

THE PROMISE: LIFE, DEATH AND CHANGE IN THE PROJECTS
EPISODE 6: THE FUTURE
REPORTER: MERIBAH KNIGHT

MAROLYN GREER: This is what we've been waiting for. This is what we've been waiting on.

RESIDENT: I want to be the first one to move in there.

ANTOINETTE BATTS: Some people want change, some people don't. Some people are afraid of change. Some people embrace change. But change is here. Change is here. [LAUGHS]

MERIBAH KNIGHT: The 99 rundown buildings that make up the James Cayce housing projects in East Nashville..are coming down. In their place will be a brand new cluster of colorful, modern apartments. And the housing authority is banking that they'll attract a new kind of tenant — teachers and nurses and young professionals...living alongside families on public assistance. If there's a silver bullet for concentrated poverty, housing director Jim Harbison believes this is it.

JIM HARBISON: "That's what today is really about for me — living together without judging each other on the size of their wallet, the color of their skin, where they go to church, or whether they go to church at all."

MK: There will be dozens of groundbreaking before this dream comes true. And right now, in the early days, violence has been an unwelcome backdrop.

JH: Just two blocks down the hill here. A talented beautiful 16-year-old woman recently lost her life. Earlier this summer another talented beautiful young woman killed on the basketball courts. 10 days ago another shooting and a murder right here at Cayce. We can change that.

MK: It's never been done quite like what's envisioned for the Cayce homes. But it has been tried across town on a much smaller scale. And Harbison contends that it worked.

JH: We can change it here. We can change with mixed income. If you don't believe me, walk through John Henry Hale. Walk through John Henry Hale. We can do that here. And that's what today is all about...

[VOICE FADES OUT]

MK: So we'll take a walk through John Henry Hale and discover that merely planting people from different walks of life side-by-side doesn't necessarily make a community blossom.

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 6: The Future.

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MK: The John Henry Hale public housing complex on the northeast side of Nashville was torn down and rebuilt about a decade ago. It used to be known as "The Bricks" for its tightly packed rows of brick apartments. Like in the Cayce homes. But today, Hale is a sleepy, manicured development. Rows of colorful townhomes. Wide streets. Tidy lawns. Driveways. As a neighborhood it looks cheerfully cookie cutter.

[KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK]

MK: Good morning how are you doing?

EMILIO HUGHES: Good. How are you?

MK: I'm good.

EH: Look at you all geared up.

MK: This is Emilio Hughes. He's 70 and lives with his wife Elaine in a well kept light-filled apartment here. Windowsills crammed with spider plants and philodendrons. The walls covered with photos. And he's got a fish tank with three geriatric fish that, frankly, he can't stand.

EH: They just refuse to die. I have starved them. I have not cleaned the tank. I have done everything. And they just survive. They're like me, you know, they just hang in there. They just hang in there.

MK: Emilio has always struggled with his health — drugs, diabetes, cancer. Now he's on dialysis.

He was born and raised in Brooklyn, and the accent still peeks through every now and then. He moved to Nashville in the early 90's when he got a job at a custom picture framing shop. He bought a house. But after falling victim to some predatory loans, he lost it in a foreclosure. And that's when he moved into public housing.

Soon after, he saw John Henry Hale being redeveloped, and noticed a townhome going up, high on the hill with a view of downtown. Yellow and red brick. At first, Emilio figured it was private housing. It looked too nice to be government built. Right away he put in a request.

EH: And I was the first person to move into this one when it was first built. And I have been here since then. What has it been 8 years 9 years or something.

MK: He loves his quiet little nook of Hale.

EH: So this little corner here is perhaps the most boring spot of the whole neighborhood.

MK: You like that?

EH: Perfect. Perfect. You know I couldn't ask for any better.

MK: Pretty soon Emilio began to meet his neighbors. Next door was a husband and wife with two young girls.

ART BOISSIERE: Imma give you actually my whole name. Art is a shortened version of my name — I have a long first French and last name. So my first Anthanas. Last name Boissiere.

MK: But everyone calls him Art. His wife is Toshi (TAH-SHI). Art, who is a bear of a man, tall and wide, had been a cop in New Orleans. And grew up in the Lower 9th Ward. Unlike Emilio, Art and Toshi and their two girls, Chloe and Zoe, are market rate renters. Meaning they don't qualify as low income. So they don't get a subsidy. They pay a little over a thousand dollars a month for their 3-bedroom apartment. Emilio, on the other hand, pays around \$600. But both moved in at the very beginning. Art and his wife saw it being built from the freeway and figured it looked like a great place to live.

