

The Promise Follow-Up: Letting Go

VERNELL MCHENRY: Well good morning. The traffic got you didn't it?

VERNATO: Do you need me to move that so you all can pull in?

VM: I'm so ready, I'm so ready I'm hyped. This morning I got up here, he go, "Calm down, Mama, calm down."

When I pull up to Ms. Vernell's apartment in the James Cayce Homes one early spring morning, this is the scene that greets me.

VM: I'm just hyped. I've been up since 3 o'clock. I've been up still getting stuff together.

V: I don't even know what she was up until 3 o'clock doing. What you going to do? What you going to do a 3 o'clock, what you going to walk over there and walk back? What you going to do? I don't know what you're going to do at 3 o'clock. I mean, I am just trying to figure it out.

VM: Get things together, just get things together. Making sure everything is together. I made sure my chair in the bathroom, everything is together. I am excited. I'm just excited. Hehehehe.

Ms. Vernell is sitting on her stoop, practically vibrating with excitement. She's wearing a light jacket to combat the early spring chill, and her close-cropped greying hair is hidden under a head wrap. Her son, Vernato, is there, too. And, like any good son, he's ribbing her every chance he gets.

V: Security. Somebody call security, please. Call security.

Today is moving day. But it's not where you might think. Ms. Vernell is moving out of Cayce. That's right, she's leaving.

Or, as Ms. Vernell put it:

VM: This is the day I move from the hood into the new palace.

<<Ambiance of boxes being moved into truck>>

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.

On today's episode, we're sticking close to Ms. Vernell. Her story — deciding to move out of Cayce — is really important. Because it reveals something about this big, messy, long process to overhaul Nashville's public housing, something that no one has really talked about: what happens when residents get tired? Tired of being told to keep waiting, tired of being asked to keep moving, just tired?

Because that's what happened to Ms. Vernell. She got tired.

Today's episode: "Letting Go."

<<Music: Vengeful>>

It's been a long time since you've heard from Ms. Vernell, so let's revisit. You might remember her bubbly personality, or her cane named Susie. Or, you might remember her folding beach chair, the one she'd park outside her apartment so she could sit and talk to the children and slip into daydream. She'd sit by the ocean, the sand between her toes, palm trees swaying in breeze ...

VM: And I am sitting and sipping a pineapple spritzer, with the little umbrella. I do travel away from here in my mind.

When Vernell McHenry moved in to the James Cayce Homes almost 20 years ago, it was a chaotic time for her. She was battling addiction and had been living at the local mission.

But as Ms. Vernell settled into the neighborhood, things began to shift. She got off drugs. She made new, sober, friends.

Then, the housing authority announced plans to totally rebuild Cayce. They wanted to break up the concentrated poverty that, they said, had held Cayce back for far too long. The project was built in the late 1930s. And in the last 10 years, a lot had changed in the neighborhood — land values had skyrocketed, wealth had moved in next door, but Cayce's residents hadn't benefitted from any of it. In fact, many were worse off. It was time for a change. Cayce needed fixing, and the housing authority believed the key was rebuilding the complex with an eye toward more higher-income renters.

<<Music: Silver Lanyard>>

Worried that she, and others, might get pushed out, Ms. Vernell took action. She organized her neighbors, formally calling the group Cayce United. They went to meetings, they asked questions, and they demanded that the housing authority hear their concerns.

And for a good few years, Ms. Vernell's community organizing defined much of her life. She didn't work a typical job, but she did work diligently on behalf of her neighborhood — spreading the word about Cayce United, attending every resident meeting, every housing-authority meeting and more.

In 2017, when I first met Ms. Vernell, Cayce's transformation was just beginning. We followed her as the first new building opened, called Barret Manor. She had planned to move in until she discovered something.

VM: It was no balconies, nowhere to sit outside. You know, like what we're doing now, sun, you know we can sit outside, mingle with our neighbors and talk. You can't do that.

