

Meribah Knight

Episode 6: A Reckoning

The Promise S2

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MERIBAH KNIGHT: Previously on The Promise...

TEACHER: 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.'

RICKI GIBBS: 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.

ANGELA MOORE: 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?

[SOUNDS OF TALKING PARENTS MILLING ABOUT]

MK: It's a rainy evening in late January. And parents, most of them from Lockeland Elementary, file into a meeting room at a community center. It's just a mile down the road from Lockeland, the nearly all-white elementary school in the neighborhood. And a stone's throw from the city's largest public housing complex, the James Cayce Homes.

CHRISTIANE BUGGS: Clap once if you can hear me. Clap twice if you can hear me. We didn't even have to make it to three. This is perfect.

MK: They're here, along with some community folks and a bunch of school district employees, to talk about that elephant in the classroom. The fact that there are almost no Black children at their school, Lockeland Elementary.

PIPPA MERIWETHER: I think we really need to stretch ourselves.

MK: It all started from a very small group of concerned parents a few years ago, but the problem has only gotten worse. Leading to more whispers, more gossip. So they've decided to come together to talk about it. Openly.

BRETT WITHERS: We asked a good question and we haven't so far been able to really answer it yet. Bu the question was a good one...

MK: And the local school board member, Christiane Buggs, chose this location because it's literally right next to so many Black families. She'd hoped they'd join. Except no one from the project is here. The room is practically all white.

Lockeland's principal, Christie Lewis, sits in a folding chair, wearing a tan trench coat, Black slacks, and heels.

Principal Gibbs, from Warner Elementary, sits next to her. Dressed in a suit, no tie, and shiny dress shoes.

The parents are looking for answers.

CLAY HAYNES: Doing nothing is not an option.

MK: But they've been circling the same questions for an hour now. The parents ask 'what can be done.'

CH: I would love to see leadership...

MK: How can Lockeland bring in more Black students?

And the district responds with...

CB: It's a bit of a 'what comes first? The chicken or the egg?'

MK: 'Well, it's difficult. What do you want done?'

CHRIS WOOD: I think we need more leadership and more real solutions from the school to kind of step in and fix this stuff.

MK: And it goes round and round...each side lobbing the hot potato back and forth. And back and forth.

Then, as the meeting nears its end—everyone seemingly frustrated that they've gotten nowhere and have no solutions—Ken Stark, the head of operations for Nashville Public Schools, gives them one.

KEN STARK: I can give you a very controversial solution right now that I don't think anybody in this room is going to like. We could close Lockeland tomorrow and put all of those kids in Warner. There is enough room in that school. The numbers would balance. But the question then would become how many people would stay?

MK: It's so absurd, so crazy, Stark assumes, that he just throws it out there—almost to sort of scare or stun the parents. Like, "Be careful what you wish for. Is it this? Of course not!" But he'll have to find some viable solution, something to give these white parents. Because in truth, they're too valuable to lose. Except they're also hard to please and they're always the loudest voice in the room.

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 6: A Reckoning

The lead up to this meeting is important. So, let me start there. In September of 2019, I noticed the district hadn't posted its annual diversity report on its website—this is a document that the district has compiled for a few years now as part of its commitment to diversity. It crunches all the numbers on student demographics by school, the diversity of the school staff, and it flags schools that are veering into racial isolation.

It's a really valuable tool. So when I couldn't find it, I asked for it. And officials told me the diversity department no longer existed. It had been shut down in the spring when its director left the district. And they had no idea where this report was. Lost in the shuffle it seemed. So I asked again. And again. And again. And finally...they found it!

What it revealed was shocking. Lockeland Elementary was now 88% white, making it the whitest school in the entire district. And its number of low-income children had shrunk to almost none. Now, there are *a lot* of neighborhoods in Nashville that are way whiter and way wealthier than Lockeland's, so this was a pretty stunning development.

So shocking, that I tweeted about it with a head explosion emoji—which I don't use lightly, especially in my professional capacity.

When Chris Wood, Heather's husband and Momo and Oscar's dad, saw this news, he decided it was time to revive the conversation about how to integrate Lockeland, especially since it was now the whitest school in the city.

CW: I posted something on the PTO page saying, 'hey, if you guys, this is important people, you should get in touch with your, you know, community and elected representatives and let them know.' And it kind of snowballed into the meeting happening.

