

**The Promise S2**  
**Episode 2: The Nashville Way**  
**By Meribah Knight**

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**MERIBAH KNIGHT:** Previously on The Promise...

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

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

**HEATHER WOOD:** 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.

**Richard Dinkins:** Nashville, some people are in denial about how vicious it was.

**John Kasper:** I say integration can be reversed it can be stopped anywhere.

**RD:** Nashville didn't just say, OK. Desegregation was fought here. A school was bombed.

**CANZADA HAWKINS:** I was spat on, N this, N that.

**RD:** America is not comfortable addressing race. I mean really addressing it.

**ELLEN WHITE:** We just wanted to be able to live the American life.

**MK:** While I was reporting this story, I got my hands on a copy of a grant proposal that Nashville schools sent to Washington D.C. a few years ago—in 2017. They wanted millions to recruit more white families to Warner Elementary, by turning it into a magnet school.

I hadn't made it past the first page when I saw this:

*"MNPS has a rich and proud history of school desegregation dating back to 1957, the same year as the Brown v. Board of Education decision."*

I nearly choked on my coffee.

For one, they didn't even have the year right. Brown v. Board was decided in 1954. Not 1957. And even more egregious, they'd rewritten history to make it seem as though Nashville had integrated its schools right away...and eagerly.

The district couldn't be more wrong. And, frankly most of the city seems to have forgotten all this too. But then again, it's the victors who write history isn't it?

Well, let's tell the real story of desegregation in Nashville—and in this country. Because the truth is, Nashville's leaders fought against integration at every turn.

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 has been deemed as the *Great Equalizer*...but more and more feels like the *Great Divider*...Public education.

In this episode, we're going back to the early days of this battle for racial equity in the classroom. Back to the time...a time *not that long ago*...when school desegregation literally blew this city apart.

## Episode 2: The Nashville Way

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling on Brown v. Board of Education established that segregated schools violated the U.S. Constitution. Giving way to the dismantling of segregated classrooms. Black families across the country *believed* they would finally have access to equal education.

But in truth, the high court's decision was hardly the end of racially divided classrooms.

In Nashville, more than a year later, nothing had changed. The schools were just as segregated as they were the day the court's gavel cracked.

That is, until one man stood up, and decided to *make* it change.

On September 6, 1955, A.Z. Kelley, a self-employed barber, walked his 14-year-old son, Robert, to the neighborhood high school: East Nashville High.

But because Robert was black and the school was white, A.Z. and his son were turned away, forced to walk home empty-handed in the late summer heat. Nashville's director of schools had given white principals explicit instructions not to admit any black students to their schools.

It was clear, the city wasn't going to integrate its schools willfully. But A.Z. was tired of his children having to commute across town for school—passing a white high school and a white elementary school on the way. He was tired of them getting second-hand books, already marked up by white students. Tired of classrooms so poorly lit children couldn't work on cloudy days. Tired of his children's teachers making half of what their white colleagues made. Tired of it all.

This was not simply a moral issue. This was about equity. As long as black and white children were separate, nothing would ever be equal. And his black children deserved better.

**CANZADA HAWKINS:** There were four of us. Two boys, two girls.

**ELLEN WHITE:** Robert was the oldest. I was the second, A.Z. Jr. was the third and Canzada's the baby.

**MK:** Those are the daughters' of A.Z. Kelley, Ellen and Canzada. They are much older now, in their 60s and 70s. But they remember this time well...Segregation and the fight to dismantle it shaped their youth.

A.Z. was an active member of the NAACP's local chapter.

And before walking Robert to school that day, he'd been meeting with two prominent black attorneys there: Z. Alexander Looby, a brilliant legal mind from the West Indies, and his protégé, a young bellicose lawyer from Knoxville named Avon Williams.

Which is how Robert, A.Z.'s eldest son, came to be the named plaintiff in Nashville's desegregation lawsuit.

*Robert Kelley vs. Board of Education.*

22 other families joined the case—all from the same mostly black neighborhood of East Nashville. But it was A.Z. who stepped out as the public face of this lawsuit and bravely placed his son at the top of the complaint, filed September 23, 1955.

