

THE PROMISE: Life, Death and Change In The Projects
EPISODE 3: The People and The Police
REPORTER: MERIBAH KNIGHT

MERIBAH KNIGHT: Just a note before we begin, this episode involves explicit language and descriptions violence.

TV REPORTER: Another night, another fight at an East Nashville public housing complex.

POLICE OFFICER: As I was on top of him, telling him to stop resisting, give me his hands, I got kicked in the head.

TV REPORTER: A Metro officer was sent to the hospital, injured in the line of duty.

POLICE OFFICER MATTHEW CAMMARN: This is it, like, um, I'm gonna pass out. I'm gonna die.

PUBLIC DEFENDER MARY RUTH PATE: This is not an isolated incident. This is not something that's another city's problem. This our problem, too.

CAYCE RESIDENT: Just cuz I'm running from the police, that don't mean you're supposed to shoot me.

CAYCE RESIDENT: Man, I know the hardest job in the world is being a police officer, but you know.

CAYCE RESIDENT: You don't shoot nobody in the back. That's a coward move.

CAYCE RESIDENT: He just need to be held up to what he did. He's a murderer. That's just how I feel.

MERIBAH KNIGHT: I'm Meribah Knight, and you're listening to The Promise 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. One neighborhood, two realities, and the city's bold promise to bring it all together. Episode 3: The People and the Police

MK: In James Cayce, the police are a fixture. They patrol the place by car, by foot, by bike even by camera. Interacting with them is one thing you can count on here. Social programs come and go. Government investment waxes and wanes. But law enforcement, they're always around.

In fact, when I first started visiting Cayce most people assumed I was police--not a teacher, not a social worker. Why else would I be ambling around? Knocking on doors, asking people questions.

For this episode, we're going to unpack Cayce's relationship with the police through two defining moments here. A viral cell phone video of a fight between a police officer and a young man. And the most controversial police shooting in the city's recent history. Both were caught on camera. And both reveal the strain between the people who live in Cayce and the people who patrol it.

On April 12, 2016, a little after 6pm, Matthew Cammarn, a Nashville Police officer who'd been on the force for only three years, was sitting in his cruiser on South 7th Street.

MATTHEW CAMMARN: When a call came in for a shots fired call.

MK: It was a mild spring evening. He was about two hours into his shift. Cruising the neighborhood with his windows down. He hadn't heard any gunshots. But he figured he'd check it out. He was alone, but he knew that other officers were close by if he needed backup.

MATTHEW CAMMARN: So I am cruising down South 7th. And I get towards Sylvan. And there's people running towards one area.

MK: Right away, Cammarn assumed that this probably wasn't a shooting. People run away from gunfire, not toward it. As he drove down South 7th, Cayce's main thoroughfare, he saw a large group of mostly young people, gathering in one of the courtyards.

MC: So I rolled down. I see the large group and I chirp my siren. And I heard people, when I got out of the car. 'Police are here. Police are here.'

MK: Cammarn saw a young man and a young woman arguing. Bystanders had their phones out, capturing the incident for social media. The fight was over the young man's niece, who was allegedly being bullied. When Cammarn saw him push the woman, he decided to intervene. But the man, visibly upset, walked away. Refusing to acknowledge the officer's request to talk with him.

MC: He walks past me. And I say, 'stop dude. Talk to me.' And he says, 'F you, I didn't do nothing.' So at that point I can't let him walk away. I grabbed him, cuz, he was still continuing to walk past me and that's when he took a swing on me. At that point I wrapped up with him and I took him to the ground and he continued to attempt to assault me.

MK: And that's when a bystander, a man named Andrew Hunter, pulled out his smartphone and began filming.

[SOUNDS OF SHOUTING FROM ASSAULT VIDEO]

MC: As I was on top of him, telling him to stop resisting and giving me his hands, I got kicked in the head. At first, when I felt it I thought I got hit in the head with a piece of metal or something like that. Like a baseball bat. And I was like, 'Well, this is it. I am going to pass out. I'm going to die.'