AB: Once I found out that this used to be a project and it was going to be a mixed community, I was really excited about that part. Because I said to my wife, and she agreed. I said, we also get to model what a loving, married, African American couple looks like with kids. That's a healthy family. Because when we first moved in, we were the only married couple with kids on the block. The rest of everybody else that was living here were single moms.

MK: Art believed in strong communities. In the Lower 9th Ward, when crack cocaine descended, he saw what happened. He wanted to be part of fixing things, fixing communities, fixing families. He's a deeply religious man. And this really felt like a calling. So he and his family moved into their corner house, a greyish blue townhome with a sweeping view of downtown Nashville.

AB: The community at that time. It was really great. It was, people that you met outside neighbors. We spoke to each other. We got to know each other. You know it was a level of excitement just being here. And people were happy, we were all happy.

MK: When Hale re-opened in 2008, a newspaper headline called it: "A Place To Be Proud Of." Art says the property manager, DeAngela Lilly, made sure of that.

AB: And I remember because we were very active in our community meetings. And I remember Miss Lilly always drilling the point to everybody. This is not the projects. And for people who were in the projects at one time, if you have a project mentality, you're not going to be here very long.

MK: To those who came from public housing, this could sound like a threat. But to Art, a strict law and order kind of guy, it sounded like exactly the right approach.

He and his wife wound up getting close with their neighbors, who happened to be low-income renters. A couple named Shay and James. They'd have barbecues. Spend 4th of July together and watch the fireworks from their back patio. Art and James would have heart to hearts in the driveway. Where he'd urge James to propose to Shay, make it official. After all, they had a child together. At the time, Art got a job as a probation officer. And on his first day, he was getting a tour of the offices.

AB: And then we come out to the lobby where all the felons come in to report to their various probation officers. When they open the door. Guess who I see sitting there? ... I see James. He's like, Art? He says, What are you doing here? As if I am there to report. I said, I work here. I said, What are you doing here?

MK: This exchange between Art and James, this was income mixing as it's supposed to work. The leveling of a conventional power dynamic. If they didn't live next door, Art would have just been James' probation officer. Instead they were friends.

Meanwhile, Art's other neighbor, Emilio, was getting to know the place in his own way. He also wanted to be an instrument of change. So he got elected to lead the residents' association. He liked his apartment and many of his neighbors. But once he started seeing past the nice new buildings, he had concerns about whether the community was coming together. And he mostly saw that it wasn't. The housing authority, or MDHA, was strict with residents, and quick to evict.

EH: Fear and intimidation, you know, is the staff that is used to control in this environment.

MK: And there were harsh reprimands for minor missteps — like when a woman was turned away from paying rent ...

EH: Because they came up to the main office and they had flannel pajama bottoms

MK: so she was told to go back home

EH: ... And come back to the office more properly dressed.

MK: Plus, MDHA pushed back on some of Emilio's ideas that were meant to help the low-income residents. The agency refused to build a basketball court or a playground claiming it would attract drug dealers. And they said no when he tried to set up Narcotics Anonymous meetings, said they weren't necessary. And they insisted on attending the monthly resident meetings.

EH: I spent two terms, you know. But then, you know, the longer I stayed the more I recognized the impotence of the office.

MK: Emilio ended up resigning.

EH: I want to know what can I bring to the table that can better the living conditions of my neighbors, you know? And I couldn't find that. I couldn't get to happen, you know?

MK: What Art saw as management keeping the neighborhood in line, Emilio saw as *micromanagement* that kept people divided. Which struck him as all wrong. MDHA needed to creatively bring residents together, not drive them apart. Otherwise how was this big idea of social mixing going to happen?

EH: You can't just throw the dominos on the table and expect them to find their position. This new culture doesn't just happen. You know you have to develop this thing. You have to nurture this thing.

MK: A prime example, is the community center, just down the street from Art and Emilio. I went for a visit one day to meet the new president of the Residents Association, and what I saw was a shell of a place. A bunch of vacant offices. An empty computer lab.

MK: Oh wait, there's no computers?

MJ: NO computers. That's what I am working on. I am trying to get volunteers.

