

Meribah Knight

Episode 7: The Recruitment Divide

The Promise S2

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Previously on The Promise...

RICKI GIBBS: You could tell the room was kinda tense

PIPPA MERIWETHER: Whenever we had white families that came into the school and they saw that a majority of the students and staff were African American, the next thing you know they were going to the board trying to get a special transfer, saying the babysitter lived over here or over there.

WHITE MOTHER: Perhaps more blunt way of saying it is that 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.

MERIBAH KNIGHT: Happy open house!

MK: It's early December, and I'm at Warner Elementary for an open house. This is their big debut to the neighborhood. Showing everyone the *new Warner*.

John Wren, the guy from episode 5, who lamented all the competition among schools in the neighborhood has been planning this event for months. With Warner's need to recruit new students, the stakes are high.

MK: Hello hello.

JON WREN: Hey

MK: Whoa look at these fancy pens.

JW: Aren't they?

MK: Are you still nervous?

JW: Oh, I'm always nervous. I'm always nervous. I have this fear that, like, we have everything ready and no one is going to show up and they're going to think that it's lame. Which of course means they'll think that I am lame.

MK: I am sure people will come.

JW: Yeah, knock on wood.

MK: So what's like on the agenda? What's gonna happen?

JW: So It's kinda loose.

MK: Inside the auditorium, a video highlighting Warner's kids and teachers plays on a loop. There are snacks, info packets on the school, those freebee pens. Chairs are set up for an arts showcase that the kids will do a little later on. Teachers and staff and some parents are milling about, chatting.

And sitting at a table in the corner is a smiling older white woman. Her hair is styled in a short bob. She's dressed sort of preppy. She looks a little out of place sitting at this no-frills metal folding table. And laid out in front of her is a stack of change and a grid of small index cards with phrases like "reputation", "test scores" "good teachers" "parent involvement."

When I approach her, she tells me she's working with the district to help market Warner, now an arts magnet school, to potential families.

MARKETING WOMAN: We're asking parents what they value in their child's education. So what's important to them. They're given a dollar to spend and they put — they distribute the money the way they value education. And it's interesting because parents talk about test scores and ratings, and I know that influences them. But when you give them this exercise nobody says test scores and reputation.

MK: Well, what's the most frequent things they choose?

MW: Right now great principal.

MK: That makes sense.

MW: Happy children is really high.

MK: She asked if I want to do it. I tell her that at 14 months old my child is a ways off from school. And when I hesitate, only because I am a reporter and it feels odd to be doing this exercise, she keeps pushing and then she leans in close...

MW: You are our target parent. You're white. We need white parents to help integrate these schools. And so if we don't know what you care about, then how are we going to recruit you?

MK: There was a time when the decision of where to send your child to school was relatively simple: public or private. But now, In Nashville and in many other cities across the country, those choices have multiplied exponentially—neighborhood schools, charter schools, magnet schools.

In large part it's due to white families. A way to offer them an escape hatch. A way to keep them in the public system, but on their own terms. Remember, magnet schools proliferated when Nashville's desegregation case was settled. And as choice has evolved, it's been marketed as a liberating exercise for all families...a way for every child to gain access to a great education.

But the fact is: it hasn't exactly worked out that way.

WHITE MOM1: With all of the options, I feel like I had no options, it was like 'this is where you go or...

WHITE DAD: It was really stressful.

WM1: Or you spend this much money a month to send your kid to a private school.'

WHITE MOM2: She's just like, 'yeah, Lockeland first, Dan Mills second, private school.'

WM1: We did Lockeland as our very first choice because that's what everyone was like. 'You have to do Lockeland.'

CLAY HAYNES: I'd heard about the lottery process from many other parents, kind of in playground conversation while you're pushing your child on the swing.

MK: With so many choices at play, things have started to get messy to put it mildly. Judgement is cast. Pedagogy is ruthlessly ranked. Gossip and chatter steer decision making. And information begins to splinter.