MK: In the video, you don't see what took the two men to the ground. But what you do see is Officer Cammarn on top, punching the man repeatedly with both fists. The man has his left arm wrapped around Cammarn's neck. Then, another man walks up and kicks Cammarn directly in the head. Right after that, a third young man, a teen wearing a black t-shirt, tries to push Cammarn off the guy he's fighting with. Causing them to roll. So now Cammarn is on his back. He manages to get to his feet for a moment and push the man back down to the ground. That's when the teen in the black t-shirt, comes around the other side, pulling Officer Cammarn's leg. A couple more people try to kick him, in the hip and in the head. Cammarn said he tried to radio for backup, but the message never went through.

MC: At that point I was like, OK, this is going too far.

MK: When Cammarn comes out of his daze and realizes he's still in the grips of this fight, he reaches for his pistol.

MC: I was about to draw down.

MK: And then, the man he was fighting with manages to get loose and sprints away. As he flees, people cheer him on. "run," they yell, "run."

[ASSAULT VIDEO HERE: "RUN RUN, MAN I GOT THIS SHIT ON CAMERA BRO. IT'S GOING DOWN. IT'S GOING DOWN. BRO."]

MK: The crowd scatters. So Officer Cammarn takes his hand off his gun, which is still snug in his holster. He runs after the man, out of the frame. Eventually he catches and arrests him, a 22-year-old named Brian Shannon.

[ASSAULT VIDEO HERE: "IT JUST GOT LIVE. MAN, IT JUST GOT LIVE."]

MK: The video, which is grainy and crude, was uploaded to Facebook and viewed more than 3 million times. It quickly went viral, getting picked up by news outlets here and abroad. Today it has 21,000 comments. Among them are ones like, "shoot first, ask questions later." A few people recommended they build a wall around Cayce and have the police stop responding. "Let the problem take care of itself," one wrote.

A little under 90 seconds. The video captures the fight up close. And it's really unsettling. Everyone's just standing there. Maybe 50 people. It's loud. No one tries to help Officer Cammarn. Some are egging on the man fighting with him. In fact, only one person, a neighbor, called 9-1-1 to report the fight.

9-1-1: What's the exact location of your emergency?

[PHONE LINE STATIC]

NEIGHBOR: On South 7th Street they jumped the police.

9-1-1: Where is this occurring?

NEIGHBOR: On South 7th Street.

9-1-1: Is there a cross street or address?

NEIGHBOR: You know I don't know, I just know they're beating up the police.

9-1-1: Okay. Can you give me the nearest street?

[PHONE CONVERSATION FADES OUT]

MK: Officer Cammarn, bloody and concussed, was whisked away in an ambulance. Brian Shannon, who'd gone to Cayce that day to pick up his his niece, was charged with 6 counts, including assault. So was Shannon's cousin, Michael Mays. He's the man who kicked Cammarn in the head.

The next day, Nashville's Mayor, the police chief as well as the president of the police union held a press conference promising to prosecute the alleged attackers to the fullest extent of the law. It was the second time that week an officer had been assaulted in Cayce. The day before, a cop was stabbed in the hand while trying to break up another fight.

With two of their own injured in the line of duty at Cayce, Nashville police immediately began cracking down, flooding the project with officers.

MC: I mean, you had motors officers down there. You had people coming over there from different precincts to work. Just to sit there. And to clean it out. To make sure the people there were supposed to be doing what they were supposed to be doing.

MK: Cammarn's boss, the precinct's Commander, reassigned every tactical officer he had to the complex. Patrol officers starting working in pairs. Cayce was monitored by helicopter. And the housing authority dispatched a team of officers to police Cayce exclusively until further notice.

The city asked clergy to establish a presence, hoping it would ease tensions. They also announced they were installing more than 150 cameras.

Some residents welcomed the tactic. For others it felt more like Big Brother. Chafing an already tenuous relationship. And many wondered, Why now? The year before there were 35 assaults and three people killed in Cayce. Now a cop gets roughed up and they flood the place?