And the fact that all these families lived in East Nashville—just two miles from the Tennessee state capitol—should not go unnoticed.

Warner is in East Nashville, Lockeland Elementary too.

The very same neighborhood wrestling with re-segregated schools today, is the same neighborhood that spawned Nashville's fight over it...almost 70 years ago.

This case divided Nashville. It led to a school being bombed. And it betrays Nashville's racist past—a city that resisted integration every step of the way.

**CH:** Well we always bless our food before we eat. So I am going to let my sister do that. Because she's the elder.

**EW:** Dear Lord. We thank you again for another day. We thank you for the opportunity to be with family and friends. We thank you dear god for the food to nourish our bodies in Jesus name we pray. Amen.

**Group:** Amen.

**EW:** Alright.

**MK:** Today, sixty-five years later, we're sitting around Canzada's kitchen table, eating a lunch of sweet tea and turkey sandwiches. It's just before Thanksgiving and Canzada already has her 10-foot flocked Christmas tree set up and decorated. Her sister Ellen is here, too. They're the last living of the Kelley children. Robert died of stomach cancer in 2005.

Our conversation feels like an important reminder. Because America is reckoning, yet again, with our original sin. How we've plundered black and brown people since the founding of this country. How the pain and horror of the Civil Rights Movement was not, as many white Americans like to tell ourselves, so long ago...it is still very much alive. And that just like in policing and the criminal justice system, the foundation of education sits squarely, and securely, on racial inequality.

Segregation was an architecture. And to pull it apart brick by brick was a grueling endeavor. White families derailed the process. City officials worked mightily to resist it. And black families, like the Kelley's, sacrificed for it.

As Ellen recounts, the Kelley family refused to accept the status quo.

**EW:** We just wanted to be able to lead the American life, as we'd been told it was supposed to be.

**MK:** When the lawsuit was filed, just a few weeks into the school year, life for A.Z. changed instantly.

He was a known quantity now...to white Nashville...as was his son. And A.Z.'s popular downtown barbershop was immediately targeted.

**CH:** Every weekend. His barber shop windows would always be bricked. Someone would throw a brick. He would have to replace a window every weekend.

**MK:** This went on for years. But A.Z. never wavered. He was a determined man. He was also a man of many skills...a barber...a navy man...a mortician...a dry cleaner. Dapper, lean and handsome, he had a fondness for sharp suits and pocket squares.

And rather than do anything rash, he simply kept quiet, kept replacing windows and stayed the course. Shielding his younger children from the battle he and their brother were fighting on their behalf.

**EW:** What I remember most was dad was gone a lot. Because he was always at the NAACP office. Or meeting with the attorneys and all.

**CH:** Daddy never came home and talked about this case to us. Never. We never knew what was going on. Least, At least I didn't. OK.

**EW:** No, no, I didn't either.

**CH:** He never talked about it because I do believe he was trying to protect us. I was twenty-two, twenty-three years old when I found out what my daddy did. I was teaching school. And the school secretary for whatever reason had this book on her desk, it had Kelley vs. Board of Ed. And I looked at it and I said, 'Kelley vs. Board of Ed? And I kept reading. And it was in-depth of what my father had done. That's when I found out what my daddy had done.

**MK:** As I did more research into this case and story, I realized how present it was...how much it colored what is happening right now. These battles are not over. Not when schools like Warner and Lockeland exist—so racially isolated they look almost no different than schools did when the Kelley's filed their lawsuit.

I knew I didn't have a chance of really understanding this case and its scope, unless I saw it for myself.

**MK:** OK, we are headed to Georgia. Gotta buckle up.

**[SOUND OF ENGINE TURNING ON AND THE BYRDS...1,2,3,4...]**

**MK:** A four-hour drive from Nashville, at The National Archives in Morrow Georgia, is where the Kelley case file is now held

**MK:** Should I sign here?

**ARCHIVIST:** Yes, you can sign here. How can I help you today?

It's 27 boxes. Or, in archivist lingo, 29 cubic feet. Meaning if you put all the papers on a shelf, it would span *that far*.

I'm met by Ansley Erikson, an assistant professor of education and history at Columbia Teachers College.