WM1: And when I called the office they said, 'So what's the school you're zoned for?' And I said, I must have said, Hattie Cotton. And she goes, 'Oof, you don't want to send your kid there. '

WM2: And it almost became for us, kind of an act of protest to just to go to our zoned school.

MK: Rather than level the playing field, school choice, for many families, has made it even more uneven.

ANTHONY DAVIS: There's a lot of families that don't have a choice, right? So they go to that neighborhood school.

WM2: And I just thought, there's something not right here. How is this happening?

MK: One dad, speaking at a Nashville school board meeting framed it this way:

BLACK DAD: I'm 6'2" in height my daughter is 3-foot. If I put food at the top of the cabinet and say there's plenty of choices there why don't you get some food? She can't reach the food.

MK: He's right. For many families, choice is best exercised alongside time and resources. High performing magnet schools like Lockeland are at the top of the shelf. A lottery application to get in. No buses. Expected donations to the PTO. Hardly any outreach.

While assigned zoned schools. A school you're automatically enrolled in. A school with a bus to get you there. Or a school you can walk to. A school like Warner. Those are on the bottom shelf, accessible, easy to reach for any family.

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 7: The Recruitment Divide

[SOUND FROM OPEN HOUSE]

MK: The open house was by no means a flop. Wren's worst fear was not realized. People came. A mix of former faculty and community folks. Some parents. Even some prospective parents. Warner's principal, Ricki Gibbs, had hoped some Lockeland families would come, since at the last meeting he'd called on them to come visit the school. But no one was there. Except Heather and Chris Wood, whose daughter Marian is now a Kindergartener at Warner.

JW: Alright tour folks, we're going to start right here for 10 seconds and then we'll leave...

MK: Jon Wren is leading this tour. He's Warner site coordinator for the magnet grant, which requires the school to enroll more white students, hence his nerves. Getting these white families in the door is a huge part of his job.

JW: So we're going to check out Ms. Milano's kindergarten class.

MS. MILANO: This is the word NOW. Say it with me...NOW. Say it with me...NOW.

MK: Wren is a tireless booster for Warner. He likes to brag about how special Warner is, from its student body...

JW: Here at Warner the number one language is English. The number two language is Swahili, and the number three language is Somali.

MK: To its dance program...

JW: This is the only elementary school, that's a public school that has a dance program. We have a full-time dance teacher.

MK: To its art room...

JW: Original wooden floors a beautiful view, and the largest art room in the city.

MK: To its cafeteria...

JW: This is the most important room for every student because this is where you eat lunch.

MK: To just the pure size of the school, which is huge.

JW: And as you can tell we don't have any room to play. Any room to roll around. All right, let's keep going!

MK: As we walk, I notice there's a white couple with a toddler, who I'm sure the marketing woman is already eyeing. Young, smiling, hipster, tattooed. Their names are Erin and Josh Mock and they're here looking for their rising kindergartener, Truman.

ERIN MOCK: Our oldest who is in pre-K, we are looking for him for next year. And we've heard so many great things about this school that you're kind of our first stop on the tours.

MK: This isn't their zoned school, but they've been shopping around. They have plans to tour a bunch of other schools in the neighborhood—charters, magnets. But they love the idea of an arts school for Truman.

When Wren arrives at the room where the mindfulness coach works...

JW: So this is one of the more unique rooms...

MK: Erin's eyes light up.

MINDFULNESS COACH: So we practice breathing. We do a lot of yoga and tai chi and other movements to, you know, give students skills rooted in breath and movement to calm their bodies and their minds.

MK: Erin can already see that Warner has so much of what Truman loves. And it's clear just how excited she is when she talks to a school administrator.

EM: Well, we have him in ballet right now, at Nashville Ballet and he loves it. He told me the other day, I love dancing.

MT: Did you see our dance room?

EM: Yes, yes. And so, I just, that was big.

MT: That's nowhere else in the city you can find that.

EM: No, and at his school right now they do yoga when they're needing to calm down and breathing. So I'm like, I love that there's that here.

