

**THE PROMISE: Life, Death and Change in a Nashville Housing Project**  
**EPISODE 1: A CHANGE IS GONNA COME**  
**REPORTER: MERIBAH KNIGHT**

**VERNELL MCHENRY:** I wanted something better for me. And better for the neighborhood.

**CAYCE RESIDENT:** These projects been here since I was a little bitty girl.

**VERNELL MCHENRY:** Black people here. White people here. You know, that's how I lived.

**MAYOR MEGAN BARRY:** We need to have communities that are mixed use, mixed income and lift people up.

**CAYCE RESIDENT:** We've been looking forward to this for many years.

**RALPH MOSLEY (MDHA BOARD CHAIR):** And I am sure there are some people who have their doubts that we're going to do what we said we were gonna do.

**JAMES FRASER (ACADEMIC):** Unless one has lived in poverty it may be hard to appreciate that it is damn hard to get out of.

**MERIBAH KNIGHT:** I'm Meribah Knight, and you're listening to The Promise: Life, Death and Change In The Projects. It's a podcast from Nashville Public Radio. A series of stories about life in public housing, smack in the middle of a city on the rise. About epic inequality and a growing divide in *one* Nashville neighborhood. But the city says it can bring it all together. They've got a grand experiment to mix things up. And a bold promise that *everyone* will get something better. Episode One: A Change Is Gonna Come

**VERNELL MCHENRY:** The beach is the sandy beach. The water is blue. We got my palm trees sitting out there. And I am sitting and sipping on a pineapple spritzer. With the little umbreller. I do travel away from here. I don't just sit here. I travel away from here.

**MERIBAH KNIGHT:** The place Vernell McHenry is trying to get away from is The James Cayce homes, Nashville's largest public housing complex. Home to more than 1800 people who are mostly African American, mostly children. A dense cluster of 99 low-slung barracks-style buildings, just east of Nashville's thriving downtown. The buildings are plain, carbon copies of one another. Each made of red brick. Each two stories. Each in various states of decay. And every afternoon, into the evening, you can find Vernell sitting on a metal folding beach chair.

Usually on her stoop, or one of her neighbor's. She looks out onto a dusty courtyard. Watches the kids play. She smokes a cigarette. Maybe two. She's there. But in her mind she's taking in the sunset at her imaginary beach house.

**VM:** It's an old Victorian house. And it is purple. Because that's my favorite color. So it's kind of bright. But you can see it. And when the sun sets down behind the horizon it is so beautiful. My mind be traveling honey, they be like Ms. Vernell you alright honey? I done left scene honey.

**MK:** She's known as Ms. Vernell, a moniker of respect and affection given to most older folks around here — there's Ms. Marilyn, Mr. Fred, Ms. Yolanda.

Ms. Vernell has lived in Cayce for the past 17 years. In a dimly lit one-bedroom apartment with linoleum floors and tiny windows. She pays \$211 a month for the place, an amount based off her income. And despite its aging interior, she's made the apartment homey with a couple of large couches and a collection of knick knacks. And when she's not wandering around in her imagination, she's offering a constant pitter patter of greetings.

**VM:** Good evening young man. You have a good day today? Alrighty.

**VM:** Hey Tay. Gonna be a heartbreaker boy.

**VM:** Well hello. How you doing today? How you been doing? You have a good day in school today?

**VM:** Hello Marcel.

**VM:** Well hello Yana-poo.

**MK:** Ms. Vernell is 61 years old and she's like the grandmother of her corner of Cayce, a grouping of 20 apartments that share a courtyard shaded by a large Willow Oak tree. She has close-cropped greying hair, a wide smile and walks with a cane she calls Susie. She likes to hand out pieces of Trident gum to all the kids. And she knows all their names: Baby Quell, Malika, LaTay. She knows where they go to school and what time the buses drop off and pick up. She gets energy from kids, cracking jokes with them, asking about their day. It's her routine.

