting, against all odds, to succeed.

STUDENTS: I go to Warner. I go to Warner. I go to W!

MK: Episode 1, A Tale Of Two Schools

ANGELA MOORE: And the first poem we're going to learn that I wrote so many years ago is called "My Success," alright.

MK: As classes start, there's the usual first day icebreakers. Ms. Moore, who teaches fourth grade likes to get to know her students with a game of bingo.

AM: Who has black eyes? Who likes to read? When I was in fourth grade I was reading three books at a time. Who knows how to divide? Ooh my mathematicians, OK. Who likes to sing?

MK: Ms. Moore has been teaching at Warner for 28 years. Which means that every so often an update is necessary.

AM: Who likes hots chips?
STUDENTS: Oooh!
AM: I added that new. That wasn't always on my list, but I figured I'd get some people.

MK: Next door, in Dr. Hughes class, she gets right down to business.

NH: So listen, today we're going to talk about what it means to be responsible for your actions, and how what you do affects others**.**

MK: Then, in walks Warner's school counselor, Ms. Bignall.

SB: Good morning boys and girls.
STUDENTS: Good morning Ms. Bignall.
SB: Guys, it is so awesome for me to hear you say my name….

MK: Ms. Bignall is a petite woman. She wears cateye glasses, and has a penchant for tailored jackets and pencil skirts. And she is one of Warner's most beloved staff. A kid rarely sees her

without running up for hug. She just has something about her. No judgment, only love. That is Ms. Bignall.

SB: I am going to do one last thing, I am going to throw you a kiss I want you to throw me one back.
[KISSING SOUNDS]
SB: Thank you, have a fabulous day**.**

MK: Downstairs, in Ms. Milano's kindergarten class…

JULIA MILANO: Uhuhuh what we're going to do is stand on the blue line…

MK: students are starting to learn the rules of the road.
JM: And we're going to grab a breakfast. And then we're gonna elbow bump. Can you give me an elbow?

MK: The first day of school has such an energy to it. A new classroom. A new teacher. A clean slate. The chance to start fresh.

And that energy…that is what flows through Warner today. The promise of a new beginning.

SB: When I listen, I learn and grow. Say that for me, when I listen, I learn and grow.

MK: Warner is one of those schools — cavernous, stately — that looks *exactly* like a school. Like if I told you to close your eyes and draw a school, you'd draw Warner. The red brick, the tidy rows of windows, the stone-carved gothic name at the top. It's all there.

The school is more than a century old, tucked away on a leafy dead-end street. Built for upwards of 1,000 students. But today, when you walk through the hallways, the emptiness is obvious. Now, just over 200 students are enrolled at the school.

[FOOTSTEPS]

MK: And there's something else that's obvious, too. The neighborhood has gentrified a lot in recent years. Right around the school, most of the residents are now white. But most all Warner's students are black.

[STUDENT READING ALOUD]

MK: In Dr. Hughes room there isn't a single white student. In Ms. Moore's class, there's just two.

On paper, these are the numbers: At the start of the 2019 school year Warner is hovering around 90% black. And 92% of those kids live in poverty. Almost all the students come from the

James Cayce Homes, a public housing complex about a half mile from the school. A place most white folks in the neighborhood would rather avoid, and do.

It's where we spent the first season of this podcast.

In Cayce, the median family income is $12,128 a year.

But just about a mile up the road from the school, where the median income is $96,295 a year, there's another public elementary named Lockeland.

[LOCKLANDE STUDENTS RECITE THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE]

At Lockeland, it's like Warner on Opposite Day. Even though they both pull kids from the same neighborhood and much of the same zone. Lockeland is 90% white. Just 3% of its students live in poverty. And the school is brimming with kids.

STUDENT VIDEO: Have a great day, Lockeland!

MK: Lockeland has everything Warner doesn't.

First, there's who wants to go to the school. Lockeland has a long waitlist to get in. Warner has no waitlist. Warner is begging for kids.