**MK:** Hi.

**ANSLEY ERIKSON:** How are you?

**MK:** Good it's so nice to meet you.

**AE:** You're there with...

**MK:** Of course I am. I am always rolling. (laughs)

**AE:** Understood.

**MK:** Erickson was gracious enough to come all the way from New York to meet me here. And it's because she knows these archives better than anyone, short of the lawyers and the judges.

**AE:** Frequently there are 10,000-page transcripts. So, there is a lot of paper here.

**MK:** Erickson is a willowy, soft-spoken woman, with an endearing sense of calm about her. She wrote a book called *Making the Unequal Metropolis*.

In it, Erickson argues that Nashville's desegregation battle held great potential. But as black families and their legal counsel fought the city on integration—and won. Nashville always—its mayor, its police, its businesses, and its schools—favored white families over black ones. When I first came across Erickson's book, the title alone struck me...it was so...direct...so boldly honest. I'd always thought of Nashville as one of the more progressive southern cities—the moderate among immoderates. It likes to think of itself as such. But after reading, I had a very different opinion. While Nashville wasn't Birmingham or Little Rock...it fought integration just like all the others. In later years, the city would vigorously undermine and fight against integration. But in those first years after Brown v Board, as if it were stunned, Nashville simply refused to budge. It did little as possible. As slowly as possible. With as few resources as possible.

As Erickson explains, after A.Z. and the plaintiffs filed the lawsuit in 1955, the city took more than a year to come up with a plan for school desegregation.

**AE: Nashville was a champion of gradualism in desegregation.**

**MK:** The city would begin with just first grade in 1957.

**AE: Which would mean that only a 12th of the whole system was going to in any way attended desegregated school at maximum in 1957 and that everybody who was older than six in 1957 would still have a fully segregated education.**

The NAACP lawyers, Z. Alexander Looby and Avon Williams, pushed back against this. Filing motions and arguing at hearings that taking 12 years to integrate schools was not the "deliberate speed" the Supreme Court outlined in its ruling on the Brown case.

By this time, though, white supremacist organizers had descended on Nashville. One, in particular, had spent the preceding months in a jail cell in Clinton Tennessee.

**NEWS REEL CLIP: The most talked about man in Clinton is John Kasper of Washington D.C.**

**MK:** Frederick John Kasper incited such violence over the desegregation of Clinton high school that it forced the National Guard to descend on the small town. He was jailed by a federal judge for continuing to incite violence in Clinton, even after a restraining order was issued.

When Kasper was released, he traveled to Nashville to do the same here.

**JOHN KASPER: I say integration can be reversed. It can be stopped anywhere. Provided an attack is made at every single level. <<lower to go underneath my narration>>**

**MK:** Kasper was a protégé of the poet Ezra Pound, known more for being a fascist and an anti-Semite than a racist. But Kasper had decided to carve out his own niche.

Since coming to Nashville he'd been holding near daily rallies. Anywhere from 350 to 1,000 people were showing up—among them were the Tennessee White Citizens Council and the Ku Klux Klan.

Some came from outside Nashville. But the vast majority were parents of school children.

In the weeks leading up to the first day of school, they'd threatened principals and district officials. Telephoning them personally to say they'd set fire to their homes—and in at least one instance they tried. They promised violence and school bombings if the district followed through with its plan.

"Blood will run in the streets of Nashville," Kasper told crowds.

**JK: It has got to be pressure down here which is more or less like a lit stick of dynamite.**

**MK:** In the meantime, the city's attorneys were working just as diligently, though more quietly, on official ways for white families to avoid integration.

Erickson explains.

**AE: Only black people who lived inside a zone for a historically segregated white school could apply to go to that historically segregated white school. And only presumably white people who lived inside the zone of a historically segregated black school could apply to go to that school.**

**MK:** In other words, only slivers of the city—those which already had black and white families living near one another—were even eligible to integrate.

On top of that, parents were given the option to opt-out. And white parents did. All of them.

As they wrestled with a plan, the city's officials and school board members spoke disparagingly of desegregation. Dismissing it as a "new interpretation" of the constitution. A situation that needed to be managed, grudgingly.

Inevitably, though, on Sept. 9, 1957, the first day of school finally arrived.