Meanwhile, Officer Cammarn's life took its own turn. Just two months before, he'd been named officer of the year for saving a man's life. Before that, he'd served in the military in Afghanistan. Now, he was at home, injured and hurting. Thankfully he had his wife and two kids for support. But it turned out the damage was much worse than they'd initially thought. He had a bulged disk in his neck, and post-concussion syndrome, which is basically a mild traumatic brain injury. He couldn't work for months. And the pain was constant.

MC: It was killing me. To be cooped up in the house and not be able to do anything. It was very hard on me. I started to fall into, like, depression and I was having anxiety about not being able to do stuff and go out. Because I was I pain, constant pain and it wouldn't go away. I couldn't go play volleyball. I couldn't wrestle with my kids. I couldn't play soccer with my son. Because I couldn't run. So it was hurting me, emotionally and mentally. It caused me to be very angry and temperamental with my family. Which was not fun. Which that's is kinda why I am in the situation that I'm in now.

That summer, two days after his seventh wedding anniversary, his wife packed her things and moved out. A month later they'd filed for divorce.

MC: I was destroyed. Um, I was with her for 9 total years. We had two kids. So, it's been a year now. But it was really rough. It's something that I got to live with. But I am alive. My kids love me. I love my kids. That's my main focus. My kids.

MK: Coming up after the break: The fight may have turned Cammarn's life upside down. But it also pointed to a much larger rift.

MK: No matter who you ask. The fight caught on camera in Cayce was a defining moment. It altered policing in the complex, as well as the life of Officer Cammarn and the two men who were convicted of felonies. But more broadly, it laid bare the fractured relationship between the community and the police.

And that's what a lawyer named Mary Ruth Pate wanted to stress while representing the man who assaulted officer Cammarn. She knew there was no defense for her client punching a police officer. But there was context. A fury in Cayce that had built up over years.

MARY RUTH PATE: I saw this as a chance to point out that you know this is not an isolated incident. This is not something that's another city's problem. This is our problem too.

MK: Pate, a public defender, had heard a lot about the tenuous relationship between Cayce residents and the police, how they felt singled out. But while other cities, and the country, were reckoning with the treatment of African Americans by police, Nashville wasn't in a very reflective mode. There had been fatal shootings by police, but none garnering much attention. And at times, the relationship seemed oddly chummy. After Ferguson, when Nashvillians marched in protest, police greeted them with cups of coffee and hot cocoa, officers shook protesters' hands. As Pate described it, in this post-Ferguson era, the fight in Cayce was the first public tumult between the department and the city's black residents.

MARY RUTH PATH : You know, it had happened in Missouri and it had happened in Baltimore. And things. But it's the first time it had happened here.

MK: A trial would have given Pate a forum to go public, vent about this fraught relationship. But that didn't happen. Her client took a plea deal. During sentencing she broached the topic briefly. But the judge shut her down.

JUDGE : I'm unclear about why you're bringing all this up.

MK: "I'm unclear about why you're bringing all this up," the judge told Pate during the sentencing hearing.

MRP: Judge, the point is is because this didn't occur in a vacuum. And this doesn't absolve Mr. Shannon and Mr. Mays of their personal responsibility. I am bringing this up because this is part of the culture that unfortunately we live in. And it's something that we cannot ignore the social context that takes place here. But if you want me to get to the point, I'll get to the point.

MK: "If you want me to get to the point, I'll get to the point," Pate tells the judge, cutting to the specifics of the case. She knew her argument might fall flat. In an earlier hearing, a different judge had called the beating a blow against law enforcement. "You weren't just kicking him as a man," the judge told one defendant, "You were kicking him as law and order."