Then there's the extra money. Last year Lockeland's PTO spent $101,000. It was enough to hire additional part-time teachers, hold events and buy extra materials for staff.

Warner has no PTO.

There's the parent engagement. Lockeland is filled with parent volunteers. On the school's website it boasts they're "all over the building."

Warner rarely, if ever, has parent volunteers. Most of the kids' parents are too busy working or caring for siblings. Many are immigrants from The Congo, Rwanda, Somalia — refugees actually — so the language barrier is tough.

Then there's the economics. At Lockeland, just 9 kids qualify for free breakfast and lunch.

At Warner, more than 200 students do — that's pretty much the entire school. And about a fifth of the kids eat dinner there, too, at a free after school program.

And, lastly, the academics. Lockeland's students regularly place in the top 5% on state tests.

Warner, on the other hand, is in the *bottom* 5%.

When I compared these two schools, I couldn't wrap my head around it. I'm a white woman and a mother. And I've reported closely in this neighborhood for a few years now. It's split 60/40 white to black residents. So, I wondered how, and so close together, do you end up with two schools that look like this?

> **BRANDY FENDERSON:** Everyone's going about their business like it's — it's OK that we have an almost entirely white school within a mile and a half of an almost entirely black school.
> **WILLIE SIMS:** It's just weirdly weird and it ain't right. It just ain't right.
> **SB:** So what are we going to do to desegregate our neighborhood schools?
> **HW:** I can't… believe we're just doing this again.
> **RG:** Our schools are a mile apart. Warner shouldn't be 100% Black and Lockeland shouldn't be 100 percent white. It don't make sense.

MK: Warner's principal, Ricki Gibbs, is the last voice in there.

> **RG:** Hey, Good morning, good morning, good morning!

MK: Like I said before, Principal Gibbs is sort of new at Warner. He took over in the middle of the 2018 school year when the previous principal retired. An abrupt change for a school that was already struggling to find its footing. Warner had just received the state's dreaded label of *"priority status*."

> **RG:** We say priority is lowest 5% in the state. I argue that Warner is probably in the bottom 1 to 2% in the state. When I took over Warner we were 4.6% proficient in reading and 2.3% proficient in math. And those numbers are alarming to say the least because I know our boys and girls can do better.

MK: And it's worth digging into these numbers a bit. Because the school is so under-enrolled, with just over 200 students, and the test Ricki is talking about is only given the third and fourth graders. So when he says students were just 4.6% proficient in reading, that means only *six* students. And in math, it was just *three*.

When Gibbs took the job at Warner, he knew the school was in crisis. He knew it was low-performing. He knew most students were poor. But that didn't faze him.

> **RG:** To say, yeah economics plays a huge role in the success of students. But if you give me the right environment, with a group of highly skilled, highly trained professionals, we can still make magic happen for our boys and girls.

MK: The fact is, low odds have only pushed Gibbs harder. He's from a rough neighborhood in Miami, Liberty City. He was raised by a single mom who never made more than $20,000 a year. And he went to a school that looked a lot like Warner. But now he's here. He likes to say he's been to the mountaintop; he knows the power of education. He considers himself living

proof—a kid from Liberty City with a master's and a doctorate degree. So this kind of uphill battle is all very familiar to him.

But what is less familiar, is just how Warner ended up looking like it does: so racially isolated in a neighborhood that's now a little more than half white.

> **RG:** How does that happen? How does a community just isolate one subgroup into one school when the community doesn't look like that?
> **MK:** So I mean you ask a question like 'How does that happen?' Well, how do you think it happened?
> **RG:** Look I — I've thought about it — thought about it multiple times, and obviously there's choices that have been made one way or another to have it fall that way. I don't know if it's… if it's purposeful or just thinking about comfort levels or…. And like I will tell anyone, understanding how it happened is one thing, but I can't dwell on that because that's, that's not my issue.

MK: Gibbs' job, as he sees it, isn't to worry about the disparities between Warner and a school like Lockeland…or the others in the neighborhood that are starting to look a lot like Lockeland more and more. His job is to turn Warner around.