**VM:** I've never been where I couldn't come outside like a pretty day today. Enjoy my weather. Enjoy watching the children play, you know. And I do have a certain amount of claustrophobia. Because I was abused. And my step momma used to put us in closets.

**MK:** Ms. Vernell is still haunted by the foster home she grew up in. She has bouts of panic when she feels too closed in. On nights she can't sleep from the anxiety, she'll sit outside, on her front stoop. She's been on her own much of her life. Ran away at 13 with \$100 she'd saved from a job program at school.

**VM:** It couldn't be no worsen in the streets to me than it was right here in this home. I mean, I'm getting three squares and a cot. Don't get me wrong. But, being where you can't hug nobody. Or when the parent comes you get like this.

**MK:** She recoils.

**VM:** I made my own choice.

**MK:** A young mother she'd met was willing to take her in.

**VM:** She was a stripper. She had an 8-month-old baby. So we made a deal. I go to school in the day while you sleep. And when she worked at night, I took care of her baby.

**MK:** In her 40s, Ms. Vernell suffered a major setback. After her only son wound up in prison for robbery. She spiraled into depression, got addicted to cocaine. Moved into Cayce because it was the only thing she could afford. But a few years later she got sober. And she got more active in the Cayce community.

Then, about five years ago, word began to spread that the city planned to level and rebuild the project as a mixture of low-income apartments and units for young professionals. And Ms. Vernell began to get very worried. Worried that she and her neighbors would be pushed out of Cayce. It made sense. The neighborhood was changing. Around Cayce home prices were surging. All the sudden, this big block of public housing was sitting on highly prized real estate. Wealth on one side of the street, and poverty on the other. It seemed obvious to her which one would win out. But to really understand where Ms. Vernell is coming from, you gotta go back to the beginning. To why Nashville, and this country, built public housing in the first place.

**ARCHIVAL CLIP:** *To clear bad slums you must tear them down. You cannot tear them down unless you provide other dwellings to rehouse the people who live in slums. That is why public housing is the only practical way to handle the problem.*

**MK:** It began with the Housing Act of 1937, part of President Roosevelt's New Deal aimed at lifting up a country reeling from the Great Depression. A social compact to get Americans out of slums and into safe, decent housing.

Nashville jumped at the chance to raze its slums with government help. So a year after the Housing Act passed, the city created the Nashville Housing Authority. Cayce homes was one of its first developments.

**ARCHIVAL CLIP:** *Public housing demands sunlight for every room. And proper ventilation. Open spaces.*

**MK:** Today, Cayce is 90 percent black. But when it opened in 1941, it was actually for white families only. Projects for black families were built across town. The goal was to lift people out of poverty. It was supposed to be a springboard to the middle class. Not a place for people to get comfortable.

**JIM FRASER:** But when public housing began, there were many rules. And it really was for what we might deem the submerged middle class. In Nashville, as in other cities, you had to have a job. You had to be married.

**MK:** That's Jim Fraser, a Vanderbilt University professor who's studied public housing for 20 years. He says for a while, there was a real pride about living in public housing. Cayce had baby clinics and day nurseries for mothers working for the war effort. There was a record setting basketball team, a boxing team. There were libraries and social groups for seniors as well as grounds keeping jobs for residents.

**JF:** It was a step up for many people from living in substandard housing in neighborhoods, say, less than affluent.

**ARCHIVAL CLIP:** *Every dedication in the United States of a public low rent housing project is a rededication of our democracy to the principles that all men are created equal.*

**MK:** But soon, things started to change. First, white families got access to government-backed loans that were denied to Black Americans. It was a systematic and discriminatory process known as redlining. So whites left for the suburbs. Second, Urban Renewal and highway construction began. Nashville's black neighborhoods got steamrolled. Many lost their homes through eminent domain and ended up in public housing. Through the late 60s, early 70s, Cayce flipped from all white to mostly black. And across the country, public housing, became home to the poorest of the poor.

