

Season 2 The Promise

Episode 8: The Final Exam

Meribah Knight

MERIBAH KNIGHT: Previously on The Promise...

JON WREN: I mean the system is rigged. The system is rigged against parents. It's rigged against schools.

SHANNIECE: A lot of kids that come from this type of background they go down the — you know what I'm saying? They go down the gutter. They jump into gangs. They — you know what I'm saying? — drop out of school.

NIKKI HUGHES: He was supposed to be in my class, and I was supposed to make a difference.

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

MK: It's February 27, 2020, at 1:30 sharp, when the shiny black SUV pulls up to Warner Elementary.

[CAR LOCKS]

MK: The school is in tip-top shape. The hedges are freshly trimmed and mulched. School custodians have cleaned every window, changed out every dingy ceiling tile. Jon Wren, the school administrator, swapped out his usual khakis for a suit. The librarian, who prefers Adidas shell toes and jeans, is wearing a dress. Principal Ricki Gibbs even pulled out his extra fancy

brown leather dress shoes for the occasion. It's a big day. Why? Because Tennessee's Governor Bill Lee is coming to visit.

RG: Welcome, welcome.

BILL LEE: How you doing?

RG: Rockin' and rollin', rockin and rollin'. Welcome to East Nashville.

BL: Happy to be hear. Got a beautiful day to visit a beautiful school.

MK: Gov. Bill Lee, the 50th governor of Tennessee, a Republican, is visiting Warner today along with the state's commissioner of education, Penny Schwinn and House Speaker Cameron Sexton.

RG: We're gonna go ahead and make our way in.

MK: They're here because Warner is doing so well. The kids have made such big academic gains, and word is getting around.

RG: Gov. Lee, Speaker Sexton, Commissioner Schwinn, it's an honor to have you here at Warner Arts Magnet.

MK: Gibbs passes out folders to the group, with data inside showing Warner's progress over the past 18 months. On one sheet is a scatterplot of school growth across the state. And there's Warner: a little yellow dot all on its own in the right corner—an exceptional outlier. A school that has far and away shown more growth than any other.

RG: We have started outpacing almost every school in the state, especially if they serve a population with at least 80% economically disadvantaged. And that' something that we're excited about, because we tell everyone economically disadvantaged just tells you how our boys and girls eat, it has nothing to do with how they learn.

MK: This comment made me think about BJ, the fourth grader in Dr. Hughes' class. He'd aced his report card. And this year had transformed BJ from a smart, but unfocused student, to a determined, studious one. He's the reason Gov. Lee is here today. Though I am sure to hear that would make his jaw drop and his brow furrow. But it's true. His story is Warner's story. And Gov. Lee is impressed.

BL: We're here because, you have outcomes. And you are doing, you know, you go to the places where you see the work being done well, and you learn how that's happening, and you take those best practices and you lay them out across the state. So you're doing some things really really well here and you should be very proud. We're grateful. Now show us how you're doing it.

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 the “Great Equalizer,” but more and more feels like the Great Divider: public education.

Episode 8: The Final Exam

After Gov. Lee's visit to the school in late February, Warner was ready to grind until the state tests in April. When Principal Gibbs took charge of Warner, he had an ambitious goal of getting 33% of its kids testing proficient in math and reading. Remember, when he arrived at Warner those numbers in the low single digits, very low.

But today, according to the recent district test, that one that predicts how kids will do on the big end-of-the-year state test, almost 40% of Warner's kids are on track to hit proficiency. Plus, it had the most kids of any elementary school hit the district's goal in math.

Showing that progress on the big state test would take Warner from one of the lowest-performing schools in Tennessee to one of the best—in less than two years!

And it will allow them to get off the Priority List. That Scarlett Letter that's been on this school and been one of the primary obstacles in its effort to recruit new white families.

Gibbs and his teachers have set the stage. Now it's just time to hunker down and work, work, work until the test.

NH: Two times length plus two times width.

BJ: One woman named Phyllis Wheatley wrote a poem.

NH: I told y'all we have a focus of math. Because y'all didn't do well. We trying to rewrite that story.

MK: And then, just five days after Gov. Lee's visit...

NEWS CHANNEL 5: Right now, tornado on the ground. It is hitting Channel 5. It is hitting our TV station at this time moving through our parking lot...

MK: The tornado that tore through Nashville, cut a path right through East Nashville, narrowly missing Warner and Lockeland. But it ravaged the rest of neighborhood.

NCS: You need to be in your safe place right now. This is on the ground.