To get it off the state's priority list and to make it a school that will appeal to all families — of all races, of all income levels.

> **RG:** My issue is: How do we correct the issue? How do we move forward? If we have a great product that's creating great results, that we have folks excited about what's happening at our school…people will come.

MK: And recruiting is critical for the school, because if they can't up enrollment, Warner's future is precarious: closure, merger, charter takeover…it's unclear. But the bottom line is they need more students.

The school's lifeline is a bunch of federal money to transform it into an arts magnet school—a school focused on arts that can pull students from across the district. It's a much-needed infusion of cash after years of diminishing resources at Warner.

Principal Gibbs will use it to build up Warner's arts program. To pump up the school so it can recruit those families who have, in the past, opted out of Warner.

And let's not beat around this bush. What I mean is… white families.

But here, in East Nashville, this is a fraught endeavor. Gentrification has remade this neighborhood…into one where wealth and poverty, black and white, live side-by-side, but under very different circumstances. And that includes sending their children to different schools.

After the break, we'll meet a mother, a white mother, who suddenly begins to notice this divide. And once she does, it's impossible to ignore.

[BREAK]
JFK: Equally important, though often not discussed is the citizens' responsibility…

MK: That speech Kennedy gave at Vanderbilt in 1963, it wasn't just a thinly veiled appeal for civil rights. It was far more subversive. On that day, in front of 33,000 people, at this tony, white, elite university in the South, Kennedy urged Vanderbilt's new graduates to realize their privilege.

JFK: I speak to you today, therefore not of your rights as Americans, but of your responsibilities.

MK: While he never directly mentions race. This wasn't a subtle move for the president. Vanderbilt itself was still segregated. The undergraduate school wouldn't admit its first Black student for another year.

But it was also the beginning of something much larger. Just 24 days later, he'd announce the civil rights bill he'd never live to see pass.

JFK: Equality of opportunity does not mean equality of responsibility. All Americans must be responsible citizens. But some must be more responsible than others. For are those to whom much is given, much is required.

MK: So, what would they do? This privileged class. These educated, advantaged, white youth. Poised for opportunity, success.

JFK: You must decide, as Goethe put it, whether you will be an anvil or a hammer.

MK: 57 years later this is a question still worth asking, specifically to white Americans. To those whom much is given, who will stand up and accept their responsibility?

HW: Hey do you want me to clean up your face and hands so you can run around a play a little more?

MK: Heather and Chris Wood, a white couple, live about a mile and a half from Warner. In a house that can only be described as one filled with a tornado of kid energy.

[MASHING PIANO KEYS]

MK: When the Woods moved here seven years ago, they had only one child, Oscar. And life was much quieter. Then came Marian.

[MARIAN SPEAKING]

Then little Dougie.

[DOUGIE CRYING]

They'd come to Nashville from San Francisco when Chris's law firm opened an office here. And East Nashville, a dense, walkable neighborhood, seemed like the perfect spot for them.

Plus, Chris had spent his teen years in Nashville and knew the city well.

HW: So he was like East Nashville is great you're gonna love it.

Coming from San Francisco, Heather wanted to live in a diverse neighborhood. Chris, assured her, East Nashville had what she was looking for.

HW: It's a pretty diverse area. Not uber multicultural, world-culture wise but at least there's like, you know, a bunch of white people, a bunch of black people, and the kids all go to school together. I mean it's kind of what we, you know, what we thought.

MK: When Oscar was ready for pre-school, they found an integrated, city-run program close by that they loved. When it was time to send him to kindergarten, Heather had heard only good things about Lockeland.

HW: Everyone I have ever talked to has loved it.

MK: Lockeland was a magnet school with a lottery to get in. But the Woods lived in the priority zone for the lottery. So they had good chance of getting Oscar a spot.

Heather had considered looking into a traditional zoned neighborhood school—but theirs, Warner, had such low test scores she never even toured it. On the playground and in parent social circles, the sense Heather got was that Lockeland was considered the *only* public option for kids in the neighborhood. It was Lockeland or bust.