MK: Toward the back of the group I notice a young Black mom. Her toddler son is in tow. She's very quiet, wearing leggings, a knit cap and has eyes so big they pull you in like tractor beams. Her name is Marquoinza Bryant.

As the tour ends, approach her and ask if she's thinking about Warner as an option for her child.

MK: Do you have a prospective student?

MARQUOINZA BRYANT: Nehemiah Bryant.

MK: I immediately recognize the name. He's already a student at Warner. A lanky second grader with a huge smile.

MK: Is he having a fun time. Do you like the school?

MB: Yeah he loves the school. I think I need to utilize what the school has to offer a little more. Like the Be Well Room and the art room and everything. But he loves it.

MK: Marquoinza tells me she never took an official tour of the school before, so she figured she'd come today, with her youngest child, Amari, who's headed to Warner next year for Pre-K.

MK: Oh, he's going to do Pre-K?

MB: Yes, I'm excited about that. So we're preparing him. You know, coming in touring the school. Yeah, I'm like he's ready to come to school. He's like, he's been ready. Every time his brother gets up and goes to school he's like 'I'm ready, I gotta put my backpack on.' I'm like, 'no, not yet.' Sadly.

MK: These two women, one black, one white, both the mothers of two boys, had come to Warner today for the exact same reason. To see what the school had to offer. But they were

also in completely different places. One had already committed to Warner. While the other seemed to be weighing a panoply of school options.

I wanted to know more, so I followed up with both women. What I found was that although they were almost identical in some ways, in other ways...their experiences ...couldn't be more different.

That's coming up, after the break.

[BREAK]

MK: So these two moms, connected by their interest in Warner Elementary...both reflected one another, but also revealed the neighborhood's great divide.

We'll start with Erin Mock. I met Erin at the family's home, a classic mid-century ranch filled with plants. Two rescue dogs. And all the toys you can imagine two young boys needing.

EM: **[SOUNDS OF DOG JUMPING]** My house is a mess I'm so sorry. It's usually clean.

MK: Erin is 33. She grew up in suburban New Jersey. She was a creative kid, loved acting and music. She went to an arts high school and came to Nashville for college. Now she works part time and stays home with the kids. Her husband, Josh, works in the tech industry.

EM: I worked yesterday, and so the kids were home.

MK: Then, there's Marquoinza Bryant...

MB: My name is more Marquoinza Bryant. I am 26 years young. And one fantastic thing about me is I have two boys, one eight and one three Nehemiah and Amari.

MK: I met Marquoinza at her home, a Section 8 low-income apartment just a few blocks from Warner. It's sparsely decorated except for some fabric wall hangings and a tv on the floor. Her 3-year-old son, Amari is running around. Playing with my microphone, pretending to interview his mom.

MB: Hey Amari. Do you hear me? Testing, 1, 2, 3.

AMARI BRYANT: You talk crazy!

MB: Haha, I talk crazy? I don't know what to say.

MK: Marquoinza is from Nashville. She's a single mom, and grew up in foster care, bounced around a lot.

MB: I lived a little bit all over. I wouldn't claim one side of town over the other. Just Nashville.

MK: Ended up living with a family friend for high school. And was living in her car for about a week or so before ending up in this apartment. Despite this chaotic upbringing and past, Marquoinza is preternaturally calm. She's gentle, introspective.

MB: I love art. All forms of art, music, dance. I'm trying to paint. Not really all that good but trying. I love to write. I love poetry.

MK: So both women love the arts. They both work part time and spend the rest with their children—Erin at a children's boutique and Marquoinza a hostess at an Italian restaurant. And they both care deeply about their children's education. And that includes a love of a school like Warner Elementary.

EM: Warner's still our favorite. For a lot of reasons, but just felt like I—we just felt so much excitement and energy.

MB: Warner is the art school, and my son, he loves art.

EM: And Truman really is into arts. He's very into dance. He's already doing dance like outside of school.

MB: So I'm like, whichever form of art he chooses is at Warner, that can help him build on it, you know, so.

