

The Promise S2
Episode 5: Warner's Hope
By Meribah Knight

MERIBAH KNIGHT: Just a warning to listeners, this episode discusses domestic violence and gun violence.

Previously on The Promise...

RICKI GIBBS: Wussup man, how ya feeling? Ready for 4th grade?

MK: How was your summer?

BJ: A few down days and a whole bunch of up days.

RG: 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: He's singing. [**Old Town Road plays in the background**]

T: Every time.

MK: What do you mean every time?

T: Every time we do morning meeting this is what he does. He gets up there and sings and dances with them. Every time.

MK: We're back at Warner Elementary. It's a Friday assembly in the spring of 2019. A very different time, I know. Kids are filing into the school auditorium. Some sit cross-legged on the floor, bopping their heads and singing to the music, talking to their friends. As they settle the school's Principal, Ricki Gibbs, lip syncs and dances—he does the lean back, the shoulder bounce, the whip. He flashes a smile. The kids love it.

There is so much energy in this room, but it also feels cavernous. The 30-foot ceilings, the massive stage...they seem to swallow this tiny school. Such a big space, and so few kids. Thankfully though, it doesn't sound empty. Not at all.

RG: Good afternoon boys and girls.

KIDS: Good afternoon Dr. Gibbs!

MK: Warner is working mightily to up its enrollment. It's in the midst of a huge push, coupled with a surge in resources, to try to recruit new families to come here. Specifically, new white families.

I'm serious. This is explicitly stated in the federal grant Warner is getting for all this. Because, the school has become so isolated with Black children that, in the eyes of the feds and the policy wonks, it needs these white kids to balance it out: to desegregate it.

But the perception for most white families here has been that Warner is one, if not the, least desirable school in the neighborhood.

Go to GreatSchools.com and you'll see why. Warner has a "very concerning" rating. And a 1 out of a possible 10 on its test scores. "This school is far below the state average," it reads. "This suggests that students at this school are likely not performing at grade level."

So, most white parents shopping around for a school will read that and run the other direction, or worse.

Ms. Bain, a first-grade teacher, has taught at Warner for 23 years. And she's heard some things from folks in the neighborhood.

MB: I've had instances on the playground with neighborhood people. 'Oh, our kids are zoned for there. I will never send my kids to that school.' Point blank to your face.

MK: Knowing you're a teacher here?

MB: Yes. And saying it on the playground to me in front of kids. I've had that happen numerous times in East Nashville. Going to a restaurant, the restaurant owner was like, oh yeah, our kids could go there but we don't. We choose to go somewhere else. That's just not a good school. So you get a thick skin.

MK: But this year, the school has big job to do. To turn itself around. To cast of all that past baggage, and reemerge a bright, shiny legitimate choice for all those naysayers. And the man who's gonna do it is Dr. Ricki Gibbs.

RG: I want you to work really hard this year in kindergarten. Can y'all do that for me yes or yes?

K: Yes Dr. Gibbs.

RG: Yes. That's what I like to hear.

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 has been deemed as *the "Great Equalizer,"* but more and more feels like the Great Divider: public education.

Episode 5: Warner's Hope

RG: Boys and girls I am excited to see you today. We have a really special day...

MK: To see Gibbs, in action, is like watching a football coach who, despite an epic losing streak, has no doubt his team will take the 2020 title.

KIDS: [CHEERING]

RG: We gonna get it together.

MK: Warner needs Gibbs. He's like a supercharge of spirit and hope that this school hasn't had in years. When he arrived, Warner had so few students it was getting harder and harder to justify keeping the school open. It held second place for the most under-enrolled elementary school in the entire district. It had a staff turnover rate nearly twice the district average. And its academics were in the doldrums.

It was sort of a mess.

But Principal Gibbs has made big changes this year. From the paint colors to the staff to the curriculum. Some of it, like the eight new teachers he's hired, is obvious. But other things, like his insistence that all the kids' bathrooms are cleaned with Fabuloso, are more subtle.

RG: They go in the bathroom; they should walk in the bathroom, and it just smells clean. And the only thing that I know that gets that kind of clean is that Fabuloso.