And in a certain way, Pate agreed with the judge. She just saw it from the other side. People were frustrated, there was an anger coursing through Cayce. And the police were an easy target. Other than the violence and the new cameras, some compelling information emerged. A group of Nashville lawyers and activists released a stunning report analyzing nearly 2 million traffic stops. It showed black drivers in Nashville were being pulled over and searched *far* more often than white drivers. It was Nashville's version of Stop-and-Frisk. And for black neighborhoods like Cayce, the report validated long-held frustrations. But the police chief, Steve Anderson, dismissed the report entirely. Despite its grounding in the police department's own data, the chief called it a "false narrative" and "morally disingenuous."

Pate, the public defender, was unequivocal. In her mind, the fight between Officer Cammarn and her client signaled unrest. A sure sign that things would only get worse

REPORTING OFFICER: 11, we got shots fired.

DISPATCH: Shots fired. Male black.

Shots fired toward you or someone else.

REPORTING OFFICER: Shots fired toward suspect, suspect down.

MK: Ten months after the fight in Cayce, on a warm Friday afternoon in early February, a man named Jocques Clemmons ran a stop sign in Cayce. Surveillance footage shows him rolling through the stop and slipping into a parking spot near his apartment on South 6th Street. Then, an officer named Joshua Lippert pulls up behind him. It begins as a basic traffic stop. But Clemmons, a 31-year-old father of two, flees when he gets out of his truck and sees Lippert.

There is some dispute about what happens after a short foot chase, even with the surveillance video. But police say Clemmons dropped a loaded revolver. When he retrieved it, Lippert shot him three times--in the back. The bullets, lodged in Clemmon's lung, his liver and his hip, ultimately killed him.

Clemmons was black and Officer Lippert, white. The entire thing was less than a minute. And it was all caught on video, by some of the same cameras installed after Officer Cammarn's assault.

NEWS CLIP: Breaking news. We just got surveillance video of today's officer-involved shooting. Here it I want you to take a good look.

NEWS CLIP: Police say this .357 Magnum fell to the ground and Clemmons grabbed it. With Officer Lippert shooting and killing Clemmons when Lippert thought his life was in imminent danger.

MK: Suddenly, Nashville was having this conversation whether it wanted to or not. To many in Cayce, the connection between Clemmons' death and the over-policing of African Americans seemed obvious.

An analysis of Lippert's traffic stops the previous year showed he was pulling over and searching black drivers at astronomical rates. Compared to his colleagues who patrolled the same areas, Lippert was stopping black drivers up to 50 percent more. And searching them 5 times the rate of other officers. The day after the shooting, friends and residents gathered in Cayce. Some questioned whether Clemmons even had a gun.

Others just saw a man trying to get away. Not someone threatening an officer. And they all wondered if Lippert would be held accountable.

CAYCE PROTESTER: He just need to be held up to what he did. He's a murderer that's just how I feel.

CAYCE PROTESTER: That's what brought me out here, the video. You feel me. Like, you shouldn't have to shoot nobody in the back if your life was in danger. You could have tased him, you could have did anything but shoot him.

CAYCE PROTESTER: Man, I know the hardest job in the world is being a police officer, but you know, if he was wrong he was wrong, but if he wasn't, shee, he wasn't, you know what I mean?

CAYCE PROTESTER: Today when I saw the video, I'm watching exactly what happened. And what happened is he was running away from this officer.

MK: But out of the gate, the police had a very different interpretation of the video. And the department's spokesman, Don Aaron, hawked it feverishly — in press releases, and in calls to reporters. He said the video showed Clemmons starting it all, by charging at Officer Lippert and then fleeing. The video, he said, proved *Clemmons* was the aggressor. This is Aaron, the day after the shooting, on the phone with a WPLN reporter.

DON AARON: The officer didn't escalate this. I mean, again, I need to refer you back to the video. The officer is standing there and the man charges him and rams him. I mean, the officer didn't escalate that.

MK: In a *second* interview with detectives —this time having seen the footage — Officer Lippert told the *same* story.

JL: After reviewing the tape he just kind of makes a beeline and body checks me.

[VOICE FADES]

MK: He just kind of makes a beeline and body checks me, Lippert says.