The exceptions and the gerrymandering had whittled the number of children down to a handful of courageous black first graders.

**AE: Ultimately on the first day of school in September of 1957, only about 19 black children end up going to historically segregated white schools.**

**MK:** Out of 37,000 students in the district, it had come to this. Just 19 black children.

Inside one of the cases evidence boxes

**[SOUND OF RUSTLING PAPERS]**

**MK:** I find dozen of photographs documenting this vigorous and violent resistance to desegregation. Looby and Williams had entered them into evidence as proof of just how hostile it got here.

In one, a group of Ku Klux Klan members, donning robes and hoods, burn a cross outside a Nashville elementary school. In another, an angry white mob holds up a sign, “keep our white schools white.” In many pictures, at the center of the group, is Kasper. Wearing a tan suit, a tie and his signature Texas-style hat.

In another folder I find affidavits written by white school administrators who witnessed the mobs outside, and inside, their school buildings on that first day of school.

***Leonard E Gamble, Principal of Buena Vista Elementary:*** *There were two groups of people gathered at the entrances to my school. At 8:05 a.m. when school was to begin, these numbers had arisen to approximately 200 adults and children collectively. Who were listening to Rev. Fred Stroud speak. Rev. Stroud was saying to parents, “For God’s sake, do not let your children go into that school.”*

***Mary Brent, Principal of Glenn Elementary.*** *Children who were accompanied by parents were all stopped, and the parents were urged not to enter the building. About 11 a.m. I would estimate the crowd had reached approximately 400 in number, and its temper was definite[sic] tense and highly emotional.*

***Jack Stanfill, Principal of Caldwell Elementary.*** *On Monday huge crowds of agitators forced themselves into the halls of the school and would not leave when requested to do so by the police. They moved up and down the lower hall and went to each room and told the children that a negro was enrolled in the school and that they should leave the school. I also received numerous telephone calls in the office in which vulgar and abusive language were used. Two of the calls made threats if we did not remove the negro children from the school that the building would be bombed.*

**MK:** In the early morning hours on Sept. 10, 1957, after enrolling a single black first grader, Hattie Cotton Elementary was bombed. The school was laden with enough dynamite to blast out every window and ravage the school’s library and classrooms—splintered desks and broken chalkboards littered the scene. A front-page New York Times article reported that “mothers and

teachers wept as they viewed the debris.” And Police chief Douglas Hosse said “there was no question” that the blast was connected with the racial strife over the integration of Nashville schools.

Joe Casey was a police patrolman at the time. And he could see Hattie Cotton from his front porch. His children attended the school. In an oral history gathered by the Nashville Public Library, Casey described just returning home from his late shift when he heard something.

**JOE CASEY: I heard this loud boom, knocked me halfway across the room, and knew something bad had happened.**

**IN: What did you see when you got there?**

**JC: Well, it blowed a whole one side of the school out. I mean, it just blowed it out. The person that done that, we believe it was a white person, his name was Kasper.**

**MK:** He’d been at the school the morning before. Wearing his suit and wide-brimmed hat. A button pinned to his left lapel read: “Keep our white schools white.”

In first-hand accounts, officials quickly pointed the finger at Kasper.

***W.H. Oliver, Assistant Superintendent:** During the months of July and August an effort was made to inflame and excite the parents of Nashville school children and the people of Nashville in general, which efforts were largely led by outside agitators, centering in the person of Frederick John Kasper.*

**MK:** Looking through this case file, it may be easy to blame Kasper for Nashville’s rage. But that would be misdirected. This was a collective effort. Kasper was simply stoking the flames of a fire that was already burning in the city.

In the end, Kasper was never formally charged with the bombing. And it remains unsolved.

In 1957, that first year, just 11 black students finished out the year in integrated schools. And that lone black first grader who’d enrolled at Hattie Cotton, she never returned to the school.

The next year, court hearings resumed on the Kelley case.

On the witness stand, the new director of schools, William Oliver—the same man who had claimed “outside agitators” were responsible for Nashville’s rage—made his position clear.

“The majority of the people in Nashville would prefer that white children and negro children attend school separately,” he told Z. Alexander Looby in cross examination. “Frankly,” he added, “I don’t think we are gaining anything educationally by putting them together. No, sir.”