MK: And everything plays a role in making Warner feel like a completely new school, from the inside out.

RG: You can't be ready to change lives and want kids to do something totally different if they gonna come to the same thing they've always seen.

MK: This year, Gibbs is planning what very well could be the most ambitious school turnaround in district history. He has big hopes for this school.

The driving force behind all this, like I said earlier, is the federal magnet grant—the millions of dollars that Washington DC is giving Warner to enroll more white families and reverse the troubling trend of what it calls “sub-group isolation”—just a fancy word for segregation.

With this new batch of cash, Warner will step up its game, enrich the school with tons of cool stuff—arts programs, dance classes, Chinese drumming lessons. All to get Warner on the right track so those new, white students will come.

In addition to all the other changes I mentioned, Principal Gibbs has got some out of the box ideas, too. He's hired a mindfulness coach.

RIKI RATTER: So when we breathe, Gabriel, we want to breathe into our bellies...

Yoga. Meditation. Yeah, it may sound a little woo woo. But he doesn't care. He thinks it'll work—help the kids manage their feelings, minimize outbursts—so the school can lower its behavior referrals, which in the past have been through the roof.

Ultimately, Gibbs' goal is to take Warner from one of the lowest-performing schools in the state to one of the best. From the bottom 5% of schools to the top 5%.

Such a fast-paced turnaround would be a remarkable transformation for a school that before Principal Gibbs arrived, had less than 10 kids test proficient in math and reading.

If Gibbs is successful, that number would rise to more than 100 kids.

This is Warner's moon shot.

RG: Little man, you're gonna walk on the blue line on the right side. We're gonna get used to walking on that blue line...

RG: I'm passionate about going into schools that have been perceived as low-performing struggling schools and just putting structures in place to help those boys and girls be successful. Because I know better than most because of how I grew up in the area I grew up in and Miami that powerful education can be life changing.

MK: At just 36 years old, Ricki Gibbs is a rising star in the district with big ambitions. And he has a track record of success in turning around low-achieving schools. He also understands the kids at Warner in a way that few administrators do.

Because he grew up a lot like them.

Ricki is from Liberty City, Miami. If you ever watched the film *Moonlight* this is *that* neighborhood.

RG: I tell everybody, Liberty City is probably one of the toughest neighborhoods in the country. If you watch *First 48* they're always in Liberty City. There is a lot of amazing things. There's a lot of amazing people—a lot of amazing athletes come out of Liberty City. But it's...Crime, drugs, violence. You name, it you'll see it.

MK: Ricki was the middle child. His mom worked as a legal secretary, making just over minimum wage, and his father was ex-military. It was a traumatic upbringing at points. His father struggled with addiction and was often violent with his mother.

RG: My dad used to beat my mom. And when I say beat I'm talking like punching, kicking. Just really, really bad to the point that I used to try to jump into the fight and try to help defend my mom. And it was just—just bad.

MK: In fact, it was so bad that for a couple years, Ricki says he has no memories. Like he can't remember anything from first or second grade.

RG: I've been through counseling, anger management. It's one that when I say I literally don't remember going to first or second grade. I literally just don't remember it at all.

MK: What remained though, was a well of anger that bore deeper and deeper as he got older

RG: So I was fighting all the time getting suspended from school.

MK: One day in fourth grade he just lost it.

RG: It was just, it was just bad. I got into an altercation with another student. Teacher broke it up. I got mad at the teacher. I picked up a chair and threw it at the teacher. And because of my track record for all the trouble I was getting in, the school was ready to kick me out of school, send me to an alternative school for 180 days.

MK: That's an entire school year. A fate that could have changed the trajectory of Ricki's life—in and out of school. A whole year in an *alternative school*—being labeled as *that* kid. That just doesn't go away.

He was spared, though, thanks to the attorney his mom worked for.

RG: The attorney stepped in. I was able to go through anger management at a resource center in Miami with a gentleman by the name of Mr. Whittle. And that started the turn process in my life.

MK: With help from Mr. Whittle and another older mentor, Ricki began to settle down.

His mom eventually left his father.

He became a starter on his high school football team.