MK: So, he organized a meeting at the community center nearby—just before Halloween. The first of two over the course of a few months. The clip you heard up top, of Ken Stark, was from the second meeting.

Initially, Chris was worried that no one would show up.

CW: At like five minutes till six. Half the chairs were empty and I heard someone walk in saying, 'you know, gosh, I thought there were gonna be more people here.' And then at ten after 6:00, it was standing room only. And I was like, 'OK.'

MK: The room was overflowing with mostly Lockeland parents—Heather was there, so was Clay Haynes, the joyful bubble guy from episode 4. Willie Sims was there, too. His daughter, once the lone Black child in her kindergarten class, was now the lone Black child in her second-grade class.

The district councilman was also there. As well as a bunch of Metro Schools officials—important ones—the director's deputy among them. Even a state rep showed up.

Chris said he didn't know how a bunch of white folks talking about race would feel with a big furry microphone floating around the room, so my colleague sat in the corner to record.

CW: Let's go ahead and get started. We may have some other people joining us, but my name is Chris Wood....

MK: Chris gives a long preamble about his, and others', previous efforts to recruit families of color and how they fell short. People shift somewhat uncomfortably in their seats.

Then, the district's school board member, Christiane Buggs, speaks up.

CB: I just want to be frank that we have to have this conversation in a way that takes into consideration what a number of Black families experience. You know, when I've actively sought out families in the Cayce area or just that live in that neighborhood and asked them about Lockeland, some of them just really have never heard of it...

MK: She goes on to say that other Black families see the school and think it's really not a school for them—for their Black child.

Buggs is Black, and she grew up in Nashville. So as she speaks, the authority and confidence on this issue comes through clearly. This is what she hears from her constituents. While these white parents are all clamoring to get their kids into this school, half the neighborhood doesn't even know it exists. And if they do, they don't see it as an option for their child.

One Lockeland dad is frustrated that the school is being singled out. There are so many schools in the neighborhood, he says. Everyone is competing for students. It's not Lockeland's fault they ended up the whitest school in the district.

WHITE FATHER: One of the great things about Lockeland whether it's a blue ribbon school or not is kids just want to be able to walk to a school that is close with the kids that they play with.

MK: Then another parent starts talking.

LOCKELAND MOTHER: ...segregated around the school...

MK: This is a bit hard to hear, I know, but she says the neighborhood is segregated. Why is Lockeland the topic of conversation, when it's the neighborhood schools that need improvement?

LM: Why is the conversation, how do we integrate Lockland and not how do we improve our zoned school, which also a magnet school.

MK: She's talking about Warner. In this neighborhood there are the schools families are zoned for, their neighborhood school, and then there are the choice schools, the charters, the magnets.

And what she's saying is a classic response—a sort of 'get your own house in order.' Like, we chose Lockeland because the other schools are so crappy. So don't blame us for its success.

Warner's principal, Ricki Gibbs, had planned to just sit and listen at this meeting. To make sure Warner was a presence there...remember, he's trying to recruit families like this to *his* school. But at this point, he literally jumps out of his seat. He can't hold his tongue any longer.

RG: Good evening. My name is Ricky Gibbs. I have the privilege and honor of serving as principal at Warner Arts Magnet Elementary School...

MK: As he talks, he's gives the school's address, but he also namedrops the trendy café right across the street. He figures these folks probably know the café better than the school. One of Gibbs' special talents is reading a room. He's very diplomatic.

RG: And it's—it's interesting that we can, we sit there and have that conversation, because obviously, six-foot, two-hundred-40-pound Black guy. I was raised in poverty in the middle of Miami. So, I can understand my families that come from Cayce. But we've been doing, a huge recruitment effort.

MK: Warner is working hard to recruit white families, he says. To integrate the school. Then he goes on, in a sort of a rebuttal mixed with a sales pitch for Warner. Since Gibbs arrived at the school, its students have skyrocketed from making almost no academic growth at all, to making the most the district measure.

RG: So from December to this point, we've gone from a Level 1 school to a Level 5 school. **[applause]** I tell people this is the year that we get over that hump.

MK: You know Gibbs likes to take the excuses off the table. And now that he had, it was time to get down to the brass tax.