When Looby followed up by asking if he thought taking 12 years to integrate schools would be better for students than doing it all at once, Oliver compared it to being bit by a rabid dog.

“I think I can make myself clear by saying this,” he told Looby. “One time I came in contact with a rabid dog, and I had to take rabies shots. It would have been possible to give me the whole dose at one time, but the reaction to the rabies vaccine is something, so it was given to me in fourteen installments. And I think this is somewhat the same situation”

As the years wore on, the numbers of black students integrated into white schools began to inch up. But progress was glacial. And in 1963 tensions came to a boiling point. The south erupted in racial unrest. In Birmingham, Alabama, Bull Conner used attack dogs and high-pressure firehoses on black protestors.

Days later, in Nashville, 1,000 black students took to the city’s streets. White youth threw rocks and bricks at them.

“Unless some concrete steps are taken to end segregation here,” one black leader said, the protests would continue.

It was the same week that President John F Kennedy visited the city to speak at Vanderbilt University. The one we talked about in the first episode.

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

**MK:** Less than a month later. He'd address the country on civil rights...In a much bolder fashion. Framing it as a moral issue that the country was obligated to correct.

**JFK: If an American, because his skin is dark cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available...**

**MK:** Still though, the integration of Nashville's schools was barely progressing. When JFK visited, just 7 historically white schools had black children enrolled.

By 1969, more than a decade after Brown, nine out of 10 black students in Nashville still attended all black high schools.

So the plaintiff's attorneys headed back to court for yet another round of hearings.

That's coming up, right after the break.

**[BREAK]**

**MK:** In 1970, when hearings continued in the Kelley case, the plaintiff's lawyer, Avon Williams, argued a bold new strategy for integration. One that would roil and upend this city all over again.

Williams argued before the court that busing students around the district—black kids to white schools and white kids to black schools—was Nashville's best chance at school integration.

Maybe it's only chance.

But the opposition to school integration had gotten so intense, the courtroom doors had to be locked. More than two dozen federal marshals manned every entrance. Meanwhile, more than 1,000 white people protested outside the courtroom, spilling into the street and blocking traffic on Broadway, the city's main thoroughfare.

Williams was undeterred. To prove his case for busing, he called black residents to the stand, questioning them about the difficulty of accessing bank loans. He entered into evidence things

like real estate classifieds...that boasted access to majority white schools. All this revealed the depth of segregation's roots, Erickson says.

**AE: They weren't only saying this is about schools, they were saying this is about schools as one part of a very broad network of policy choices that have really constrained the lives of black people in Nashville.**

**MK:** When the hearings concluded, Williams' strategy worked. The court found Nashville had failed to make an honest effort at desegregation. The court ordered the city to start busing.

But while the jeering mobs were no longer blocking school doors, other obstacles remained.

Nashville's mayor, Beverly Briley, was furious. Calling the judge's decision "nonsensical" and "the worst busing order in the country."

A councilman urged Briley to delay the opening of school until the community could "get its sovereignty back."

And Mayor Briley did write a letter to schools' chief, Elbert Brooks, asking for a delay.

But Brooks didn't comply. School would go ahead as scheduled.

And in 1971, "cross-town busing" began in Nashville.

But looking for yet another avenue of resistance, the school board decided to play politics. It staggered school start times, some as early as 7am and some as late as 10am...forcing many children to arrive home after dark. The board claimed it needed more than 80 new buses to execute this new plan and didn't have the money to buy them...Except they did.

But that didn't matter, they wanted to create a problem where there wasn't one. So the board asked the Nashville city council and the Mayor for that money, knowing full well they'd say no.

In the judge's ruling, which was published IN FULL, taking up an entire page in the Tennessean newspaper, he scolded the school board, the city council and the mayor for their antics. Outing them for conspiring to make desegregation look impossible. He went as far as adding the mayor and the city council as defendants on the case and issued a restraining order against them for their interference.

Frankly, the Judge was pissed. Not only had these officials manipulated the system for purely selfish reasons...they used innocent children in the process. In his opinion, the judge wrote: "The health, safety and security of the children involved have been compromised by their exposure to risks and dangers."