MK: Three days after the shooting, detectives went to Cayce, looking for an eye witness. They carried digital recorders to capture their interactions.

[KNOCKING ON DOOR- SOUND FROM DETECTIVE TAPES]

MK: The witness wasn't there. But Clemmon's family was. And understandably, they were upset. Especially his sister, Asia.

ASIA CLEMMONS: Yeah, and don't come back and ask no questions because ain't no motherfuckin' witnesses. Ain't no witnesses. The camera is the witness. Y'all see what the fuck they did. He is in the goddamn ground. He's in the...

[SOBBING]

MK: At this point, the police had released a lot of footage. But compared to the hundreds of cameras in Cayce, residents felt like there should be more. Enough to answer all the lingering questions. Once Asia and the other family members calmed down, they were able to talk with the detectives.

ASIA CLEMMONS: What the cameras don't say? For y'all investigation. That's all I want to know. What do the cameras not tell y'all?

DETECTIVE : We're reviewing that as well.

TAMEKA: OK, I have another question: Why did you all use the cameras right here when there is clearly one right here on the building that is directly on the parking spot where he got gunned down at? Why did they not use that camera? Why did they use these way across the street? And not the one that is right there at the parking spot that you shot him at.

DETECTIVE: Show me that camera.

TAMEKA: OK, let's walk over.

CHRISTENA WESTBROOKS: There's cameras all over.

TAMEKA: Yeah, plenty of them.

MK: Tameka, Clemmons girlfriend, shows the detective the camera she is talking about. Meanwhile, her neighbor, Christena, can't stop pointing out all the *other* camera angles the police could pull footage from.

CHRISTENA: There is a camera right here, on the end of this building. Their on every building. Every one. They should get that one, right there.

KADIA EDWARDS: Are these cameras all live?

DET: Yeah, they record.

MK: Yeah, they record he says, adding that they'll double check they have the angle she is talking about. The next day, after retrieving more footage, the police realized something: Their story had been wrong. What Lippert said in his second interview about Clemmons making a beeline and body checking him, it wasn't true. There was no charging, no ramming, no bodycheck. The new video showed Clemmons was simply trying to flee. Running first in one direction and then quickly changing course. Suddenly, the police were backpedaling. The Media was scrambling to update the story. And the community was furious.

[CALL AND RESPONSE AT JOCQUES' VIGIL]

CALL: Why are we here?

RESPONSE: JUSTICE FOR JOCQUES.

CALL: Why are we here?

RESPONSE: JUSTICE FOR JOCQUES.

CALL: Alright, alright, alright...

[VOICES FADE]

MK: In the wake of the Clemmons shooting, activists demanded an independent inquiry. A first for the city, which was used to investigating its own shootings by police. And they got it. Much to the chagrin of the police department, the state's top law enforcement agency launched its own probe. The Department of Justice got involved, too. In the end despite three shots to the back and a changing story, Officer Lippert was cleared of any wrongdoing. Clemmons had a gun, authorities said. That...trumped everything.

MK: It's been a year since the shooting. The department is still reviewing whether Lippert followed protocol. And in turn, whether he should be disciplined or not. In the meantime, he's been reassigned to a desk job.

With no word of Lippert's professional fate, activists and family members began a sit-in outside the East Precinct. They wanted Lippert fired. And Clemmons' mother wrote an open letter to the police chief asking to meet. "You have it within your power to give us some peace," she wrote.

After months of asking, and a few moments in which meeting seemed possible, Chief Anderson still hasn't met with Clemmons mother.

And while the incidents with Officer Cammarn and Officer Lippert couldn't have ended more differently, many Cayce residents connect them. Clemmons girlfriend, Tameka, did while speaking with detectives.

TAMEKA: And when they beat the police the police officer over there, that was probable cause to shoot them. And he didn't pull out no taser, he didn't pull out no gun. He didn't do none of that.