HOME VIDEO: Hard running Ricki Gibbs on the carry

MK: Captain of the debate team. He got straight A's.

And when he'd go see his friends and family on the corner, hustling, they'd turn him away. "You're good at that school stuff," they'd tell him. "Go do that."

But for Little Ricki, as everyone called him, the hazards of growing up in Liberty City were inescapable.

In high school two of his friends were shot and killed.

RG: Another died jumping out of a car because they were getting chased by the police and he jumped out of the car doing 80. So when he jumped out of the car his body hit a

pole, killed him instantly. And he died in middle school. So when you, when you're dealing with that kind of violence all the time, when people always ask 'well Rick why don't you go back to Miami?' You know it's Miami is everybody thinks South Beach. I'm not from that part of Miami. That wasn't my world.

MK: And to this day, with all his family still back in Liberty City, his worlds are splintered.

RG: My brother has been in and out of jail his whole life. My cousin, he's doing life without the possibility. All of our other partners that was right down the corner too have all done 10, 15, 20 years in jail down in Miami. Some of them out now doing, doing better but most of them are still locked up.

MK: In the middle of our interview Gibbs pulls out his wallet and shows me his Miami city ID card. He was 7 in it—the same age the abuse in his family got so bad he lost his memory. In the photo his face is round, his eyes bright, he's sporting a big toothy smile. His face reveals nothing about what's really going on at home.

RG: I keep this in my wallet, one: it's a good conversation starter when I'm buying an adult beverage. But two: It reminds me of why I do this work because this kid on this picture... If you ask anybody that was at my elementary school, especially the people who were doing the paperwork to put me out of school for 180 days... He doesn't. He's not gonna earn a doctorate degree. He's not gonna be an educator. He's not gonna be a teacher. He's not gonna be a principal. He's not gonna be a life changer. He's gonna be a menace to society. He fights people every day. He puts his hands on people every day. He curses. He, he does all those things.

But somebody believed in me. I had a mom and a grandma that prayed for me. I had teachers who said 'no, you're gonna get an education, and you're gonna stop the nonsense.' So he just reminds me that this work that I'm doing is life-changing. And if somebody invested in me to change my life to put me on this path the least I can do is pay it forward.

MK: This small moment sounds almost scripted, I know. And I will admit, Gibbs' feels almost typecast for this role. With his overly cheerful attitude and his nearly superhuman resilience. It's like his story is plucked straight from some gritty 90s movie.

[Excerpt from the movie Lean On Me]

MK: And he never shows his cracks. It's all positive visualization...we can do it...we just need to work harder, work smarter than everyone else. He seemed, at times, truly Pollyannaish. Refusing to entertain the slightest possibility of failure.

RG: If I don't believe it, who will? If I don't believe in my babies, who will? If I don't trust in the process, who will? So no, I'm confident that it'll work. I know we can do it. So now is just about getting it done.

MK: I often wondered, 'when is this guy gonna admit just how hard his job is?'

Because other people see it, and it stresses them out.

JON WREN: I mean the system is rigged. The system is rigged against parents. It's rigged against schools, and it's rigged against communities. Because it's turned it into this just like, turf warfare, over six-year-olds. That's kind of messed up.

MK: That's Jon Wren, an administrator at Warner. He's telling me this one morning in a moment of frustration. He's worried about a nearby charter school trying to siphon off Warner's students. Or potential students.

And the reason Wren uses the terms "rigged" and "turf warfare" isn't simply for drama. This is a really difficult job, and you're always looking over your shoulder. Especially in this neighborhood, where quite simply there are too many schools, and not enough students.

JW: It's just the market is so saturated with competition, and I think that adds this level of like—I don't want to say tension—just adds this level of competition that just almost like unreal because we're so close together.

MK: There are 15 public elementary schools right around Warner. And literally thousands of vacant spots for kids—major excess capacity.

Lockeland Elementary, the high performing magnet school, has netted many of the white families who are actually zoned for Warner. While the charters and other magnet schools picked off the rest.

So yeah, I can see why this feels like a turf war. Plus, for every kid a school enrolls, thousands of dollars come with them. And when they *leave*, so does the money.