MK: It plucked off roofs and crushed buildings like petulant giant, its winds hitting 165 mph. I know its force. Because after hitting Warner's neighborhood, it continued on to my home about 8 miles east. It ripped our roof straight off, shattered our windows as I ran to the basement holding my toddler son.

In the wake of the disaster, school closed for three days as the city and the neighborhood wrapped its mind around this destruction. Spring break was just a week after that.

Commented [ES1]: So did they reopen that Friday? Like, they were closed Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday?

Then came the virus.

ABC: The latest on Coronavirus—that disease now has an official name. It's COVID-19.

MK: Everything was different. But also, it wasn't. Children still needed to be educated. They still needed to be fed. They still needed school. And Principal Gibbs was still in motion, still thinking about Warner's goals: the state test, the ground yet to be covered, the white families he still needed to recruit. He'd been playing catch up for the past year, and he wasn't about to stop now.

After resettling my family in a rental and salvaging what we could from our home, I finally caught up with Gibbs on March 16. School was on spring break, but it looked like kids would be out for much longer. Maybe another month, maybe the rest of the year; maybe too long to take that big final test.

RG: This is Ricki.

MK: Hey Ricki it's Meribah.

RG: Hey, how are ya?

MK: I'm good. How are you doing?

RG: Oh good. I'm good. I'm trying to try to stay safe and stay healthy. We're in some interesting times, right now. I was planning on working, because in my mind this is that, that last strategic point to finish strong and push hard. But now, now it's kind of like I'm just in a holding pattern. Actually, that's the district calling right now. Hold on, I'll merge—I'll merge you in, so you can hear it, too.

MK: Okay, great.

ADRIENNE BATTLE: Hello, this is Dr. Adrienne Battle calling to inform you that schools will remain closed through April 3rd in response to the public health emergency caused by COVID-19. We will continue to monitor the situation and inform you as soon as possible if this timeline will be extended or when we will resume classes.

MK: It seemed everything was in limbo.

AB: I'm keeping the health and well-being of all of our students, families and staff in my thoughts and planning during this difficult time. Thank you. To repeat this message press star. To opt out of informational calls press nine.

RG: So we're shut down until April 3.

MK: Oh man, oh man. So, yeah, I mean, what's going through your mind right now? You guys just got the great MAP scores...

RG: You know, we gotta—if we're playing sports. We got a sprained ankle right now, and we had a little injury. But we're just... 'Coach put me back in the game!'

MK: It's always sports with you.

RG: Everything relates back to it. We're just ready to get back in the game and get it going.

MK: At this moment, Gibbs' can-do attitude kicked into high gear. His kids needed him, and he was determined to be there.

RG: I'm just really looking at how can we make plans to check in with our families, to make sure that our boys and girls are continuing their progress? You know, they're gonna be home for what's about, you know, almost three weeks, almost a month. So just really trying to figure out what plans we want to put in place to get, you know, work and things of that nature in our parents' hands. Because one thing we do know, if we put it in our parents hands our parents do a great job, of making sure that our boys and girls, you know, follow through on what they need to do.

MK: Gibbs told his teachers that they'd be having conference calls to discuss the next steps. He knew 70% of his kids didn't even have home computers. And about 20% didn't have internet. And so he was ready to meet his kids where they were.

RG: We going try to create some packets, so I'm gonna probably create a day where people can just stop by the school and pick them up. And if that's not an option, we'll just get a team together, head over the Cayce and drop them off. Just we can't—we can't afford for our boys and girls to have three weeks of no instructional, no instructional time. And it'll put them too far behind to close out the school year.

MK: Honestly, to me this sounded dire. But Gibbs didn't seem fazed. And if he was, he wasn't letting on.

RG: I just look at it as another challenge. It gives us a checkpoint. It helps us measure where our infrastructure is in place. You know, life gives you lemons. You make lemonade.

MK: Gibbs had been pushing so hard all year, he had way too much momentum to make such an abrupt stop. To concede to this crisis.

So he gathered his teachers by phone the very next day...

RG: We got the whole crew on the line.

MK: Grade by grade, to hatch a plan to put together packets for kids with lessons in them and practice sheets.

Ms. Bain, the first-grade teacher, was ready.

MB: Can we start rolling on this, like on Monday, come in Monday and start working on it? Is that what the plan is?

RG: Yeah, so that's—that's totally up to you all. Ideally, I would love to have it in parents' hands by middle of next week.

MK: Another first grade teacher, Ms. Eastwood, offered to make YouTube videos.

VALERIE EASTWOOD: I feel like that's the one thing that our kids—if they can access anything, it's YouTube.

MK: Plans were set, they'd gather at the school, socially distanced, on Monday, get the packets together and drop them at families' homes later in the week.

