

**THE PROMISE: LIFE, DEATH AND CHANGE IN THE PROJECTS**  
**EPISODE 5: GET SOME GONE**  
**REPORTER: MERIBAH KNIGHT**

---

**MERIBAH KNIGHT:** A quick a note before we begin, this episode includes descriptions violence.

**BIG MAN:** This is where majority of us is at. This is what the majority of us. I mean, half of us, we can't afford to move up out of here. Get some gone. How they say it, get some gone.

**CAYCE VISITOR:** You got some gone? Yeah, I got some gone. I used to live on Dew Street. But I had to get some gone.

**RESIDENT MARILYN GREER:** It mean get somewhere. Bye. See ya. Get some gone.

**FRIEND:** Get some gum? Get some gone. That's gotta be a Southern thing, right, because if you said that in Brooklyn ...Get some gone!

**CAYCE VISITOR:** That's pretty much all it mean is move, quickly. Real quickly. Move.

**BIG MAN:** You start hearing them shots, get some gone. Somebody talking about robbing you for your little equipment, you'd better get some gone.

**CAYCE VISITOR:** I used to live up here I don't live up here no more. I had to get away. Get some gone, yup. Uhuh. Yep

**MK:** I'm Meribah Knight, and you're listening to The Promise, a podcast from Nashville Public Radio. It's 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 5: Get Some Gone

**MK:** It's a saying I heard constantly in East Nashville's James Cayce homes. As if getting away from the dense cluster of decaying apartments was both urgent and fleeting. Something to reach out and grab—like catching a comet by the tail.

Remember that day from Episode 2, the homicide outside Big Man's apartment? At one point, while police marked the crime scene, Big Man's upstairs neighbor leaned way over her railing. Yelled to a friend across the courtyard.

**NEIGHBOR:** ...on facebook, girl. It's time to get some gone. I'm tired.

**MK:** Three simple words that are, in reality, much more complicated. Get. Some Gone. And today, we'll hear the story of *one* woman determined to get out of Cayce, Nashville's largest public housing complex. And she does. But leaving Cayce is rarely a clean break.

**MK:** Oh hey, is Tonya in?

**MK:** Tonya Shannon grew up in Cayce. With her mom, and her two brothers.

**TONYA SHANNON:** I have a big wall fan with dragons on it.

**MK:** Today, Tonya lives with her fiancé in a suburb of Nashville. In a tidy condo decorated with a Japanese theme—samurai swords, dragon sculptures, and Buddha's, lots of Buddha's.

**TONYA SHANNON:** I have a Buddha picture. I have a Buddha statue. Another Buddha statue. My bathroom is the same thing. It has the same theme in there. I don't know it just brings me peace.

**MK:** Tonya has a round face dusted with tiny freckles, and short hair, the tips of which are dyed a burnt orange. She always appears totally put together. Her eyebrows perfectly arched. Her outfits sharp and bursting with color.

And she is obsessively organized. She has this saying she's always telling her three sons: "if you stay ready, you don't have to get ready." And one could fairly say that from the moment Tonya came into this world, she stayed ready.

**TS:** I knew what I was doing in my life, I wanted the opposite of what I had. I wanted the opposite.

**MK:** It was the mid-80s, and Tonya was 4 years old when her mother, Constance, left an abusive marriage and moved into Cayce. Tonya, who is now 38, is the youngest. And the only one of her siblings to make her way *out*. Her brother died there, of an asthma attack. Her other brother has intellectual disabilities and still lives with her mom. When Tonya was young, her mother was on and off public assistance. But most always Constance worked—sewing feed bags at the Werthan Factory in Nashville's Germantown neighborhood, or as a line cook at McClellan's, a lunch counter downtown. Tonya says it felt like a normal childhood. And a happy one. She loved school, especially Kindergarten.

**TS:** We'd get to go outside. We would fly kites. Have kite day. We would have bubble gum hunts instead of Easter Egg hunts. It just seemed like fun. I loved to go to school. I would cry when I was sick and I couldn't go to school.

**MK:** Tonya's memories of growing up in Cayce are so vivid. Her recollections are like pressing play on a series of home movies.

**TS:** You know the ice cream truck would come around. We called it a popsicle truck. But the ice cream truck would come around and you could buy everything off of their, pickles, candy apples, chips. Any kind of ice cream. // I can say I had a good, you know, a good first couple of years. And then, you know, I can say when I turned about 10, I seen someone shot. And you know my life just kind of changed after that. I wasn't a very happy kid after seeing that.

**MK:** It happened as she and her friends were headed to go swimming at a nearby community center. Her friend's cousin had given them each a dollar to get some candy. Tonya was ecstatic since on the way to the pool was a little corner store.

**TS:** Johnny's Eats Shop. And you could go in there and they had penny candy. But as we were walking he told us to "get down, get down." And I am like, "What's going on"? So we duck down behind trees and then there was a car over there so we ducked down behind that. And he got killed. Right in front of us. They shot his brains out.