So as Warner grows, its budget grows. And as it shrinks, its budget shrinks.

But Gibbs, the eternal optimist, is convinced that he can grow Warner and make it thrive, in the face of all this competition.

Coming up after the break, Gibbs' vision comes to life.

[BREAK]

BJ: Something that I know about dinosaurs. The raptor, even though its head was small, and its body was big, it had the smartest brain of all dinosaurs.

MK: One kid, a Warner student, with a story a lot like Principal Gibbs is a 9-year-old named BJ.

BJ: Smarter than T-rex, smarter than the allosaurus...

MK: As you can tell, BJ loves dinosaurs.

BJ: Smarter than the brontosaurus, brachiosaurus...

MK: Is there a dinosaur you most identify with?

BJ: Yah, umm, there's two actually. That represent me. T-Rex and Velociraptor.

MK: Why?

BJ: For the Velociraptor umm, I think fast, think sharp, think hard and is quick. T-rex, slow moving, like to chill, very hungry, and need attention.

MK: I've spent a lot of time with BJ over the last year, and I gotta say, this is *spot on*. BJ is whip smart. He's always angling for an extra school breakfast. And on the playground, he's got the agility of a cat.

He's also has these eyes that sparkle. This adorable smile and a crop of tiny locks sprouting from the top of his head. He's got dimples.

And yeah, all this definitely gets him a lot of attention, which he relishes. But BJ's want for attention makes for its own issues. Acting out in class. Talking too much. Talking too loud.

NIKKI HUGHES: Every time you get an audience you start misbehaving...

MK: BJ has trouble staying on task in the classroom. He's got ADHD, which he takes medication for. But some days he forgets to take it. Or he feels OK, so he decides to skip it. In 3rd grade, his behavior was all over the place. But this is 4th grade. The fall of 2019. And BJ has a new teacher: the no-nonsense Dr. Nikki Hughes.

NH: Stay focused. What you got BJ? Are you following BJ? Could you take BJ, because he's not here to learn today.

MK: And they've really hit it off.

NH: You are an amazing kid. I think you are brilliant.

MK: Dr. Hughes has a way with kids like BJ.

NH: He was supposed to be in my class. And I was supposed to make a difference. It's just a gift that God has given me. I always get the tough, hard kids. The kids that sometimes teachers say, 'I don't want them in my class.' I usually get those.

MK: Principal Gibbs knew this about Dr. Hughes. Which is why he put BJ in her class. He sees himself in BJ. A kid with such potential, so smart. But who struggles to direct that energy into the right places.

He knew what BJ needed to thrive—structure, confidence, trust. It's what those pivotal adults in his own life did for him. So to Gibbs, what BJ needed was obvious. And he was right. It's just a couple months into the year and BJ is like a different kid.

MK: How is the school year going?

BJ: Well, for my behavior. For my behavior, awesome.

MK: He's making nearly all A's. He isn't acting out as much.

He's been getting into yoga and the daily breathing exercises.

RG: So on the count of 3, I want you to take a deep breath in.

[BJ breathes]

MK: The stuff Principal Gibbs brought in as part of his turnaround plan, which he also leads, himself, over the loudspeaker twice a day.

And Dr. Hughes just knows how to talk to BJ.

NH: I love you to death. Yes I do, but I'm not going to allow you sit in my class and disrespect me. You're not doing that. You're not. You're better than that.

MK: How to reassure BJ that he's not the *bad* kid. He's a *smart* kid, who sometimes makes bad decisions.

NH: When you get your report card today it reflects how intelligent you are. I could never be more proud of you. But this behavior right here, it ain't goin' down.

MK: Dr. Hughes sees what's beneath BJ's class clown persona. That really, at heart, he's sort of a nerd. He loves Japanese cartoons. He loves science. He loves lizards.

This is BJ's mom, Shanniece, describing his kindergarten graduation.

SHANNIECE: My son stood up and he was just like, 'I wanna be a dinosaur scientist.' And I was just like, 'Wow.'

MK: This makes Shanniece really happy because she worries about BJ.