HW: You know I just — the stuff that I heard at that time was just kind of like 'Eh, you know you're in the priority zone for Lockeland, just just do that.' And Chris was like, 'I really want to walk my kids to school, is that so wrong?' And I was like, 'No it's not.'
Chris Wood: I think parents have a lot of anxiety about schools and where they're gonna send their kids to school. And if you move to — East Nashville's a great neighborhood and you've got a school literally down the street which everyone wants to send their kids to, great test scores, great teachers. You know, I mean it's a great school. And you can walk you kids to school every day, which I think is like you know the American dream for lots of people.

MK: In the end, Oscar got into Lockeland. And with two other kids in line, they now had sibling passes to one of Tennessee's best public elementary schools.

> **HW:** So Oscar goes to Lockeland, and he loves it. But he was there about a week before he said 'Where are all the brown people? It's all pink people here.'

MK: She couldn't shake his comment.

When Lockeland Elementary opened in 2004, it was almost evenly split—48% of the students were white, 49% were Black.

But as the neighborhood began to gentrify, and Lockeland built up its reputation, white families flocked and Black families began to disappear.

One big factor, it seemed, was that Lockeland didn't have buses for students. As a magnet school it didn't need to offer transportation. And this made it hard for families, like those low-income ones, mostly families of color, living in public housing: those who had a good chance of getting into the school, but didn't have the means to get there.

But the race issue, for many of Lockeland's white families, doesn't really register.

> **CW:** I think it's easy to stop thinking about it because like 'What? You've got everything you need right?'

MK: Now, looking back, Chris was seeing things differently. Like their first tour of Lockeland.

> **CW:** In retrospect, it was pretty telling, but like we asked like what the biggest challenges were at the school. And the answer from the person who was giving the tour was keeping our test scores up.
> **HW:** That was the number one challenge.

MK: Remember, Lockeland is regularly in the top 5% of the state when it comes to tests.

> **CW:** And then I asked what they did for kids that were struggling and there wasn't really a good answer to that either. And that also was weird…. But apparently, it wasn't weird enough to stop us from sending him there.

MK: Disturbed by Oscar's comments and what Heather noticed when she walked the hallways of Lockeland, this time she decided to visit Warner, their zoned neighborhood school. Most of Oscar's pre-school class had splintered by race when they left for kindergarten—with white kids headed one cluster of schools and Black kids headed to another. And she'd always been struck by the kids' divergent paths.

HW: I opened up the door of the kindergarten to say hi to Oscar's friend from pre-K and it was an all-black classroom and then I drove over to Lockeland to read to his all-white kindergarten classroom. I remember physically feeling nauseous in my stomach. I remember feeling like, 'Oh my god, like are we going to do this again? Like another generation? We're gonna do it again? No… I can't.'

HW: You can call this all kinds of different things, but like if a full kindergarten class of all African-American kids and a full kindergarten class of all white kids isn't segregation, what is it? Like what? And so that was sort of the beginning of it for me.

MK: This season on The Promise.

Willie Sims: If, black people could do something about the way America is, and the way things are, and the way we've been done, or the way that it goes, it would be changed. Evidently this is a white people issue.
Ellen White: We just wanted to be able to live the American life, as we'd been told it was supposed to be.
HW: There is no segregation fairy. Like, we're doing it now. And I feel like somebody has to take far-reaching, inconvenient action to reverse that trajectory.

MK: The Promise is written and produced by me, Meribah Knight. Editing by Emily Siner and Anita Bugg. Special thanks to Sam Zern, the intrepid intern for this podcast, and its fact-checker. Thank you to Tony Gonzalez, Samantha Max, Sergio Martinez-Beltran and Damon Mitchell for additional editing. Our advisor on The Promise is Savala Nolan Trepczynski.

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Find photos and more on how we reported this story at thepromise.wpln.org

This is Nashville Public Radio.

WARNER STUDENT: Shout out to all the teachers and fourth grade and the whole school building of Warner Arts Magnet School.