RG: Ok, cool. Alright. Appreciate y'all!

MK: But the next afternoon there was an abrupt change.

Gibbs sends an email to staff... "*Good afternoon Heroes. I was informed this afternoon that we will not be able to move forward with our plans.*"

He didn't exactly say why. Only that they needed to comply with social distancing. But he told me later that a supervisor had called him, said delivering the packets and having teachers in a building, even far apart, was just too risky.

With COVID, there were so many unknowns. What was safe? What wasn't? It had everyone nervous.

But then, while Warner's students were sitting idle, I started to hear about other schools that hadn't missed a beat. Emailing worksheets and lessons, doing weekly Zoom calls with kids. Schools like Lockeland.

LOCKELAND PARENT 1: The teachers at our school have done a fantastic job of trying to be accessible and trying to include the kids and to try to give them ideas of things to work on.

LOCKELAND PARENT 2: So the 4th grade teachers are sending home weekly packets, or not sending them home. Sending you a link so you can download the packet and print it out.

MK: At Warner, this wasn't an option. Remember 20% of its kids didn't even have internet and almost three-quarters didn't own a computer. The only way Warner was going to get kids what they needed to keep learning was to physically find them, but district wasn't letting that happen. It was too unsafe. So in the meantime, Gibbs and his teachers were losing momentum.

Then, finally, almost two weeks after Gibbs had tried to organize his teachers, the district changed its mind. Decided it would hand out its *own* packets along with free meals.

AB: This week we started providing printed materials.

MK: But these packets were more generic, not tailored to individual classes or where kids were at in the curriculum.

So I emailed Gibbs that same afternoon. "I'm still struggling to understand," I told him. I wondered, why packets were suddenly possible for the district, but when *Warner* had tried to do them, they were shut down?

That night, at 8:22pm I got a response. "*I heard the same thing,*" Gibbs wrote. "*I'm so turned off and disappointed with public education right now. I can really see why people walk away.*"

I'd never ever heard Gibbs talk like this. He was clearly frustrated, more frustrated than I'd ever seen him. So I called him the next morning to check in .

RG: Because I know for every day we miss, that's critical time and our boys and girls lives that they won't be able to make up.

MK: Gibb's was struggling, and to him the stakes couldn't be higher.

RG: That's the part that just tugged at my heart, that's—that's just super frustrating.

Because we only want to get back to ensure that those boys and girls have a great chance at life.

MK: He told me he'd been hearing about how quickly charter schools and private schools were responding to the crisis. They were handing out Chromebooks. Connecting with parents and kids. They were just so much more agile—so much less bureaucracy.

Gibbs felt handicapped.

And with no tours and all the community events shut down, the school's recruitment efforts had ground to a halt. On top of that, the big state test was about to be canceled. It was a mixed blessing. Yes, the pressure was off. But also, it meant Warner wouldn't get that definitive proof of success, of victory, not this year. Instead, Warner would remain on the state's Priority List, of lowest performing schools, despite all the work it had done this year, despite the fact that it was performing and growing and thriving like one of the best schools.

In the meantime, unable to hand-deliver materials to their students, teachers were desperately trying to connect with kids in other ways. And some were having more luck than others. For many, emails and texts went unreturned, phone numbers no longer worked. BJ, the fourth grader, had been totally unreachable. I couldn't get in touch with him. Neither had his teacher, Dr. Hughes, nor Selene Bignall, Warner's school counselor.

SB: The problem is that most of the phone numbers that I have, those numbers are not very reliable.

MK: Still, Ms. Bignall reveled in the small victories. Those kids she did finally reach.

SB: I was talking to one of my fourth graders, Maria. And she was telling me that, you know I asked, I said, ‘What is it? What do you miss the most?’ And she said, her friends, she missed her classmates the most. I said to her, ‘Maria, do you know how I give you a great big hug in the morning when you’re heading to your class after you get off the bus?’ She said, yes. I said, ‘what I want you to pretend right now is that I’m hugging you really really tight.’ She was laughing, and I could hear her mom laughing in the background, because I could just imagine she was hugging herself. It was so funny. We just laugh. Yeah. Yes. That was an awesome moment.

MK: But having a laugh and virtually hugging her students wasn’t going to fix the growing inequities. Ms. Bignall knew that. While many of Warner’s students—Black children—were home without computers and reliable internet, other kids—white kids, kids with means—were racing ahead.

I knew this, too. I’d seen the Facebook posts from parents at other schools, in more affluent areas of Nashville. They were swapping ideas about materials and lessons, making their own packets for their kids, even hiring private tutors and guides.

MK: I’m sure their parents are printing out stuff for them to do. Lessons.