MK: Brian Shannon, the 22-year-old who fought with Officer Cammarn, was convicted of aggravated assault. A felony, the first on his record. He served 30 days in jail, on weekends between his shifts at a fast food restaurant. Shannon's cousin, Michael Mays,

the guy who kicked Cammarn in the head, he had prior convictions and as a result was sentenced to 4 years in prison.

For Officer Cammarn, his divorce is settled. He and his ex-wife have 50/50 custody of their kids.

Recently other departments started showing the video at police trainings--as an example of good instinct and tactics, because he *didn't* stop fighting and he *didn't* pull his weapon. Cammarn's brother, who was going through the Denver Police Academy, watched it in his training. When Cammarn went to his graduation he was greeted by the cadets.

CAMMARN: They were like meeting like somebody famous. It was so funny. And then their instructors came to shake my hand and you know, said, you know, 'Good job out there,' and stuff like that.

MK: After months off the job, Cammarn's back to work. In the same precinct, actually. Patrolling the same streets. He admits he avoided Cayce for months, only going if he had to. He had PTSD from the incident, he said. And it caused him to be more on edge. Counseling helped. So did being patient with himself. To realize the fight wasn't personal.

MC: After my incident happened I just felt like nobody cared about police. I said, you know, them people down there. They want to be like that, they don't need police down there then. Well, obviously I've changed my mind about things. Because, you have time to reflect.

MK: One thing that's really helped Cammarn reconnect with Cayce, is spending time with the kids who live there. He'll sometimes throw a football with them before a shift, or play a game of pickup basketball with a few other officers. As a father, he can't help but see them the same way he sees his own children. And in his mind, the feeling goes both ways. To the kids, he's just a friendly cop, not that guy who got beat up down the block.

MC: I don't know if the kids are an icebreaker. But they do help.

[SOUNDS OF KIDS PLAYING]

MC: You know, because kids are innocent and you see the joy and the cheer inside their little minds. They just have no recollection about what's going on in life. They're just happy.

[OFFICERS PLAYING WITH KIDS: "Get ready, get set, go!"]

They're making the best out of everything. They could be sitting there playing in the dirt, in their little minds they're creating something in the dirt.

MK: Today, the relationship between Cayce residents and the police is still fraught, but some say things have eased slightly.

The precinct Commander has a few more officers on foot patrol. Some play night basketball with the kids and hand out stickers--anything to connect with residents without the armor of a police cruiser. But it's slow going.

They've added more cameras, too. There are now more than 200 scattered around Cayce. Tucked up high in the corners of buildings. Police say they've been crucial to solving crimes. Since they were installed after Officer Cammarn's assault, they've helped solve six of the nine homicides in Cayce. But they seem to do less as far as deterring crime. Homicides are the highest in nearly three decades. And shootings practically doubled in 2017.

There is no doubt that Cayce residents want the community to be safer. Of course they do. But with so many cameras it can feel like you're living in a fishbowl. Like everyone is watching, and no one is connecting. Like Cayce is being overseen from somewhere way up high. It's all so removed. So...Orwellian. Which only further isolates. Drives an even bigger wedge between Cayce and the rest of the neighborhood.

But the cameras are there to stay...Take the new building as an example. The one on the south side of the project, signaling this huge remaking of Cayce. Along the outside and lining the hallways are 57 cameras.

MK: Next time on The Promise. Big Man feels this isolation growing by the day. And he worries what his new, more well off neighbors might do if he stepped out of the fishbowl, and, neighbor-to-neighbor, asked for a cup of sugar.

BM: But if you walk up there. And knock on one of them doors and say 'Can I have a cup of sugar' there's gonna be about 8 polices, swat team, and they gonna tell you you was doing a burglary.

MK: We put that theory to the test, and maybe make a friend while we're at it. That's next on The Promise, stories from public housing on the brink of transformation.

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 Martinell. This episode was written and produced by me, Meribah Knight. Sound design by Tony Gonzalez. Fact checking by Steve Cavendish.

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Go to our website, wpln.org, to see photos of Cayce and listen to previous episodes.