He ordered the city to buy 30 buses and the school board to buy the rest. The matter was settled. Nashville would comply with the busing order.

Still, the public sentiment around busing was venomous. Local newspapers, published letters, mostly from white citizens, arguing against busing.

One woman called it a "sociological mix master!"

"Take a good look at Nashville from the suburbs to the slums," wrote another reader, Steve Smith in the Tennessean. "Before you claim that clean decent children, with kind hardworking parents from the suburbs are the same as people with quite opposite characteristics from the slums!"

In 1971, real estate ads featured homes in the suburbs out of reach of the court's order.

"No school busing problem here."

"Spacious floor plan...NO BUSING!"

"Old Hickory Lake...giving you the acreage you desire beyond Metro and school busing"

Meanwhile, the federal judge who issued the busing order, Judge Morton—after receiving death threats and being socially shunned in the city—he left Nashville, moved more than 80 miles away to Cookeville, Tennessee.

But as Ansley Erickson explains, despite white families' fear of busing, it was black families who were most inconvenienced by it.

**AE: The federal officials who helped plan the 1971 busing said, we will not ask white children in first or second or third or fourth grade to ride buses out of their neighborhood. We will not do it and we won't do it, they're saying, because we think that if we asked them to do it, their families will say, no, and withdraw from the school system and that undermines desegregation. So we can't do that. So we have to accommodate their resistance. But we can ask black children to ride buses in first and second, third and fourth grade, so we'll do that.**

**MK:** Yet again catering to white families, Nashville placed a double standard on the city's youngest students. White elementary children would not be bused. But black elementary children would be.

In the ultimate act of resistance, heeding the real estate ads, White families fled. Left the district in droves. Some to the suburbs, others to newly constructed private schools—built with the explicit purpose of creating all white classrooms. Whites were willing to pay rather than integrate.

The rest fled for the fringes of the county, where the district had managed to get more than 30 schools exempt from busing all together, claiming they were too far away.

**Richard Dinkins: Desegregation has been a history of the line of least resistance. You know, what is the least integration that you all would take? Right. You put a busing plan in there. Oh, no, no. You see. And and that's what I came to realize. And the more I learned, the more I was determined.**

**MK:** Richard Dinkins is now an appellate court judge. But in 1975 he was a fresh-faced student in his second year at Vanderbilt Law School. And he landed a clerkship with Avon Williams.

By this time Z. Alexander Looby had died. Williams was chief counsel and had been working on a new motion in the Kelley case.

**RD: He filed this motion for further relief.**

**MK:** This was 1976, five years after busing began. And inequalities persisted. Black students were being bused farther, and longer than white students. Black elementary kids had to ride the bus more than two hours a day to predominantly white schools. While white elementary kids traveled less than an hour. And those schools on the edges of the city that had skirted the busing order...they'd become a haven for white families fleeing integration.

This new motion argued to include those more than 30 exempt schools.

And Dinkins wanted in.

**RD: I said, you know, I'd like to be involved in it to work on this. And he looked at me. I'll never looked. We just had this. Emerging smile on his face. And little did I know that this would put all this white on my head one day.**

**MK:** Dinkins was familiar with the Kelley family, they attended the church Dinkins father pastored and A.Z. had given him his first haircut. Dinkins ended up spending 22 years on the case.

The work changed him forever.

**RD: I truly did not realize. How. How deep and pernicious the opposition was, you know how how they, some folks really did not want it and they would resist it and fight it at every turn.**

**MK:** That motion Dinkins helped Williams file took close to a decade of court battles, but they ultimately won, and it was a gamechanger.

By *finally* including every school and every square mile of the county into the plan, Nashville did something few cities had done: Despite the resistance and white flight, Nashville widely integrated its school system...at least on paper.

**RD: Let me tell you, for a while Nashville was a model of metropolitan desegregation.**

**MK:** As Erickson puts it, from the mid 80s through the late 90s, Nashville was on a short list as one of the most desegregated school systems in the country.

It had taken the Kelley family and the plaintiffs' lawyers' decades of work, court hearing after hearing, plan after plan, to get there. But they finally did.