Homeschooling. There’s been so many posts about homeschooling.

SB: And even Lockeland. They’re all on their iPads right now, working away.

MK: Mm hmm

SB: Mm hmm, they are. And you know. I don’t know, I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.

MK: As the weeks went on, school remained closed, and Warner’s teachers did their level best to keep their kids engaged and on track.

VALERIE EASTWOOD: Hi boys and girls. I miss you so much, and I just wanted to read you a little story today.

MK: They posted lessons to YouTube.

VE: Hello my Mathematicians! Today we're going to do a little math lesson.

MK: They kept calling and texting students. BJ was still unreachable. All my calls and texts to his mom went nowhere. Same for Dr. Hughes, his teacher. So the staff planned a car parade through Cayce, where most of Warner's kids live, BJ included. But then they decided against it when they realized the close quarters of the complex would pose its own risk. So many kids...all running out to say hi to their teachers...Public housing isn't built for social distancing.

It was early April, and I knew budget meetings were right around the corner. And with everything happening around COVID, with tours canceled and community events shut down, Warner was increasingly at a disadvantage in its efforts to recruit new white families. Which meant that the money it needed to keep this turnaround afloat could be at risk.

And Nashville's Mayor had just asked the district to slash \$100 million from the budget. With nobody spending money, the sales tax revenue that helps fuel public schools had evaporated.

It was not looking good.

When I followed up with Principal Gibbs I didn't hear back, which is really unusual.

Then he canceled the weekly staff meeting. Said they'd all meet the next week, on April 17th, via Zoom.

RG: So, I feel like we haven't seen each other in forever. As you know, we had our budget meeting last week, and we—we took some significant hits. Some of the things they were wanting us to do. I just couldn't live with. And I tell y'all all the time that I—one of my favorite quotes says 'I'm no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I'm changing things I cannot accept.' So if I cannot accept it, I just I am to the point now where I'll fight the battle. Because our boys and girls just don't—they don't deserve to

have a school gutted because of cost. But my job is to advocate for Warner. And it's simple as that.

MK: Gibbs began listing the casualties. Just 179 students were currently enrolled for the next school year, compared to 216 the previous year. And Warner's budget had been slashed by, more than \$200,000 dollars.

RG: We lost funding for our dance program. We lost funding for one of our deans. And we also lost funding for a classroom teacher. So all of those cuts had to be made. So, Mr. Robinson is going to be cut from the budget for next school year.

MK: Mr. Robinson, the Dean of Students and the guy in charge of behavior, was Gibbs' right-hand man. Robinson was so valuable to the school, not just because he was good at his job, but he'd grown up in the neighborhood. He'd gone to high school with a lot of the kids' parents. And he knew families and had connections with families in ways that no other staff member did.

But with only so much money to work with, Gibbs just couldn't make the numbers work.

The school had also lost money for Ms. Rattner, the mindfulness coach. She'd started the Be Well program—the yoga, the meditation—all of which had been so instrumental in curbing behavior issues.

I could see now, why Gibbs had gone dark. There wasn't any good news to share. The key pieces of Warner's recipe for success—the very things that had helped so many Black children and caught the attention of so many white families—the dance program, the yoga—were all about to get cut.

RG: You have to be around me when I get into a funk. I don't get into funks often, but I was pissed last week. And when I get pissed, I kind of shut off from the outside world. I was at my breaking point. I was like, you know what, I'm—I'm tired of fighting for kids. It's like, one person can't just consistently carry that burden on top of everything else

that's going on. Because I was at a point—I was like...I was going to say, 'Y'all can have Warner... Like I'm just...this. This is—This is too much.'

MK: I'd never seen Gibbs like this, his voice breaking. Ready to give up.

What shocked me the most was losing the dance teacher. As an arts magnet, the dance program was its marquee offering. This was a huge part of how the school was going to recruit white families. It was part and parcel of the federal magnet grant.

But here's the tricky thing about Nashville's federal money: it *cannot* be used for hiring teachers. It can be used for building stuff, for buying stuff, for marketing, even for hiring administrators—but it cannot be used on teachers.

So Warner, it seemed, was in a nearly impossible position. A top-notch dance studio and no dance teacher.

Then Jon Wren, Warner's site coordinator for the magnet grant, called MSAP, explained what this really meant.

JW: When the school received the MSAP grant and the decision was made to add dance, the district agreed to fund a dance position.

MK: Over Zoom he tells teachers that when the school received the federal grant, the district agreed to fund a dance teacher outside the standard school budget. And now, by cutting that position, they were going to, essentially, be in breach of contract with the feds. Which meant that the entire grant would be at risk...