RG: So now the conversation has to become what can we do to make our schools reflective of our community? Because by having such strong sub-group isolation at two schools, we in turn are preaching to our students. Well, at home, I tell you, you should love everybody, be friends with everybody. But I only want you to be educated with this group.

MK: I'm gonna pause here because, if you haven't noticed, the amount of coded language in this room could stun an elephant. Even Principal Gibbs uses it... "sub-group isolation." It all feels so clinical. Like everyone is avoiding talking about race. But that's exactly what they're doing. This is all about race.

Still, the Department of Education prefers "sub-group isolation," and so Gibbs will follow lingo. But what he needs is for white parents to visit his school—their neighborhood school—and realize it's not as terrible as they thought.

RG: You're gonna pick what's best for your baby. Like, I get that. But before you make a choice, or you talk to someone who is thinking about making a choice. Tell them to visit their zoned school.

MK: Christie Lewis, Lockeland’s principal, has yet to say a word. In fact, she will only speak once. And honestly, it’s slightly awkward. A parent asks the two principals what their staff diversity looks like. Gibbs gets up and says it’s about 55% white, and 40% Black.

RG: I want my babies to come in and see somebody that they can relate to.

MK: Then it’s Lewis’ turn...

CL: For Lockleand we have about... probably 80% white... there's probably....

MK: She says Lockeland’s teachers are 80% white, 10% Black and 10% Hispanic.

And Let’s just say those numbers land with a thud. They’re also padded. According to the same report that prompted this meeting, Lockeland’s certified teaching staff is 89% white, 7% Black and 4% Latino.

Tamika White, a Metro Schools employee implores the white parents to please, invest in every child—not just their own. They have the power, and the resources to spare.

TAMIKE WHITE: You guys, word of mouth, Facebook groups. Y’all talk. So if John say ‘go to Warner’, Emma’s gonna say, ‘Oh my kids are going to Warner!’ Y’all stick together. Just spread the word. Come together like y’all do for everything else. About dogs, stores, whatever. It’s East Nashville, so it’s about you guys coming together as a people and deciding what’s really important. This is a conversation that has been long overdue. We don’t want to be 25 years later, having this same conversation about why Quay can’t go to school with John. It’s not worth it. It’s really not.0

MK: Heather Wood, the white mother who enrolled her daughter Marian in Warner and whose husband organized this meeting, stands up. She’s been wrestling with this issue for two years

now. And finally, it's her turn to speak. She takes a deep breath, holding a set of notes in her hand. She seems nervous. Like she wants to make sure she stays on script.

HW: So, I mean like I could literally talk about this for like 14 hours, so I may restrain myself to like this piece of paper. You know, we have a lot of residents who are very progressive and, and public officials who are progressive. And they want these—all our schools to be integrated and equitable. But as we obviously know, if you walk into our schools, that's not what we have. One of my favorite writers said, you know, 'there's no segregation fairy,' like we're we're doing it now. And I feel like somebody has to take far-reaching, inconvenient actions to reverse that trajectory.

MK: What Heather is saying to these families is that they did this. As they sit here wringing their hands over the issue of diversity, they need to look inside themselves—at their actions, at their expectations. The only way things will change, is if white families—these families—start making different choices for their own children.

HW: As a community, if we let this kind of separation exist, even if they were all blue-ribbon schools, we are still accepting a dual society for our kids. And they're going to ask us why. And I don't know what the answer is. I just want, like it's our job we're the adults. And I think we need to try to fix it for them. For all of them. **[applause]**

MK: Honestly, I was a little surprised at these applause. Heather's comment was a sobering one. But it seemed a sense of optimism had crept into the room. A sense that change was right around the bend.

But the district hadn't proposed any concrete ideas. And Warner's newfound success offered a good distraction from the more difficult issue.

For Principal Gibbs, though, the meeting was much more solemn. It had rattled him. This was a play he hadn't practiced for.

The next morning, I followed up with Gibbs.

RG: It was—You could tell the room was kind of tense.

MK: Was last night something that you knew was coming?

RG: Nah, No. You know I keep telling folks. I took this job to turn around the school. Like I—That's my work. I know how to turn around schools. 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. I was perfectly fine with just sitting in a room listening. But once you—once you call my school out. I just can't sit back at that point. Like I—the work we're doing is so powerful and so life-changing. I can't let folks who are not knowledgeable of the work speak on it. So if we want to speak about the work. I need to educate you on it. You need to come see it for yourself, and then speak on it. But you can't speak on it if you've never been in the building. You're only going by hearsay that, that doesn't work for me.