I cried and cried. I was like, I wanna go home. I don't want to go swimming anymore. I want to go home. And, I remember, my mom wasn't there yet. And I just sat at home and you know, my friends, came over we were sitting on the porch and we talking about it. And I was like, 'did he die? I know you can get shot in the head and...did he die? I just kept saying that. And they was like, 'Yeah, he died.' And it was just eerie to me. I just couldn't, I didn't feel safe anymore.

**MK:** Tonya said that before the shooting, living in the projects didn't faze her. She was a happy kid. Excelling in school and writing short stories about kingdom's made of candy. But after that, her whole world flipped.

**TS:** I just realized we were in the hood. We were in the projects. But after that, it was like, I wanted to either be in someone's house playing with Barbie dolls or something. Or be in my own house playing with Barbie Dolls. I just didn't feel safe. I didn't feel safe.

**MK:** As Tonya became a teenager, her resolve to get out of Cayce grew. Especially as she watched her friends and classmates start to get stuck.

**TS:** All of my friends they, I mean, they were having kids young. They were having children at, one of my friends we were in like 6<sup>th</sup> grade. And she was pregnant and we were riding the school bus to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. But the next thing was

when we got to high school she dropped out. Didn't finish. And then she having another one and another one. It was just like a cycle. And I just knew that I didn't want that.

**MK:** Then, at 16, after being with her boyfriend for about two years, Tonya discovered *she* was pregnant. It took three months before she finally got up the nerve to tell her mom.

**TS:** And I came and said, 'Momma I got to tell you something.' And she said, 'What? Tell me what?' and I was like, 'shhh, nothing man.' 'You better tell me what you want to tell me. What is it?' And I just sat the pregnancy test on the table and she was like, 'What is this? I was like, 'You never seen one before? Did they not have pregnancy tests when you...' "what this mean you're pregnant? All be damned. I thought you were going to be somebody. You know, she just kind of. I said, 'Momma. I can still be somebody.'"

**MK:** Tonya was a feisty young woman, had a temper on her. She'd sometimes get into fistfights at school. And she'd get suspended. But she was so determined to prove her mother wrong. She'd sneak *back* to school so she didn't fall behind. She wound up graduating 9th in her class.

But it's important to point out that after Tonya's son, Gary, was born, Constance did step up. She took care of him while Tonya was at school. Doted over little Gary in ways she'd never done with her own children. The fact is, without her help, Tonya might not have graduated. But as soon as she did, Tonya left. Got an apartment nearby with her boyfriend and the baby.

**TS:** I was downstairs packing some things in a bag. She was like, 'where are you going? What's all this stuff for? You throwing it away? What you doing? I said, 'no momma I'm moving out. I got my own place. And when she told me, it was like a stab in the heart. She said, 'You doing what? You ain't gonna make it out there. You just 18 years old. What you getting you a project? That's what they called living in public housing, A Project. "what you got you a project?" And I was like, "no momma I don't have a project. I have an apartment. I don't want to live over here. I don't want to be in this environment. I don't want my son, I want him to be

able to be able to go outside and play on the playground and you know. No, no I don't have a project. Just her saying that just motivated me more to prove to her that I am gonna make it. I'm gonna make it.

**MK:** Tonya got a job working the front desk at a nonprofit in Cayce called Martha O'Bryan. As much as she wanted to leave Cayce, she liked going back, seeing her friends. And she was a popular employee, connecting well with clients. Plus, she was able to put Gary in daycare at the center. On the surface, her life seemed pretty good. She'd managed to move out of Cayce. Was living with the father of her child. And with two incomes, the family was financially stable. But in some ways, leaving home brought its own trouble. Tonya's boyfriend, who she'd go on to marry, was really abusive. She would tell her mom there were big problems. But she encouraged Tonya to stick it out.

**TS:** They need their daddy, they need their daddy. So I stayed with him for years and he was abusing me and my children. And my mom telling me, Stay with him. It just stuck in my head. OK I'm going to stick it out. It's going to get better. It's going to get better. It never got better. I think I stayed in the abusive relationship with my husband because of my mom.

**MK:** The thing was, Tonya and her mom were more alike than she wanted to admit. Constance herself had been in two toxic relationships. Tonya's older brother had a different father, and when Constance walked in on him with another woman, she'd grabbed a kitchen knife and stabbed him. He survived. But the relationship didn't. As the abuse in Tonya's life escalated, she says she found *herself* hiding knives —behind the headboard of her bed, beneath the couch cushion, taped under the sink in her bathroom.

**TS:** Cuz I knew he would hit me. And I would pull a knife on him. The first time that I ever defended myself I saw my momma in me and I stabbed him 13 times.

**MK:** We'll be right back.

**MK:** Tonya was never charged with assault. Since the stabbing was self defense. And it wasn't until one day five years ago, after a particularly horrific beating that she finally left her husband for good. He hit one of their children--an escalation from his usual verbal abuse. And something clicked.

**TS:** It just something popped in my head like, this is the last straw. I got to go. You done started hitting my children now. No.