JW: The Department of Education can either pull all of the funding, pause all of the funding, or pull the funding and require the district to refund the Department of Education all of the money that was spent. So we have to have a dance teacher. There is no ifs, ands or buts about it.

MK: But when Gibbs and Wren reminded the district of their commitment...

Commented [MK2]: Jakob this new bite is JW_sub...I kept the tail end of it in case the way he ends "dance position" sounds too weird and you need his next phrase. Then dip him down, make the volume a little lower so he's not competing with my narratin as much, and he will come back in that second bite.

JW: But you signed a contract saying you would fund a dance teacher and the district said, ‘Don’t care.’ Oh. There’s been a great month, everyone. So, we went back to the Department of Education and we said, “Hey...”

MK: It seemed without a dance teacher, to save an immediate \$75,000, the district was at risk of losing *all* the magnet money, \$15 million in total.

Still, Nashville schools wasn’t going to budge. But Wren and Gibbs, the eternal optimists, had an idea...

They went begging to the feds. Asking them to make an exception and pay for a teacher, this once, for just one year. And it was looking promising. They’d been reaching out to various officials—state and federal—to see if anyone could help.

JW: All of the goodwill that we’ve earned, like, we are cashing in all of those chips now on this. So keep the good thoughts going. Keep your prayers involved in that. I’m more confident than not. But this is—whew, this has been a lot.

MK: Three days later, the federal government agreed to let Warner use its grant money to fund the dance teacher.

[“WE ARE FAMILY” BY SISTER SLEDGE PLAYS]

MK: May 21, 2020. More than two months since classrooms were shut down. It’s the last day of school.

Not how the staff at Warner, or anyone really, pictured this day. But they’re making the best of it, celebrating what they can. They’re standing in the back parking lot of the school, music is blasting. There are balloons, goody bags for the kids.

RG: Yeah, I won elementary principal of the year.

MK: Gibbs was given the district's highest accolade, principal of the year, for his transformational work at Warner.

DAD: You worked a hard year, brother.

RG: Man, I appreciate it.

DAD: These kids need a leader to look up to. You know what I'm saying? Good luck to next year too.

RG: We gonna grind it out. All gas no breaks.

MK: Parents and students are picking up their belongings, saying final goodbyes to their teachers.

CAROL BAINES: Jocelin! Happy Summer. No more school!

DONNA CORLEW: Well you all enjoy your summer. We love you. We'll be thinking about you. I'm gonna call you and make sure you're reading Jarrell.

MK: Per usual, Ms. Corlew, the school secretary, is ribbing kids.

STUDENT: There's no network here!

DC: You're with Ms. Corlew right now so you don't need no kinda network. It's all about you and Ms. Corlew.

MK: I see Jon Wren and ask him if they have funding yet for the mindfulness coach. Last I checked she'd been slashed from the budget.

JW: Oooh, ummm, I put that in a bag I labeled 'problems I will deal with in June.' I gotta get at least about \$40,000.

MK: As students roll up, on foot and in cars, I keep scanning for BJ, the 4th grader. But I don't see him. I still hadn't been able to connect with him all this time. And last I checked neither had his teacher Dr. Hughes.

MK: Hey Reggie!

REGGIE CLAY: Hello. How you doing, how you doing?

MK: Then I see Reggie Clay, a friend of Dr. Hughes. She'd brought Reggie in to meet BJ in the middle of the year, thought he'd be a good mentor for him. He has a video production business and likes to do what he can to help kids in the neighborhood. He'd come some Fridays, bring popsicles for the class or Taco Bell for BJ, and they'd eat lunch together. He'd become a pretty regular fixture in BJ's life. Even taking him to a boxing match and out to eat.

Reggie said work had been slow, so he'd been trying to help in whatever way he could. Even with COVID bearing down on everyone. And BJ in particular was a worry.

RC: Dr. Hughes had some kids she hadn't gotten in contact with, so I ended up going around, walking around to their houses, knocking on the doors that she gave me. And we got eight more students hooked up.

MK: Oh great, did you talk to BJ? Because I haven't been able to reach him.

RC: I ended up talking to somebody that was at his house, and they said he'll be back. He's in Florida. That's what they said...

MK: BJ still hadn't signed up for a laptop, which the district had given out to kids a few weeks earlier. So he hadn't been participating in any of the virtual learning. Clearly, BJ was adrift, disconnected. And Reggie was concerned.

RC: That's been my third time going over there, but I am going to continue to go over there.

MK: Oh really, you went over three times?

RC: Yeah, yeah, I mean, just like I said, shoot, I am serious about this. And when you serious about it, you can't lay down at night. You know what I mean? You be troubled. And my heart been troubled to make sure that these kids continue their learning.