MK: This was the first time I'd heard Principal Gibbs admit just how difficult this job really is. That it's different than what he anticipated. He had no idea the dynamics of this neighborhood would pose such an obstacle. He's fighting against assumptions. He's fighting against privilege—white privilege. And he's fighting against systems shaped by the district's desire to keep those white families happy.

It seemed to me that Gibbs' sheer, unbending optimism was being challenged.

Many white parents in the neighborhood simply didn't see a problem. And if they did, they wanted the district to fix it. To hand deliver a solution that would bring more children of color to their school.

Well, there was a time not that long ago when an idea was floated that would have gotten more Black kids—from all over the neighborhood—to Lockeland. And it did *not* go well.

That's coming up after the break.

[BREAK]

MK: If the meeting had made anything clear, it was that the issue was far from resolved. And those white Lockeland parents were asking the district to take action in whatever form possible. They wanted some options put on the table. But the truth is, a bold plan had been presented, just five years earlier, by another director of schools to another group of East Nashville parents.

JESSE REGISTER: What I saw was an opportunity that it was to create schools there that would attract a diverse student population—racially and socio-economically.

MK: That's Jesse Register, the former superintendent of Nashville's public schools.

JR: There was a negative reaction to the proposal that I did not anticipate.

MK: In 2014, after a record number of the neighborhood's schools ended up on the state's Priority List—the lowest performing schools in Tennessee, he decided to propose drastic measures.

What he called “a third way” to fix East Nashville's struggling schools.
This is Register at the board meeting where he announced the plan.

JR: I propose that we convert the East Nashville corridor to an All Choice Zone. An all choice zone would contain all successful schools with every parent in east Nashville having choices among high performing zoned schools, charter schools or magnet schools.

MK: There were too many schools in the neighborhood, Register explained. 27 in total—and more in the works. And simply not enough kids to go around. And many parents—both Black

and white, though mostly white—were choosing charters and magnets rather than their assigned neighborhood schools.

JR: Leaving high concentrations of underserved children in some zoned schools.

Register had experience in school desegregation. He'd lead Hamilton County schools, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, just after it consolidated its city and county schools. It was controversial merger divided along race, with the majority white county taking control of Chattanooga's majority Black schools. And he'd done a similar merger in North Carolina before that. So this was familiar territory to him.

JR: Desegregation was really what I had done in—in those mergers that I had been in. I had been doing that for 15 years. So I felt like I had some background for doing the kind of work that was needed in Nashville.

MK: Register's thinking was that by making the neighborhood all choice, and eliminating automatic enrollment to assigned neighborhood schools, the playing field would be more level. The district would supply transportation to every school in the neighborhood...not just the assigned schools. And every parent would make a choice and participate in this system that right now empowered so many white parents over Black ones. In large part because a number of Black families didn't know about all their options, or they simply couldn't access some schools without a bus.

See, Nashville's schools has a blanket policy that they don't offer transportation to magnet schools. And Lockeland is one of those schools.

Register figured with the district's full-throated commitment to school choice in East Nashville, most every parent would choose a good school for their child. Yes, some schools would fail, but only because kids had access, real access, to better ones. It was the basic economics of supply and demand.

There was so much choice here, and it was far too late to turn the clock back on that. So why not just lean in, he thought...way in.

JR: There was not a plan to eliminate zones. It was to just open enrollment so that if parents wanted to make a different choice, they could do in that area, and transportation would be provided. So that children who lives in the, you know, public housing, for example, could be bussed away and wouldn't have to just rely on a school that was in walking distance.

MK: But this proposal to open up the entire neighborhood with kids able to go to any school, and to send buses to every single one, it divided the neighborhood...in large part along racial lines.

Most of those for the plan were Black.

BLACK FATHER: I keep hearing about segregation and change and choices. It's not about politics. It's not about charters. It's about the kids.

MK: And most of those against the plan were white.

WHITE MOTHER: This plan would have MNPS simply close those schools and move those kids around. Leaving and students and their parents to navigate and extremely complicated and possibly unfair lottery system.