**OLD NEWS CLIP:** *Poor people stacked on top of one another. Their problems multiplied, intensified.*

**MK:** During the Reagan years, federal money for public housing was slashed and the buildings fell into decay, turning into the very slums they was supposed to replace. Crack took hold and crime surged.

**JF:** Public housing developments started to decline because our government at all levels started to defund it.

**MK:** Cayce's apartments have seen no major renovations since they were built in the 40s and early 50s. They're old and crumbling. Teeming with pests. The place has sky high asthma rates. Not too long ago, public health researchers issued a troubling report, showing the apartments have high levels of pollutants, like mold and some harmful gases. But this overhaul hopes to wipe the slate clean. And start over with the poor and the well-off living side by side. Jim Fraser has his reservations about whether this type of strategy even works. But he recognizes what a historic moment this is.

**JF:** If we could really redevelop Cayce where people get along and appreciate each other. And beyond that, where there are real opportunities for low income families and their children. Where they don't feel trapped. Then we will have done something that very few places have done.

**MK:** Jim knows how these kinds of projects have gone in the past. Chicago, Atlanta, St. Louis, New Orleans have already knocked down much of their public housing. And inevitably, affordable units are lost, residents scatter, and few move into the finished product.

The same thing happened in Nashville, more than a decade ago after rebuilding four of its public housing developments. When all was said and done, fewer than 10 percent of the original residents came back. Which is why this time, Nashville made a bold promise: No one in Cayce will be pushed out.

Coming up after the break: Ms. Vernell gets all dressed up to see the beginning of this grand plan for transformation.

.....

**VM:** Then I went and got my toes done. You know us girls got to look good, honey.

**MK:** This is a big day in the long history of the Cayce homes. Ms. Vernell got her toenails painted a royal blue for the occasion. She spent the morning fretting over her outfit. After years planning the remaking of Cayce, this is it's first step. The grand opening of the first new building. A ribbon cutting, with the usual speeches, and political pats on the back.

**VM:** Oh, there's a lot of people already down here. I'm glad I didn't overdress.

**MK:** Ms. Vernell is hoping to move into this building. A brand new apartment. And on the quiet side of the projects. She'd applied a week earlier, but doesn't yet know if she's been accepted. As she walks down the hill toward the new building, which is a few blocks west of her current apartment, she sees a large crowd gathering.

**VM:** Oh they down here packed.

[CHATTER IN THE BACKGROUND]

**MK:** The building is called Barrett Manor, after George Barrett, a prominent white civil rights lawyer in Nashville. And, like the rest of Cayce, it's still bland looking. Like a college dorm. A no frills, four-story brick structure.

**VM:** Good morning, Ms. Clarice!

[CHATTER IN THE BACKGROUND]

**MK:** It's the first proof this massive remodel, which the city calls Envision Cayce, is happening. But it's also different from what's to come. This building is low-income only — mostly for the elderly and disabled. It's not attempting the heavy lift of making neighbors of the working poor and the well-off. So this is the simple stuff. Moving existing Cayce residents into this brand new apartment building so there's space to start the demolition of the other buildings.

Ms. Vernell takes a seat under the large white tent. She pulls out a pen for jotting down notes. The head of Nashville's housing authority, Jim Harbison, takes the microphone.

**JIM HARBISON:** Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for joining us today on this really important day for our residents here at Cayce.

[VOICE FADES]

**MK:** Harbison says for the past four years they've been crafting plans for this *\$600 million overhaul*. If it works, it'll be used as a model for six other public housing developments across the city. Harbison says tenants will start moving in soon. And today, Ms. Vernell hopes she's one of them. But initially, she was resistant. The building has no place to sit outside. No balconies. No patio. No stoop. Nowhere to connect with her neighbors and daydream about the beach.