MK: Reggie said he used to run amok in this neighborhood, be a wild kid when he was young. And he needed to repay that debt. So he wasn't going to rest until he connected these kids back with their teachers and their classrooms. And most importantly that meant BJ.

As afternoon wound down, the kids came less and less. The staff seemed to ease into their own summer vacation mode.

Gibbs cranked up the music.

[MUSIC PLAYS]

MK: An old favorite, Johnnie Taylor. And like any Friday assembly, but this time just for his staff, Gibbs started to sing.

RG: I'm not gonna loose these last two dollars. What they going for? One's going for the bus fare. The other for the juke box.

DC: Yeahhhh. See y'all don't know nothing about that.

CB: I do, I know about the juke box!

RG: Every time I hear this song I just think about momma and them be sitting in the yard. Everybody playing cards. This come on everybody get up and start vibing. It's just feel good music.

MK: Gibbs is no stranger to overcoming struggle. It's woven into his life story. For him it's often come down to mind over matter.

But this school year had so much that was so far out of Gibbs' control. All he can do now is regroup and hope that summer will bring a fresh perspective. That's coming up after the break.

[BREAK]

MK: Hello.

AB: Hello, how are you?

MK: After asking for more than a year, I finally got an interview with someone from the school district, Director Adrienne Battle. Battle is a product of Nashville public schools. She's also Black. And she's navigating this unprecedented situation of trying to educate kids in the middle of a pandemic.

AB: We have been managing a public health crisis, right? Lots of factors, metrics that are out of our district control. But yet we must stay grounded in the priorities that are before us which are first and foremost our students.

MK: Dr. Battle is a guarded speaker, and sometimes ends up talking in jargony circles. But she says in the early days of the pandemic she tried, as fast as she could, to get a plan in place for families. But she knows it hasn't always gone smoothly.

Still, from my vantage point at Warner, it felt like death by a thousand cuts. I asked Dr. Battle if she had any comment on how Gibbs was so quickly shut down when he tried to deliver materials to his kids, while other schools I'd seen do it so quickly, electronically.

AB: There was a time where we just, we didn't know as much as we know today, and we still got a long way to go.

MK: Yeah, I mean, it was a chaotic time, I know. And I understand that it just, it was, you know, it was frustrating to see. It's like this is how the inequities happen, right? It's just like, someone's just got it all in order and all in place to do it the way that they need it to be done. And then a bunch of other kids, they just don't. And so they're gonna miss out.

MK: But my questions for Battle far outdated the pandemic. The disparities existed long before COVID came around.

So finally, I was able to ask what had been nagging at me for the better part of two years. Lockeland was now the whitest school in the entire city. So why was it given a pass, while Warner was bending over backwards to integrate?

MK: I mean, do you think it's OK that Lockeland Elementary is now whitest school in the entire city?

AB: You know, I don't think it's OK, per se. I think that we have some work to do, and I know that over the last year or two we've seen a little bit of an uptick, um at Lockeland with regards to diversity. I think we still got a lot of ways to go and we are studying what is happening.

MK: You mean, an uptick in it being white? Because it's gone from like 86 to 88 to 90 and I don't know what it is this year. Is that the uptick your talking about?

AB: No, it's a very slight uptick this year with regards to their representation.

SB: In kindergarten enrollment.

AB: Say it again?

SEAN BRAISTED: In regards to kindergarten enrollment.

MK: Do we know the breakdown of the kindergarten enrollment?

MK: That's Sean Braisted chiming in, the spokesman for the school district. It turns out this year Lockeland's kindergarten class of 62 kids, has five Black students in it. Last year it was just two

AB: But, you know, we know it could be better.

MK: Despite that increase though, Lockeland is still the whitest school in the entire city.

And at Warner, fewer than 10 white students had applied. Still, that's progress, more than last year. And Warner does now have a PTO. Last I checked it has \$3,000 in its bank account. And the school managed to cobble together just enough to keep the mindfulness coach, though only part time.

When I caught up with Gibbs in early June, as the country twisted and turned in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, Gibbs had been doing some reflecting.

RG: So that's with everything that's going on with, you know, the outright murder of George Floyd. It's really brought to light just more of the inequities that we see in education all the time. A lot of it was brought to the surface during COVID, and this just really, just kind of hit the nail further into the wood, help people start screaming. 'Do you see what's going on?'

MK: Gibbs has spent the past year and a half tactfully asking white families to give his Black school a chance. But, now, everything seems different.