S: A lot of kids that come from this type of background. They—they go down the gutter. They'll jump into gangs. They'll—you know what I'm saying? They drop out of school. They have kids. They don't continue their education. And I'm just like... I'm just proud. He loves school. He loves it. He cries when he don't go to school.

MK: Shanniece, BJ, and his two sisters live in public housing, just a couple blocks from Warner. In the James Cayce Homes, the city's largest public housing complex. It's a tight-knit community, but it's also a turbulent place.

[WKRN news clip]

MK: And where BJ lives in particular, it's an intense corner of the project. More shootings happen there than any other part of the complex. Just this summer at least six people were shot on BJ's block. One man in the chest. Recently, a white Cadillac and a black Chevy rolled down the street, spraying enough bullets to hit five people, including a 7-year-old.

BJ's father has been in prison. And BJ can't remember the last time he saw him. He's very close with his mom, Shanniece, who shares BJ's love of all things reptile and prehistoric. Lately, she's had a lot of piecemeal work—sometimes juggling as many as three jobs at a time. Bartender, dancer, in-home health aid, childcare worker. And living in a place like Cayce does make kids like BJ grow up fast, because life here plays out here in a concentrated intensity.

It's place that feels like another world compared to the rest of the neighborhood. Except when BJ is on the monkey bars playing a game called Stick. Then it just feels like a place where kids live and play.

KIDS: On your mark. Set. Go.

BJ: So you gotta go back and forth on the monkey bars as fast as you can without getting hit with the ball.

[KIDS PLAY]

BJ: Stop lying!

MK: Like I said, Principal Gibbs put BJ in Dr. Hughes class for a reason. Because he knew Dr. Hughes can relate to a kid like BJ. She has spent much of her youth around Nashville's public housing.

And this is how BJ benefits from this magnet grant. Warner got the money because of its Black racial isolation, but also because of its potential for recruiting white kids. There are lots of young white families living in this neighborhood now. So the district put its star principal in the school who brought his A-team teachers. And together they reimagined Warner top-to-bottom.

When Gibbs got the offer to come to Warner, he'd already worked in a number of struggling schools. But this was the first time he'd been offered the chance to lead a school that felt so close to him.

RG: This is where my purpose lies. Because this school resembles the schools that I attended growing up. The boys and girls that are here look like me. Have stories like me. So I'm not going to feel sorry for you, because I'm not—that's not, that's not the help I'm giving you. I'm going to ensure you get a great education.

It's kind of like when Dr. King said, 'I've been to the mountaintop.' I—I've seen it because I've lived it. So I know if once we do this work right. Man, it's gonna be life changing for our boys and girls.

MK: But turning around Warner's academics, as we now know, is just one of Gibbs' tasks. Getting kids like BJ on track is just part of this assignment. He needs to reduce the school's "sub-group isolation." Even with all the competition around Warner, he needs to recruit white kids. If he doesn't get these white kids, the school will be in violation of the terms of the grant. But also, the school needs the money and the resources that come with them.

So, Gibbs plans to make Warner so successful that those white parents will have no choice but to take notice, and finally consider Warner as an option for their child. He knows it's the only way to ensure Warner survives.

RG: I'm a big believer in taking all the excuses off the table. So if they're—if you're not choosing it for another reason, let's just have an honest conversation.

MK: He knows that if white parents say no to Warner. What they're really saying is no to are its children—its Black children. But he needs these white families, desperately, so he's going to have to suit up and put his best foot forward.

And he does it every day. Unlike other metro schools, that only do tours one day a week. Gibbs does tours every day...all day.

RG: On that card you'll see my Twitter, Instagram....

RG: Are there any other questions that I could possibly answer?

RG: If we're going to make Warner once again the beacon of East Nashville....

RG: Not only are you welcomed here, you're actually wanted here.

MK: The irony, or the glibness, about this whole endeavor is that no matter how well Warner's kids do on their state tests, no matter how much they grow and thrive, and how remarkable this turnaround is, this school will still fail if white children don't come.

It's just too under-enrolled. Even the district's own projections, created with a fancy formula by outside consultants, predicts Warner will have just 168 students in the 2023 school year. That is way too low.