**VM:** I want to move down there. I'm praying. Y'all put up some prayers for me. Because I've never lived in an apartment complex like that.

**MK:** When the housing authority chief finishes, he passes the mic to Nashville's mayor, Megan Barry.

[APPLAUSE]

**MAYOR MEGAN BARRY:** We need to have communities that are mixed use, mixed income and lift people up. So, we have to do everything we can Jim Fraser, to fund, build, preserve and retain — those are Jim's words — and this is a great example of that.

[VOICE FADES]

**MK:** The Mayor eyes Jim, the Vanderbilt professor. He's been a real bug in her ear. Because he knows just how challenging it's going to be. A public housing slum is sitting on some of the city's most valuable real estate. And now they've gotta revamp, integrate. But it's hardly so simple. Cayce has a stigma. As a dangerous place, a foreign place. In the 90s, the Tennessean newspaper reported a series of articles in Cayce. They sent in two white reporters and a photographer, *undercover*. Changed their names, their identities, their clothes. Needless to say it did not go over well with residents. And today, anyone driving east from downtown will pass Cayce. But most Nashvillians have never been inside. There's no reason. There are no stores. No community parks. Nowhere to get to except from one side of the project to the other. And so assumptions persist. But this mixed income idea, it takes buy in from everyone — those who live in Cayce and those who might consider moving here.

[LAUGHTER]

**VM:** Well, hello miss lady ... this is my new place ... welcome, everyone ...

[LAUGHTER]

**MK:** Inside Barrett Manor, Ms. Vernell is checking out the new apartments. Stopping first in the community room for a glass of lemonade and a cookie, which she tucks away in her bag for later. On her way out, she sees Nashville's Mayor.

**VM:** I've been on all your elections. I voted for you too.

**MEGAN BARRY:** Awesome! I want to go see one.

**VM:** C'mon let's go look at an apartment.

[VOICES FADE]

**MK:** Around the corner, Ms. Vernell and Mayor Barry step into the first sample apartment.

**VM:** Ok this is big enough. I don't know about my other stuff but this is big enough for my bed.

**MK:** It's a one bedroom, about 600 square feet with a good size bathroom. The open-concept kitchen has a breakfast bar and the floors are a handsome wood-colored vinyl.



**VM:** I think it's looking... Oops, I knocked over Susie. She's happy.

**MK:** Susie, Ms. Vernell's cane, topples over and Mayor Barry quickly picks it up.

**MB:** I'll get your cane for you.

**VM:** (Laughs) This is Susie. She's happy.

**MK:** Across the room, a woman is in tears, overwhelmed by the experience. Public housing has never looked so nice. Big windows let natural light stream in. Central air. Electronic key fobs to get in.

**VM:** It's just so beautiful. I'm just so. I don't know how to act. I am like a child in a new candy store.

**MK:** As Ms. Vernell walks down the hallway, she passes the housing authority chief, Jim Harbison, doing a TV interview.

**VM:** Vernell McHenry

**JH:** Vernell is going to be one of our residents. She's moving in. She moves in in July.

[VOICES FADE]

**MK:** And with that, Ms. Vernell keeps walking. I think I'm more shocked at what I just heard.

**MK:** Wait, I think Jim just told you you had an apartment.

**VM:** Yeah, I applied. I applied for down here.

**MK:** I know, but I think he just told you like for sure.

**MK:** Ms. Vernell tells me she's not surprised. But there is a bit of worry in her voice. Moving is never easy, and she wonders aloud if all her stuff will fit in these new apartments. After the tour, Ms. Vernell steps outside to rest her legs.

**VM:** I am going to sit down right here. OK, they got light outside. Oh they got all kinds of strobe lights and stuff.

**MK:** She looks up at the new building, which does have a lot of lights. It also has a lot of security cameras. 57 outside and in. Over the winter, less than 100 yards from this very spot, a resident named Jocques Clemmons was fatally shot in the back by a city police officer. The District Attorney deemed the shooting justified because he said Clemmons had a gun. But since then, Cayce has erupted in violence. Homicides are the highest in 25 years.