RG: You know, Michael Jackson told us years ago. I'm starting with the man in the mirror, and I'm asking him to make a change. I that's, that's, that's almost...that, that could be the theme song for this. For what we're going for, this revolution that we're seeing. Because you have white America that's at a point where they're holding white America accountable.

MK: The Woods are a perfect example of what Gibbs is talking about. They'd been doing this very thing for the past two years.

HEATHER WOOD: Oscar, I'm not doing any more stuff right now.

HW: Hello

MK: Hello

MK: While Chris Wood works out of a makeshift office in the garage, Heather is trying to keep it all together.

HW: Look, this is a global pandemic. I just want to like survive it. I'm not trying to, like, teach anyone Mandarin.

MK: She tells me if she just had one kid, it would be very different. But there are three.

HW: But as it is now, there's also like a naked, screaming two-year-old in a fire hat all the time.

OSCAR WOOD: And a singing five-year-old.

HW: And a singing five-year-old.

MW: (singing) I am Momo, I am Momo, I am Momo...

MK: Heather worries less about Warner the school and more about the children there, the ones that are now even more invisible than they were before.

HW: They need to be at school. I think about sometimes how, you know, back after federally mandated desegregation, school districts closed schools. They closed them on purpose rather than let black kids go. And I do think about that a lot. I'm like, people did this on purpose, like they did this to kids on purpose rather than let the kids go to school together. And now everybody's stuck at home.

MK: Willie Sims, the father of Lockeland's only Black third grader, is sobered by this time. America is having an awakening.

WILLIE SIMS: It's like a test for everybody. Now, it's like once you know, what do you do? So now, you know, we're gonna test the hearts of man and see. We gonna find out in 2020. And I've been saying this for, for like two years. We gonna find out right now who is who on planet Earth. That's the question we will find out who is who. And it will be dealt with accordingly.

BJ: Uhh, I got it. I got it.

MK: Ooh! Got it!

MK: It's Labor Day, three-and-a-half months since the last day of school. Another semester has started. Virtual learning is in full swing.

BJ: Go like this. I am going to use the tips of my foot.

MK: BJ is playing with stomp rockets and spraying my toddler with our garden hose the backyard of my rental house. Reggie is here.

We're eating ice cream sandwiches and drinking fruit punch.

[SOUND OF WATER SPRAYING]

MK :BJ looks older. He cut his locks off. His face is a little fuller. He's taller. He's 10 now.

Reggie brought him here to visit. He'd been spending a lot of time with BJ lately. Last time I saw Reggie had been trying to find BJ. He was worried he might fall through the cracks. So he'd been dropping by his house often to look for him.

RC: And I went by there he wasn't there. It looked condemned. I was like, 'I wonder if they still live here?' It really looked like, the houses next to them was boarded up. There was some broken glass and stuff like that. And I finally ended up going one day and BJ was there. And when he opened up the door. It was like, I was just so happy. You know like my heart was filled with, like, it's hard to explain, like a joy. Because I knew I had him. Like he was right here.

MK: When Reggie finally found BJ that day, on his fourth visit to Cayce, he saw BJ was totally behind in school already, and it had only just begun. BJ had spent the last five months out of the classroom, away from his friends. He was depressed, isolated. He'd barely participated in the virtual learning. And he wasn't the only one. Almost 2,000 of Nashville's students hadn't even signed into their virtual classrooms. When Reggie saw this, he enlisted Dr. Hughes, BJ's fourth grade teacher, to come get him back on track.

BJ: Ever since that day I never actually fell behind again.

MK: Reggie had decided to start teaching a few kids video production. He called them The Prospects. And he asked BJ to be a part of it. He told BJ if he kept his grades up, he could join., and BJ welcomed it.

BJ: He's like a man for a man. Eye for an eye. Like if I do my work, he'll like, he'll do something for me though.

MK: So he follows through on his promises.

BJ: Mhmm.

MK: That's really important.

BJ: I ain't—not once Reggie made a promise and never kept it. All his promises were true. Cause all the males I know. I can't reason with them.

MK: A lot of broken promises.

BJ: My dad for one. Saying that he was going to come. Come to my house to check up on me, cause he ain't seen me since my birth. And I was like, 'Know what dad? I don't even want to see you no more. Because like, you couldn't have been there for me like 10 years ago? But instead you choose to leave.'

MK: I can see Reggie is tearing up. I tell him it's nice to have someone like Reggie around, isn't it?

BJ: He is like a father to me.

[SOUNDS OF PLAYING]

MK: Watching BJ play with my son. I felt a sense of relief for the first time in months. Relief that BJ had Warner, which had given him Reggie and Principal Gibbs and Dr. Hughes and Ms. Bignall.