MK: I later found out the computers had disappeared after a grant ran out. And the offices were supposed to be for nonprofits, so they could be onsite to offer services like job coaching or parenting classes. But the agency wanted to charge rent and no one's wanted to pay it. So for a decade, they've stayed empty. Emilio says, the community never had a chance. The low income tenants tried not to rock the boat. And the market rate mostly kept to themselves.

EH: Those of us that are income based, we the low life in the community. In their eyes.

[GUNSHOTS]

MK: uh-oh.

EH: Yeah.

MK: What was that?

EH: What it sound like?

MK: It sounded like gunfire. As we sit there, wondering, Emilio's neighbor, Art, walks outside and starts rolling video on his phone.

AB: Now there seems to be a shooting that's taken place and my neighbors are telling me that this is the second shooting that's happened in a matter of weeks in our community.

MK: It turns out, Art has been upset about the crime and violence creeping in. There was a drug bust around the corner. Then his car was stolen out of his driveway. He asked the property manager for a stepped up patrol. But nothing came of it. Recently, Art got so frustrated he demanded a meeting with the housing authority's head of security.

AB: And in that meeting, that short meeting. I told him, you guys have lost control of this community. We have multiple folks in this community selling drugs. I said, what are you going to do about it? Because I said next thing that's going to happen are armed robberies. Home invasions and homicides.

[MONTAGE OF TV NEWSCASTS]

NC5: It's a mother's worst nightmare, a teenager was killed defending the woman who brought him into this world.

NC5: Around midnight, police responded to a home invasion as the J Henry Hale apartments. Two gunmen busted through the back door of this home demanding money ...

F17: I did speak with a neighbor who says his heart goes out to the family and he is quite upset at the crime rash in this neighborhood.

AB: I feel for the family. I am going to be praying for them But I am not shocked. Because the crime in our community has steadily been on the rise.

MK: That was Art talking on the evening news about a fatal home invasion. Seven hours after his meeting at the housing authority. And he's right crime *is* up at Hale. Serious crimes have more than doubled in the last five years. But compared to what it was before the overhaul, it's dramatically lower. Since the year 2000, major crimes, like homicide, aggravated assault, burglary, are down 73 percent.

Still, in Art's world, the community isn't as safe as it was when he moved in. And he's right. What he sees as a neighborhood slipping away, has caused him and Tohshi to retreat. They no longer attend the resident meetings. And in a neighborhood full of rentals, people come and go all the time. Which means he knows fewer neighbors. It's enough to get him and and his wife thinking.

AB: It's time for us to start researching and considering moving out. And here is the sad part about it. When you lose families like us, that have been here since the beginning, that have a sense of pride and care and compassion and love for the community. And you get other people in here that don't have that same passion and love for the community it just makes the place more desolate, worse.

MK: What I heard Art and Emilio telling me, is it's not enough to just build attractive buildings and fill them up with different types of people. That alone doesn't mean the community will thrive. Someone has to be intentional about finding ways to bring people together, despite their economic differences. The residents have to feel nurtured, they have to feel safe. And poor tenants need to feel welcome. When we come back, I press housing director Jim Harbison on how he plans to make this work on an even grander scale across town at the James Cayce homes.

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MK: Before I go any further, I want to say that Hale *is* different from Cayce. Most notably, its size. When Hale was rebuilt, the city slashed the number of affordable units by half. So the new townhomes were prettier, but few were able to stay and enjoy them. This time around, at Cayce, the housing authority has promised to do things differently. Everyone will stay. 2,400 new apartments will be built. Which means Cayce going to be 10 times bigger than Hale. And if it ends up with similar problems, there's no doubt

those problems will be amplified, by a lot. So it's important look at Hale and learn from it, that's what the experts said.

Jim Fraser, the Vanderbilt professor from Episode 1, he spent three years studying Hale as it transitioned. He'd done hundreds of resident interviews, crunched statistics and he found an interesting, but troubling trend...

JF: Well, one finding we didn't expect was that very few people reported that they felt there was a sense of community in the development. A lot of people reported that they had feelings of isolation. They were told to go to work, come home, don't interact with people, don't cause any problem. Just get ready to save a little money so you can move out.

MK: Fraser gave me some studies to read. And they were sobering. One, which followed mixed income efforts in Chicago, said these developments "show little progress towards bridging the huge social divides among residents (and in fact display troubling signs of increased tension and alienation)." Another, which he helped write, proclaimed, "Simply put, poor people do not seem to benefit much from mixed-income housing."