The shootings are concentrated in a couple spots. One of them, is outside Ms. Vernell's kitchen window. One night not long ago, a storm of bullets came so close that she dropped to her floor and crawled to her living room for safety. This new apartment could offer more security. But without a stoop or a balcony or any place to sit and talk with her neighbors, it could also erase her social life. Cause all those closed in feelings to creep back.

**VM:** I'm going to just still pray about it... that being closed in... I hope I'm down stairs. I'd rather have a downstairs.

**MK:** Ms. Vernell sees the housing chief from across the parking lot and says nothing about her nagging concerns.

**VM:** I like 'em. I like them.

**JH:** We listened.

**MK:** "We listened," Harbison says. But in the back of her mind, Ms. Vernell is still worried about this move.

As the months go on, Ms. Vernell gets more and more concerned about moving. Every time I see her she brings it up. She's convinced her living room set won't fit, even though the new apartment is actually slightly larger than her current one. And she worries about all the rules. Rules about overnight guests. Rules that ban smoking. Rules about what cleaning products to use. It turns out those vinyl floors need a Swiffer, no mop and bucket. But mainly, it's not being able to sit outside and greet her neighborhood. Then I go to visit her one Friday.

[SOUNDS OF KIDS PLAYING]

**MK:** Hi!

**VM:** Hello, how you doing?

**MK:** I ask if she has a move-in date yet. It's been months since the tour.

**MK:** Have you heard anything?

**VM:** Yeah, they called me but I turned it down. My furniture's not going to fit in there.

**MK:** You're not gonna go down there?

**VM:** No. Changed my mind. It's too small. It was no balconies. Nowhere to sit outside. You know. Nowhere you can... like we doing now. It's sun. We can sit outside and mingle with our neighbors and talk. You can't do that. You know. They say they're going to try and put an area outside, but I drove through there the other day, me and my cousin. And it's really nowhere for anybody to sit. Not in a shady spot. I've seen all the cameras they got. But, it's just it's too small. It's just the main thing: It's too small.

**MK:** So after all these years pushing for change, Ms. Vernell has decided it's not for her. She'd rather stay put. Wait to see if something better comes along. I suddenly realized it's not as simple as just building something new and expecting people to come. Seemingly insignificant things — a balcony, a living room set — can end up tipping the scales. And Ms. Vernell isn't the only one on edge about the new building. Many in East Nashville are supportive of Envision Cayce. But when given the chance, the naysayers emerge in full force. "It's going to become a drug-infested eyesore," one commented on Facebook. "It's still a cesspool," another wrote, adding that, "Decent people aren't going to pay to live amongst trash." One man concluded, "Unless the higher paying tenants get a bodyguard, now way in hell I would ever want to live anywhere in James Cayce Homes."

Next on The Promise. We meet Big Man, a husband, a father of two, and a Cayce resident.

**BIG MAN:** Cuz see like this right here, it's a good day. But you can't say nothing going to happen. You can't can't say nothing stupid ain't going to happen. But, I wish it wouldn't. But it might be a good day today.

**MK:** He has plans for a family BBQ and it turns into anything but a good day.

### **CREDITS:**

The Promise is a production of Nashville Public Radio. Editing for this episode came from WPLN's Blake Farmer and Anita Bugg. With additional editing by Tony Gonzalez, Emily Siner, Chas Sisk and Julieta Martinelli. This episode was written and produced by me, Meribah Knight. Sound design by Tony Gonzalez. Fact checking by Steve Cavendish.

Our music is by The Insider, Fleslit and Willbe, all found through the Free Music Archive. The archival audio is from the United States Housing Agency.

Go to our website, [wpln.org](http://wpln.org), to see photos of Cayce and other episode extras.