**MK:** She walked out, took the kids, and never looked back. Tonya's always been a fighter. She's even got tattoos of boxing gloves--on her arms and on her back. One set for each of her children. Who by the way, are all stellar students. The two oldest are in college. And today, she thinks a lot about that fighting spirit. Her fight to get out, to stay out, of Cayce. Her fight to leave an abusive marriage. And to defy the odds stacked against her as a teen mom. So when Tonya sees old friends, or people she's known for years still living in Cayce, her feelings get complicated.

**TS:** In my mind I feel that I'm judging them. I am. I am judging. Because I know that, as I am going to say it: My people can do better.

**MK:** She's not proud of her attitude. It's just, she knows what's possible. I should say, though, it's not lost on Tonya that she had a rare springboard for leaving: A steady job, daycare for Gary, a second income from her boyfriend. She may have left, but her dedication to Cayce shows. In the advice she gives the young moms. The time she spends with the kids. Ms. Vernell, for example. From Episode 1. They're really close, Ms. Vernell is like a second mom to Tonya. They go out to eat. Get their nails done. Cayce is Tonya's home. And she's determined not to give up on it. Even her mom--a relationship that's beyond strained. Almost every day she goes and visits her. In her cluttered apartment on South 5<sup>th</sup> Street. With cinder block walls and a smoke detector that won't stop beeping for a new battery.

**[SMOKE DETECTOR CHIRPS]**

**MK:** She sits across from her mother. Usually she plays word games. Some days she brings her groceries. Or the company of her teenage son Myarie. They talk in short bursts, with long stretches of silence. Today, Tonya's hiding behind a pair of large sunglasses. As we sit in the cramped living room, the walls peppered with Tonya's old school photos, I ask Ms. Constance if she was proud of Tonya for leaving Cayce. Or if part of her wished she'd stuck around.

**MISS CONSTANCE:** I'm glad she didn't. She got out when she could.

**MK:** Ms. Constance doesn't acknowledge she ever doubted Tonya's ability to make it on her own.

**MISS CONSTANCE:** Yeah I was proud of Tonya. She's always been my ace in the hole. I don't know what I'd do without Tonya.

**MK:** Tonya says nothing. She just sits there, continues to work on her word puzzle. She tells me later she was livid, hearing her mother's revisionist history. Ms. Constance, she goes on to talk wistfully about her long-ago dreams of buying her own home.

**MC:** I always wanted my own house. I always wanted me a house with a white little picket fence. But I keep saying my ship coming in. But I guess it'll come in when I get ready to go out.

**MK:** Ms. Constance may never get her house, but change is coming her way. With Cayce's big overhaul, every apartment will be torn down and residents get new units, with higher income renters living next door. Tonya welcomes the mandated move for her mom. Who, after living in Cayce for the better part of a half a century, seems resigned to sticking around. These days she rarely leaves her apartment. She's never been to any of Tonya's homes. She's missed her grandsons' birthday parties, basketball games, chess tournaments. It bothers Tonya.



**TS:** It's like she's stuck in a rut. She stays I the house and that's just gonna be her life. Staying in Cayce. And I think that's how some of the families there are. It's generational. Your grandmother stays there. Your mom stays there. So you're going to stay there. And you lead by example. So if that's what you learned, your momma stay here and she's been fine, "ok I'm going to do it." And I just decided to do the opposite. I do not want to stay in Cayce. This is not where I want to raise my children. I don't know if it makes people depressed and stuck in a rut, I don't want to get it whatever the Caceyities, I don't want it. No, no, I don't want it.

**MK:** If Tonya's story tells us anything, it's that Cayce is a complicated place. There are those like Tonya, who have an unwavering drive to get away. And a way finds them. Pushing them up and out. A steady job. A relationship. Then there are those like Constance. Where it's like so much time has passed that Cayce is what makes sense. It's what's feasible. And then there are those where the means to leave just aren't there. And the stakes are just too high, to leave the place that may be far from perfect, but that also happens to be home.

Next time on The Promise...

Even by housing chief Jim Harbison's admission, it's been a rough summer at Cayce.

**JIM HARBISON:** Ten days ago another shooting and a murder right here at Cayce. We can change that. We can change it here. We can change it with mixed income. If you don't believe me walk through John Henry Hale. Walk through John Henry Hale. We can do that here.

**MK:** So we go take a walk through John Henry Hale. And we ask: Does mixed income really work?

### **CREDITS**

**MK:** 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, and Julieta Martinelli. This episode was written and produced by

me, Meribah Knight. Sound design by Tony Gonzalez. And fact checking by Steve Cavendish.

The music is by The Insider, Fleslit, M-N-S-L, Wake, and Black Ant — all found through the Free Music Archive.

Go to our website, [wpln.org](http://wpln.org), to see childhood photos of Tonya, additional photos by photographer Joe Buglewicz and listen to previous episodes.

**[VOICE FADES IN]**

**RESIDENT MARILYN GREER:** You better get some gone. Yeah you better go on. Yeah.

**[LAUGHTER]**

**MK:** And I just want to take a moment to say if today's story resonates with you, if you or anyone you know is experiencing domestic violence, please ask for help. Call the police. Or call the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Their number is 1-800-799-7233. They even have a 24/7 online chat feature. Thanks for listening.

---