Fraser says there *were* some good outcomes at Hale, the community garden, the townhome style apartments, the huge drop in crime. But the housing authority ultimately failed to create ways for people to come together. Plus, they used such a heavy hand to maintain control, that many low-income residents felt watched and on edge.

JF: The only thing they really cared about was to keep residents in line. To not be in the news. Not to have violence. Not to have some type of failure in terms of what it looked like to the broader public. But the price the residents have paid for that is really, at the very best benign neglect.

MK: And this is why he's adamant that Nashville take the time to get it right with Cayce.

MK: Ok, just say your name.

JIM HARBISON: Your name.

MK: You're already messing with me, we just started.

JIM HARBISON: I'm sorry. Jim Harbison.

MK: This is Jim Harbison, the head of Nashville's public housing agency. And this massive overhaul is his idea, his legacy.

MK: How do you think turning 715 low income units into 2400 mixed income units is going to solve the problems of Cayce?

JH: First, everything we've seen is that leaving it like it is. With concentrated poverty in old buildings is a bad idea.

MK: Second, he says, is that with mixed income comes possibility, opportunities.

JH: When you have differing incomes together the people with resources get to know the people that lack resources and provide either examples, or actual support to the safety, education and opportunity of lower income. Am I certain of this? No, it worries me. But I know that leaving it like it is is not the right thing to do.

MK: A former Marine colonel, with the haircut to prove it, Harbison is a formal kind of guy. I've never seen him without a suit. Which is why his ribbing at the outset of this interview surprised me. He never does that. But more significant, is hearing the doubt in his voice. His admission of what a challenge this whole thing is. He's rarely spoken so candidly.

JH: We don't know exactly how to make intentional mixed income work. I will be very clear about that. We realize that's a tough question.

MK: And, he says, they haven't always done it right in the past. But Harbison grew up in an economically diverse neighborhood in South Nashville and this is deeply personal to

him. He talks often about wanting his daughter, a highschool teacher who works at a school near Cayce, to move into the new development.

MK: So when you said things keep you up at night, what keeps you up at night?

JH: I think the main thing is will someone of higher income be happy with someone of middle income be happy with someone of lower income living side-by-side. I believe it in my heart, but I worry.

MK: Harbison says he has ideas for tenant barbecues. And a mandatory class for new residents. So they know about where they're living and with whom.

JH: Clearly we can't just build it and say, 'Eh, leased up!'

MK: But if you ask people like Jim Fraser and Emilio Hughes, it's going to take a lot more than that to make folks gel. For Harbison, there is no blueprint for a project as large as Cayce...which plans to build 2400 new apartments and integrate more higher income renters. But, frankly, he doesn't see another option. Cayce cannot stay as it is, he tells me. The buildings are falling apart. The violence is too oppressive. The people are too isolated. And, let's be honest, the land has become far too valuable.

JH: We now have to ask that question. What is the best use for the community? For these residents? And what's the best approach? And keeping 1937 buildings, with closelines, that I can't put central heat and air in, and that take a lot of money to maintain. With everybody being at an \$8 to 10 thousand of income in a concentrated environment just doesn't seem to be the way to go. But it's a risk.

MK: What would a successful, in 10 years, 15 years, when this is all done. What would success look like? In specific terms.

JH: Job opportunities for those of low income. Good education. And safety for all residents. And obviously great infrastructure and lovely buildings. And neighbors living side-by-side, in peace. And supporting each other. Stay tuned. I am sure you're coming back.

MK: Harbison recognizes that he's dealing with thousands of lives. If this doesn't work, if they don't keep their pact to re-house every family in Cayce, along with thousands more. Many of Nashville's most vulnerable residents could be worse off than before. Left to scramble for housing on the private market — which can be hard even for those with means. And while overhauling the 63-acre James Cayce Homes is a complicated endeavor, the question at the root of it all is really pretty simple: How should we treat our city's poor?

For years, Cayce was isolated, ignored and starved of resources. Now, 75 years after it was built, officials have vowed to make things right. And whether it's in Nashville or across the country, there really isn't a road map for how to do that. At this point, it's all just a *promise*.

We'll be back in a couple weeks with a bonus episode. We'll catch up with all your favorite people from The Promise, see how they're doing, and what's new in their lives. Stay tuned.

CREDITS

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