EM: I don't know, the idea that he gets to do that there is incredible to me.

MB: That's a perfect school for him. Like God put it like right here. And it's—It was perfect.

MK: There was something else the two women had in common. What they wanted their schools to look like.

EM: Josh and I have always been intentional, that we wanted our child to go to a diverse school that was always like that was huge for us.

MK: What's important for your kids to have?

MB: Diversity. Yeah, there's very important. Diversity and teachers who are passionate.

EM: I wanted my son to feel comfortable but challenged. I wanted him to feel safe.

MB: I just want them to be happy to be free, be happily, free. Be free, happy. And to definitely use their talents.

EM: It's important to me that it's not just that the student body is diverse, but

MB: America is so diverse.

EM: Our white sons see people of color in positions of power and leadership.

MB: So I think that if my child is going to live in a diverse country, every environment, my child is put in to learn or to connect with people should also be diverse.

EM: And that's what we were looking for in school.

MB: I want him to be able to connect with different cultures, learn different cultures.

EM: You can't test that, though. That's not what these websites and these numbers are telling us. And that, to me was more... like *that* was what was important to us.

MK: But then, things started to diverge. Like how both women found their way to Warner Elementary.

EM: We have visited three or four schools by now. We have one more that we want to visit.

MB: Um, for the most part, we was here, and the school is like walking distance because now I don't have a car, so.

EM: And there were a few other ones that where we thought we were gonna visit and then we kind of just said, 'what are the chances that this that we're going to like this more than what we've seen?'

MB: It was convenient for the most part.

MK: Despite all the things they shared, their experience choosing a school existed in two separate worlds.

EM: I've been hearing about for years, like the panic of like, 'oh, my gosh, there's like one school that you can get, you know, like that you want to get your kid into for Davidson County.

MB: What honestly were my options were the majority Black schools, the public school, which are the public schools. And in this neighborhood, I think all the public schools are majority Black people.

MK: Probably the most striking difference I saw was what schools each woman heard talked about. Despite the fact that they both live in East Nashville. For Erin, everyone she met assumed she would go for Lockeland, the nearly all white school in the neighborhood, or Explore, a new charter school there.

EM: You know, when you're dropping off at a parent's day out and you're talking with these parents. I mean, I remember saying like, 'oh, where's, you know, like, where's your child going to next year?' And they're like, 'oh, Lockeland. Thank God. Like we got in, we're good.'

MK: For Marquoinza, the school all her neighbors talked about was a practically all Black charter school, Kipp Kirkpatrick.

MB: My neighbors and things, so a lot of people had left Warner and then went to KIPP. And so most of the talk is about KIPP.

EM: That was kind of that was the message I got. If you can't get into Lockeland or Explore, you're in trouble.

MK: When I asked Marquoinza about whether anyone ever mentioned Lockeland Elementary, she looked at me quizzically.

MB: Never heard of it. I never even heard of that school. That's why when you said that I thought it was just like a neighborhood or something. I've never heard of that school ever.

MB: I've heard my options were Warner, Caldwell, Kirkpatrick. Those were the only options that I thought I had until now, until you told me about... Lockwood?

MK: Lockeland.

MB: Lockeland, ok. Haha.

MK: Marquoinza is actually in Lockeland's priority zone, so her sons have just as good a chance of getting in as any white family in the neighborhood. This is a scenario I've seen play out time after time in my three years reporting in this community. Most white families are obsessed with Lockeland, which is understandable since it's one of the best schools in Tennessee. Yet most black families here don't even know the school exists.

I've probably had this conversation, with moms like Marquoinza, a dozen times. The fact is, there is a huge information gap.

At the beginning of this episode I talked about the staggered access to school choice. In Nashville if parents want to choose a school, they need to fill out the choice application and rank seven schools by preference. Seven! So parents who want to maximize their options have to visit seven schools. Meet with seven different principals, and visit their classrooms.

And this byzantine process, navigating these myriad choices becomes its own filter system.

Take a mom like Naukeshia Washington, whose children went to Warner...