MK: Those who opposed the plan latched on to this notion of choice, of charters and all the politics swirling around them. And they had reason—Register also wanted to possibly close a school and convert another to a charter.

The group, called East Nashville United, was made up of almost exclusively white parents—the majority of whom had children at Lockeland and Dan Mills: two high performing, in-demand elementary schools.

The few Black parents in the group had kids in Inglewood Elementary, an under-performing neighborhood school that was quite vulnerable to a charter takeover. And they wanted the chance to turn their school around.

JAI SANDERS: Inglewood the community believes that our faculty has the skills to move the school forward. Choice is a respectable goal, but to improve the schools you must support the schools.

Thank you.

MK: It seemed to me, that those with the most to lose were the Inglewood parents—their school was at risk of closing.

The parent you just heard there is Jai Sanders. His daughter attended Inglewood Elementary. And he and his wife, Tara, were the only Black members of East Nashville United. They were also the only members with a child in a high poverty school at risk of closure. So when all these white people arrived. He thought, huh...

JS: But none of them have kids in our school. So, I don't really understand why they're here. But they are and they're organizing. So let's go with it.

MK: They had political clout, media connections. And Sanders was willing to do whatever it took to save his neighborhood school. So he welcomed the backing.

But Sanders was right to be flummoxed. The fact that so many Lockeland parents were adamant about preserving neighborhood schools was ironic.

Because Lockeland is not a neighborhood school. It's a magnet school, meaning all those same parents had opted out of their neighborhood school to enroll at Lockeland. And what they cared about was preserving *Lockeland*. Honestly, it made their comments feel a bit contrived. But man they were mad. They wrote letters. They published op-eds. They spoke at board meetings. They yelled at community meetings.

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

OK, you're funded by a charter entity and that's why you're so passionate about it.

JOHN HAUBENREICH: We've been suffering through this turmoil for years now, and all it does is distract us from those kids in those schools who are crying out for our support.

MK: They got so mad that Register had to issue an open letter to East Nashville's families where he said explicitly that he would not change Lockeland's priority zone. But simply try to look for ways to "expand its reach...does it mean adding or opening up seats at Lockeland? Maybe."

Register is now retired, living in Charleston, South Carolina. In fact, this incident was so taxing, so volatile, that it pushed Register into early retirement.

JR: The real reason I decided to retire at that time, was because I was just stuck. I didn't want to spend the rest of my career in a political fight.

MK: Like, when parents got up and were so vehemently opposed to the plan. What did you see like the core or the crux of their argument?

JR: I think there was a fear of losing what they had. And particularly the Lockeland parents, you know, they're they're understandably they're very protective of the program there. You know, honestly, it may have been racially motivated by some, but I think more than that, a fear of just losing what they perceive to be a good school, and with a change, perhaps a loss of what they consider to be a very high-performing school.

And it was and I'm sure it still is, although it's not diverse.

MK: East Nashville is a progressive neighborhood. None of the white families were going to say outright that this was about race. This was about protecting their schools. But what about protecting the Black kids languishing in the schools that were struggling?

For some, the motivation was clear. Sonnye Dixon was the education chair at the NAACP for years. He was instrumental in negotiating the 1998 desegregation settlement...when I called him to ask his take on the dust-up over Register's All Choice plan, this is what he told me.

SONNYE DIXON: The pathology of what was going on at that particular time was that—that people would want to be with their own people. But there was a risk that when we're listening to them and giving them the choice that some undesirable people may make the choice. That if we have this very safe and protected school because everybody knows somebody. What happens with a stranger? It was a wonderful conception, but I don't think the community was willing to take the risk.

MK: But Dixon wished they had. Because it would have been a chance to have *every* family choose a school, not just some families. Dixon said he had ideas for outreach and opening neighborhood information centers to help families learn about their choices. The fact is, Dixon knew that many Black families weren't exercising choice in the same way white families were because they didn't know about their options. The maze of school choice was completely overwhelming. And he wanted to help guide them—show them that they didn't have to be relegated to underperforming neighborhood schools if they didn't want to be. It was the same argument A.Z. Kelley had made for his children back in 1955. He wanted the choice to attend the school he felt best for his children, and because of its resources, that was a white school.