And the magnet money floating this whole plan won't last forever—just another two years. The bottom line is if they don't have more students in this building, there won't be enough money to continue all these new amazing programs. The art program will be gone. The dance program will be gone. The Chinese drumming gone. The guitar lessons gone. And, eventually, inevitably, Gibbs' will move on too, taking his teachers with him. If Warner can't stand on its own by then, the school will implode yet again.

One day last spring, I visited the classroom of Ms. Angela Moore. The teacher who likes to play class bingo. She's been at Warner for almost 30 years and her classroom looks like it—every surface is packed to the brim, with Elmer's glue bottles, contact paper, notes from students, pencils. As we sat at tiny desks and talked, I asked her about what she thinks of all this.

Surely, after so many years of struggling, it must feel good to get the resources the school needed, but couldn't get with so few students. She nodded, says she appreciated the infusion, but something about all of it nagged at her.

AM: Are you investing in these kids? Or are you investing in the kids to come? You know. We have a wonderful fuse lab. It's a science lab, brand spankin' new.

MK: She points down the hall, toward the new lab with 3D printers and computers. There's also a brand-new dance studio, like the real deal, with a sprung floor and walls of mirrors. No other school in the district has one. It's all thanks to the federal magnet money.

AM: Are we selling it to these kids, the kids that are here now... or are we selling it to the parents that are coming in that we want to recruit their child to be here?

MK: It all feels sort of familiar doesn't it? Desegregation has always prioritized white children over Black ones. The district has been trying to woo them, to please them, from the very moment the Kelley's filed their lawsuit. Almost 70 years ago. Yes, Warner's Black students are benefitting from this. BJ is a great example. And that is critical. But it took the promise, the potential of luring white students that finally saved Warner.

And if they don't come, well...Warner's future hangs in the balance.

And so Gibbs got to work. And the school began a meteoric rise. Behavior incidents dropped by 70%. Attendance was the highest in years. And the kids' academics started to surge—grow faster than almost every other elementary school in the district.

Finally, with the resources they needed, the resources attached to enticing white families, Warner's students were headed to the moon!

Including BJ.

[BJ RUNNING]

MK: When he got his first quarter report card, he couldn't wait to show his mom, uncles and grandma.

BJ: Uncle Jonathan! Hold on, mama. Hold on, hold on.

MK: When they finally arrived home, BJ sprinted from the monkey bars to the steps of his apartment show them.

S: C'mon let's see.

BJ: I was just waiting for you to get home.

S: OK. That's what I am talking about.

BH: A, A, A, A, A...Hey Lando saying he giving a dollar per A. Go get him.

BJ: Hey Lando...Look I got, 1, 2, 3... uh, where's it at? 4, 5 so \$5.

LANDO: Ooh!

BJ: No C's or nothing.

MK: BJ had aced his report card. Just one B, in English.

L: You gotta work on that then, nephew. You gonna work on the English. We gotta work on that. You got 5 of them, right? I am gonna have to go to the bank, but I got you. Blanche, look, I'm going broke today. I'm going broke today. Finna go broke.

MK: Gibbs' plan was working...at least in part.

RG: I took this job to turn around the school. Like I—That's my work. I know how to turnaround schools. I know how to build teacher capacity, increase culture, increase teacher satisfaction, increase student achievement and growth. That's, that's my job. That's my job. The layer of a gentrifying community, as well as trying to reduce sub-group isolation. I didn't know about that part.

MK: Gibbs' job description was looking a little different in real life than it had on paper. Trying to convince white families of Warner's potential started taking its toll on Gibbs. And the racial tensions in the neighborhood began to show.

KEN STARK: I can give you a very controversial solution right now

WHITE LOCKELAND FATHER: Who are you with? Are you funded by a charter entity?

CAROL ZIEGLER: My impression of that whole thing was like, 'We don't want these kids from over here come into our school.'

WHITE MOTHER: If you are a white, upper-middle class, upper class person in East Nashville, and you want to send your kid to a school that's not 100% white, well then, go send your kid to Warner.

MK: That's next time on The Promise.

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