And I felt relief that I had Warner, too. Because I've learned that this is kind of school I want for my child. More than test scores. More than deep-pocketed PTOs. I want a school that can unflinchingly, somehow, take our untidy and complicated world and show children that each and every single one of them belongs here.

But it won't work unless white families decide to buy in, unless they stop carving out spaces just for them and start committing their resources to schools with Black children. Unless they do, schools like Warner will always be on the precipice. And why do we keep putting the burden on

Black families to fight tooth and nail for equity? Black families have done enough. More than enough. It's time for white families to do this work.

RG: I argue with anybody that education is the great equalizer. Education, like my grandma and my mom used to always tell me: That's the one thing that once you get it, people can't take it away from you.

MK: When I spoke with Gibbs after the school year ended, I could see that resilience is still his signature trait. This was going to be a really difficult year. But he was ready. What other choice did he have?

RG: Do I have what I need to continue in the work? Absolutely. Absolutely. Do I have what I want? Absolutely not.

MK: But COVID had laid the inequities bare—starkly, ruthlessly and allowed them to increase exponentially. Black children were being left behind. Their families were dying at disproportionate rates. Jobs had been lost. Food was scarcer. Innocent Black Americans were being killed, and a tornado had torn through their neighborhood. And now Gibbs and his staff would have to deal with all of that in the coming year. How much had been lost? And would they truly have what they needed to get it all back? It seemed no one really knew. And they wouldn't until they had the kids back in the classroom. And at this point, when that would happen was totally unknown.

RG: It's, it's a tough situation for a lot of our families. But the great thing that I can say a lot of our parents are hopeful about the future, because I share with them, you know, all of the accolades that the school received. And, you know, just that that sense of pride about the community is starting to come back.

MK: Gibbs knew this wasn't ideal. But in true Gibbs fashion, he refused to acknowledge the weight of those obstacles and uncertainties. Instead, he chose hope.

Commented [MK3]: Jakob, I am not wild about this chimy music at 45:54. It's a little jarring to me. Anything more subtle and emotive?

Commented [ES4R3]: agreed

Commented [AM5R3]:

And I will, too. Because it's all over Warner. It's in schools everywhere. But it's on all of us to recognize it.

[MONTAGE OF KIDS]

STUDENTS: When I grow up I wish I could be a YouTuber and a doctor.

What do I want to do in life. I want to be a momma and act good to my kids.

Well I really want to become an artist. A teacher. And a lawyer and an educator.

I will, I will play soccer.

STUDENTS: BJ, I gotta ask you two more questions...

Today we're having fish for lunch

MK: how do you know that?

STUDENTS: I smell it.

MK: I smell it too.

STUDENTS: My name Shanteria. My name is Laderrel. My name Jarrell... and we go to

Warner. I go to Warner

I go to W!

MK: The Promise is written and produced by me, Meribah Knight. Editing by Emily Siner. Special thanks to Sam Zern, the intrepid intern for this podcast, and its fact-checker. Thank you to Anita Bugg, Tony Gonzalez, Sergio Martínez-Beltrán and Damon Mitchell for additional editing. Thank you to Samantha Max, for always being willing to listen to half-baked drafts.

And thank you Emily Siner for your careful editing and total grace while shepherding this series to completion. I am in awe of your talents and your patience.

Our advisor on The Promise is Savala Trepczynski.

This episode was mixed by Jakob Lewis of Great Feeling Studios. The music is by Blue Dot Sessions.

Additional news footage courtesy of News Channel 5 and ABC.

And thank you so much to everyone who made this series possible. The staff at Warner Elementary, specifically Ricki Gibbs, Jon Wren. Thank you Donna Corlew for always greeting me with a smile! Thank you to Nikki Hughes, and Angela Moore, and all the Warner teachers for letting me into your classrooms. Thank you, Heather and Chris Wood for your endless patience and for trusting me with your story. Thank you to BJ and Shanniece for letting me in and always making me laugh. And letting me pet your bearded dragon lizard. Thank you to Erin Mock, Marquinza Bryant, Willie Sims, Clay Haynes, Brandy Fenderson and Ella for opening your doors and your lives to me. And thank you to Ellen White, Canzada Hawkins and the entire Kelley Family for your bravery, your sacrifice and your commitment to making this city better for all children.

And many, many thanks to my dear friend, my mentor, my loyal guide, Alex Kotlowitz.

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

This is Nashville Public Radio.

[DONNA CORLEW SINGING “RESPECT” BY ARETHA FRANKLIN]

MK: Ooh! It's that kind of day?

DC: You make me show out when you come over here! Go on somewhere!

MK: That was good!

DC: Thank you.