Another mother in the neighborhood felt the same way as Dixon. Carol Zeigler is white, and her son Ezra is biracial. His father is a Black man from Kenya. She attended most all the meetings

around this issue of the All Choice Zone. And the yelling and the grandstanding by white parents...it was clear to her what they were really saying.

CAROL ZEIGLER: So I felt like it was it was ninety eight percent about race and fear. And I felt like...My impression of that whole thing was like, we don't want *these* kids from over here come into our school, right? No. And the dangerous part is I wish people would just say that, because then you know what you're dealing with. But they wouldn't. They couched in all these, you know, P.C. terms. So it's like, 'oh, no, it's not about that. It's just about this BS.' It's because you're racist. Right. But no one wants to actually admit that.

MK: In the end the plan almost completely fizzled. Register retired. The neighborhood didn't become an all-choice zone. Despite hours of community meetings, and the formation of a taskforce. It was totally squashed. Except for one thing: A charter network did takeover a neighborhood school. The almost all Black, Kirkpatrick Elementary, located right in the middle of the James Cayce public housing complex. For Lockeland parents, though, absolutely nothing had changed.

PARENT:...I don't know if there is anything you can do to like share funds from the Parent Teacher Organizations....

MK: It's now January 2020, this is the second meeting of Lockeland parents to talk about how to diversify the school. At the community center right next to the low-income housing complex. Lockeland's Principal, Christie Lewis, is telling parents there really isn't much she can do. There are just so few open spots at the school every year, around 30—out of 300 students overall. And, she says, Lockeland's success was hard earned.

CL: It's taken a lot of work over the last nine years to get to this point. And so I say that with a lot of passion because we've had parents come together and work together.

We've had teachers that committed to staying, and our retention rate is high, but it's taken a lot of work to get to that point. And our budget is very minimal.

MK: She's talking about her budget because it was brought up earlier that Warner gets Title 1 funds from how many low-income kids it has. \$130,000 this year. Lockeland, though, doesn't get that money because they don't have enough low-income children.

CL: The PTO does all that they can. Tooth and nail to raise funds in order for us to have the things that—some of the extra things that we have. But it's definitely, our budget isn't near what yours is.

MK: Lewis is essentially envious of federal money used to close the gap for poor kids. This is *not* apples to apples. Her school has almost no poor kids. So they don't need this money. Period.

This year Warner used their Title 1 money to pay for essential things—a 3rd grade teacher, for the school's art teacher, and for all the school supplies kids need that their families can't afford—pencils, notebooks, calculators.

The fact is, most Lockeland parents already *have* the resources they need to ensure their kids have the best possible education. But they're not bringing those resources to their zoned schools.

A Black woman sitting just across from Lewis knows this well. Pippa Meriwether is now the principal for a school on the southeast side of the city. But for 15 years she taught and was the principal at Kirkpatrick Elementary. The school just feet from this very building. And school filled with nearly all Black children living in poverty.

PW: One of the things that I continually experienced when I was principal at Kirkpatrick was whenever we had white families that came into the school and they saw that a

majority of students and staff were African American, the next thing you know they were going to the board trying to get a special transfer. Saying that the babysitter lived over here or over there. And so as much as you want Cayce residents, African American families to come into Lockeland, Ricki, you, all these other schools desire for white families to come in and give them a chance also. So it's not a one way thing. It goes both ways. And this dynamic is across the district. It's not just here it's across the district.

MK: Her comment is strikingly direct, and brutally honest. And it seems to galvanize one white mother, who waits her turn and then starts to speak up.

WHITE MOTHER: ... I didn't hear....

MK: Her kid doesn't go to Lockeland. In fact, her family moved out of Lockeland's priority zone because she was so disturbed by all of this.

She asks if anyone at the meeting from the Cayce Homes.

WHITE MOTHER: ...I'm making an assumption here, but I didn't hear during introductions anyone say that they were a resident Cayce. And so it, it makes me feel deeply uncomfortable to sit in this room and talk about why people who live in Cayce may not be sending their kids to Lockeland, when really I think the fundamental conversation needs to be, especially among the people that I see in this room, around what individual choices people are making. Perhaps a 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. Right? Send them in Inglewood. Come to Rosebank. Right? There's a lot of great options for families. And I think we just really as many conversations that we're having about what we're doing to market to families who may live in Cayce, I think that there's actually a more—an equally fundamental question about what decisions individual

white, affluent parents are having about where they choose to send their students. Because fundamentally that is going to have to change to prevent the—well—to reverse what's, what's happened in this community, which is a re-segregation of the schools in this very small pocket of Nashville.