MK: What made you choose Warner?

NAUKESHIA WASHINGTON: I actually didn't choose Warner. It was the school that was in my zone, so he was automatically enrolled there.

MK: When I asked Naukeshia if she knew about Lockeland and had ever considered it, she gave me that same puzzled look as Marquoinza. So I offered to look on my phone and see if she was in Lockeland's priority zone.

MK: Ok, here we go. So school—so zoned school is Warner... You are zoned for Lockeland.

NW: Wow I didn't know that. I don't remember getting any kind of mail, postcard or even a phone call. Some schools have called me. I've never gotten any of that, so I didn't know.

CLAY HAYNES: This this is what inequality looks like.

MK: And some white parents, like Clay Haynes, whose daughter goes to Lockeland, are starting to see that access issue very clearly now.

CH: We have the capability and the resources to tour all of these public schools, to meet the principals individually.

MK: But it's also more than just resources. It's literally the fact that some schools work to get the word out. They recruit; they send flyers; they knock on doors. While others, like Lockeland Elementary, have become so insular, that even word of its existence travels only so far...never making it to moms like Marquoinza and Naukeshia.

And so, these two groups—many Black families and many white families in this neighborhood—seem to have vastly different experiences when it comes to choosing a school. Not because they want anything different for their children. But because of logistics, time, social circles, and yes—resources, all of which have become divided along race in this neighborhood.

On top of that fact, schools that have become segregated in either direction—either too Black or too white—can turn some parents off. Even a school like Lockeland.

Carol Ziegler is white and her son, Ezra, is biracial, his father is a Black man from Kenya. Ezra was enrolled at Lockeland briefly, at the beginning of last school year, but the family quickly realized that it was not the right fit.

CZ: So when we were at Lockeland, his father, I mean, was just like 'There's no kids here, that there's very few kids that look like him.' I didn't see any adults that look like him. I saw one woman of color. And then in the clinic, I guess the room where the nurses are, and I put my head and I said, 'hey, are you the school nurse?' And she said, 'No, I'm the custodian.' I didn't like the optics, honestly.

MK: For Erin and Josh Mock, they had just a few weeks left before the school deadline, and they still needed to decide, officially, where Truman would go in the fall.

But Erin had a hunch about what they'd settle on. And before we ended the interview, she told me a little story about her recent visit to Nashville's school enrollment center to fill out some paperwork. And it was telling.

EM: I walked in and I was like, 'Hey, I'm just here to get my child's I.D. number.' And then I, you know, I started filling out the paperwork. And then, I guess they ask you, like, what you're—what school you're hoping for. And she did. And she said, 'Lockeland?' And I said, no. I said, 'actually, no we're hoping for Warner,' and she was like, 'Warner?!' And I was like, 'uh huh.' I was like, 'Yeah, we've fallen in love with it.' And she was like, 'oh, okay...'

MK: It seemed Erin had just experienced some of what kept Warner down and Lockeland up for most white families. Assumptions are powerful things. The first push into a world of segregated schools. But Erin isn't one to fall into such traps. She knew what she wanted for Truman. And it wasn't Lockeland. And so, Warner had just scored what may well have been its first new white family for the 2021 school year! The Mock family would join the Bryant family at Warner Elementary.

Next week, on the final episode of *The Promise*: As Warner works to finish out the year on a high note, everything comes undone.

GOV. BILL LEE: We are here because you have outcomes. You go to the places where you see the work being done well.

CC: Right now, tornado on the ground.

ADRIENNE BATTLE: This is Dr. Adrienne Battle calling to inform you that schools will remain closed through April 3 in response to the public health emergency caused by COVID-19.

RICKI GIBBS: I was at my breaking point. I was like, 'you know what? I am tired of fighting for kids.' One person can't just consistently carry that burden.

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 Martínez-Beltrán and Damon Mitchell for additional editing. Our advisor on *The Promise* is Savala Nolan Trepczynski.

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For more information, photos and more information on how I reported this podcast go to thepromise.wpln.org.

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