And in that time, student achievement had improved—for *both* black and white students. Though for black students most dramatically. In 1971 roughly 70 percent of Nashville's black students were scoring "below average" on standardized tests. By 1991—20 years later—that number shrank to just 25 percent. It had worked—access to better schools, to more resources, to what white students had been given all along, was exactly what Black students needed.

But what cannot be ignored is the burden it placed on Black families. It was immense. Emotionally and physically. *They* had gone to the unfamiliar white schools—the schools that did not want them. And *they* spent many more miles and may more hours riding buses—chasing the equity they were promised. The equity the city and its white officials had tried *so desperately* to evade.

But as Dinkins explains, as the case entered its fourth decade, and Nashville's ambitions grew, the city's mayor and its business leaders wanted this lawsuit and its court orders to go away.

Looking to gin up more economic growth, the city's chamber of commerce hired an outside consultant to tell the city what it was lacking and what it needed to grow.

Their advice: If Nashville wanted to attract more corporate relocations, more outside money flowing in, it needed better public schools.

The message was clear: a federal desegregation order wasn't going to woo new employees.

Nashville's elite—the same ones who years before had fled the system for private schools and white suburban schools—made it their mission to take back the district.

**RD: All of this is going on. And the system was growing. And the Chamber was, We need to get out from under this court order so we can become the "IT" city in all this other stuff. And so they were putting pressure on the board of education to move this thing along. Nationally, the Reagan revolution was kicking in and this anti-busing and anti-integration, we've done enough, you know, was taking hold. And the commitment to integration was kind of going by the wayside.**

**MK:** Williams and Dinkins saw their window closing. It was time to talk about a settlement. Nashville's mayor convened a panel. Dinkins pored over maps and demographic data, drawing new boundaries to create the equity he had always hoped for.

In East Nashville, the neighborhood where this had all started more than 40 years earlier, things were especially difficult. It was integrated, but the economic disparities were great.

**RD: East Nashville was is responsible for all the white on this side of my head. It was a, it was so hard to get an equitable pupil assignment plan over there.**

**MK:** Based on the recommendations from the panel and lawyers on both sides, the Metro School Board released a plan, called "Commitment to the Future."

It had taken Dinkins a year and half, working full time, to help craft it. It was the seventh desegregation plan, and the last, the city would ever attempt.

The settlement added art and music to all schools. It promised to build new schools and renovate ailing ones.

It also made a big push for magnet schools, which could pull from outside an assigned zone.

Magnet schools proved to be a key element of the plan—the first iteration of school choice aimed at keeping white families in the system.

The district had lost almost 40,000 white students since busing began. And it was desperately trying to lure them back.

The final plan put a focus on neighborhood schools—arguing that schools close to home would yield more parental involvement across all races and incomes. It also hired more teachers and gave extra resources to schools that the plaintiffs’ lawyers knew would likely re-segregate or were already racially and economically isolated. One of those schools was Warner Elementary.

**MK: So what was it like coming up with that final plan. I mean, what was your sense. Like, we’re finally doing this?**

**RD: It was a sense of achievement. It was a sense of promise that we were going to do it right. Not we, the city was going to do it right.**

**MK:** On September 28, 1998, Robert Kelley vs. Board of Education was settled. 43 years and 5 days after it was filed.

Before his gavel cracked, Judge Thomas Wiseman, who had presided over the case for 20 years, held back tears as he read his ruling. Perhaps from sheer exhaustion, or maybe because he believed ALL children might finally get fair shake.

Robert Kelley, the case’s named plaintiff, didn’t speak at that final hearing. But the son of another plaintiff did.

“I do not see us regressing,” Rev. Bruce Maxwell told the court. “We’ve come too far.”

Next time on The Promise...

**RD: Between you, me and the wall Nashville failed that test.**

**MK: How so?**

**RD: Look at the system now.**

**HC: So, I experienced the repercussions of integration. I was spat on. Walked down the hallway, get pushed for no reason. It was not a pleasant thing.**

**RD: the settlement, was based on mutual promises. And you broke her promise. The city broke the promise that they gave to the plaintiffs.**

**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 Trip-Chin-Ski.

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For more information and photos about this series go to [thepromise.wpln.org](http://thepromise.wpln.org)

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