MK: This is important. What she is telling these white families, is it's not on Black families to beat a path to their door. It's time for white families to take on the burden of integration. Black families have done it long enough. It's time for white families to do that work. Unless they do, nothing will change.

But the other parents are silent. And they hardly even have time to let the gravity of what's just been said sink in. The councilman immediately jumps in to break up this awkward moment. Says it's getting time to wrap things up.

BW: We are just past 6:30.

HW: I'll be quick, yeah.

MK: Then, Heather stands up.

HW: Yeah, I just have to say, as a as a dual Lockland-Warner parent, it does feel silly to talk about trying to convince Black people to send their kids to Lockland, which is full when Warner has room for 500 kids. People are a lot more honest when you're just hanging out at parties and barbecues and stuff. And the stuff that really is said is things like, 'I know this sounds horrible, but they have washing machines where the kids have to bring their laundry. My child will never go there.' 'I'm sure East Magnet is a great school, but it's got a very different complexion. Dorito?' You know, and these are people who are super liberal. They have Bernie Sanders, President Obama coffee-table books, like these are self-selected progressive people.

MK: Put together, these comments are a mic drop moment. They echo through the room.

Reminding people that in some way they had created this problem. It's a bitter pill to swallow. And unlike the first meeting, Heather gets no applause. Just a nod to wrap it up from the district councilman. It's time to go. The community center is closing. It's dinnertime.

[LAUGHTER AND ROOM SOUND]

MK: Nothing has been accomplished.

After the meeting I ask Lockeland's principal, Christie Lewis if she'd be willing to talk with me. She declines; says I should really talk to the district. They are the final say.

I left curious about this idea to merge the schools. Sure, it was said in jest, but it was all I had to work with. No other options were presented. And nothing else seemed to have moved the needle. Lockeland's mailers hadn't worked, the All Choice plan was squashed, the buses were too expensive. Honestly, I was more confused than ever. To me, this merger idea might not be half crazy.

So, I followed up with the spokesman for Metro Schools, Sean Braistead.

I email him asking if he could make anyone available, preferably Stark, to unpack this idea of merging Warner and Lockeland...or any other ideas they had on the issue.

When I get a response from Braistead he tells me Stark's comment was "more of a hypothetical" and declines to make him available.

So I give Sean Braisted him a call...

[PHONE RINGING]

SEAN BRAISTED: This is Sean, can I help you?

MK: Hi Sean, it's Meribah.

SB: Hey Meribah. How are you doing?

MK: Hey good, I just got your email so I wanted to call you. So you're not having any luck having anybody willing to talk to me.

SB: You know it's not one of those things where I can just say, demand that they do it...

MK: This was not the first conversation we'd had on this topic. I'd been asking for interviews with Principal Lewis and other district officials for months and getting nowhere, so I figured I'd record this call. He told me that my past reporting on the issue had made people angry. It seemed I was being blackballed now, or at least heavily avoided. I tell him it's hard to give their side a fair shake if they won't talk to me.

SB: I get what you're saying. And I think it's just a matter of the situation itself is going to be hard for them to sort of speak candidly about it. And because there is just a lot of politics and everything involved in the matter.

MK: It was clear. They didn't want to touch this issue. It was political dynamite. And it had been for decades.

MK: The thing is the parents are asking the district what they can do, and I'm just trying to be a conduit for what the parents are asking. But then the district doesn't want to talk to me.

MK: He offered to try and get me an off the record conversation with a district official who oversaw East Nashville's schools. At this point...I was desperate. So I agreed.

SB: I mean, I'm happy to set that up and you guys could talk about it a little more.

MK: Ok, ok, that would be great. That would be great.

SB: Ok, let me see if I can get him on board with that, and I'll let you know.

MK: Ok, thanks Sean, I appreciate it. Ok, bye.

MK: I didn't get the meeting.

Next week on The Promise...

MNPS EMPLOYEE: You are our target parent. You're white. We need white parents to help integrate these schools.

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

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

MK: Next week on The Promise.

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 Trepczynki.

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