Ms. Vernell had been abused as a child, and part of that trauma was being locked in closets. So being in a tightly packed apartment building gave her, as she referred to it, that closed-in feeling.

She decided not to move, to wait for something better to come along as Cayce was renovated.

And that's where we'd left off. But as time went on, Ms. Vernell watched as apartments were built up the hill: Kirkpatrick Park, they were called. And they were exactly what she wanted. A rainbow of elegant colors, each had a balcony and a front stoop. And, they were almost complete. Maybe this was her something better.

She hoped to move in there. And, if memory served, the housing authority had said she could.

VM: We'd be grandfathered in. That's the words they used. When they get through building in Kirkpatrick Center, they would let us move down there.

But then, she says ...

VM: And in the other meeting, they changed the plans. They changed it that the one bedrooms, that they weren't going to move the people in the one bedrooms to Kirkpatrick.

MERIBAH KNIGHT: So, that was surprising to you I take it.

VM: It was very surprising. It was very discouraging because I had really had my heart set to move down there. I really did.

Officials at the housing authority say they'd been clear from the beginning, that for this particular new building not all residents would be eligible. But I've been covering this renovation for nearly three years, and this was the first I'd heard about it.

Regardless, Ms. Vernell needed to move. She'd gotten a letter in the mail saying her apartment was about to be demolished to make way for a new mid-rise building. A remember, she had already moved once before, the previous winter, when her apartment was condemned for a sewage leak.

This time around, since Kirkpatrick wasn't an option, they offered Ms. Vernell yet another apartment. But it was still in the old section of Cayce, perched on a hill with lots of steps, not so good for someone who walks with a cane. Plus, it was on the dicey side of Cayce, home to drug dealing and other bad behavior.

VM: It's a very high-crime area, and so I chose not to move there.

<<Music: VelaVela>>

This was the human Tetris required to pull this whole thing off. See, the housing authority had promised a one-for-one replacement. Meaning, residents would not be forced out of Cayce during the renovation; and when it was all finished, there would be enough units for everyone who was here before.

It was a noble promise, but also nothing short of a logistical nightmare.

And Ms. Vernell was just one resident. Imagine this multiplied by several hundred. Hundreds of residents were being shuffled around from apartment to apartment, all so the housing authority could build anew and still keep its word.

After rejecting the first offer, Ms. Vernell was presented with another: An apartment three miles away, in the John Henry Hale Homes.

Officials said Ms. Vernell could go to Hale until a unit was ready for her back in Cayce.

She didn't see another option. It was time to leave Cayce. At least for now.

<<Music: VelaVela ends>>

In mid-March, after signing the lease at her John Henry Hale apartment, Ms. Vernell went to ask if a maintenance man could let her in to see the place. We sit in my car, waiting for him to arrive.

VM: Maybe we need to get out. Maybe if he sees us walking around, maybe it'll kind of help.

<<Car door opens>>

MK: It's very different than Cayce.

If you remember, this is the complex from Episode 6, where Emilio Hughes and Art Boissier lived. It had been redeveloped a decade earlier but was criticized for displacing hundreds of low-income families in the process.

I called the neighborhood "cheerfully cookie-cutter" in the episode. There are rows of colorful townhomes, wide streets, tidy lawns.

But some residents said there was an oppressive quality to how the complex was managed. Emilio called it "fear and intimidation."

VM: OK here come the manager, here come the people...I'm Vernell McHenry. I'm the one going to be —

MANAGER: Well she won't be able to go in with this equipment on.

He points to my microphone and recorder.

MK: OK well, I'll turn it off so I can go in.

VM: OK, and I was just going to take pictures of it because I wanted to see how it's going to look. Me.

M: They won't let you take pictures.

VM: They won't?

M: Naw.

VM: OK.

M: Yeah, they've got some strict, strict laws for us. To not allow certain things to happen so ...

<<Music: Vengeful>>

I understood he was just doing his job. So did Ms. Vernell. But it was a reminder of where we were. Despite the quaint, sleepy look of this neighborhood, the housing authority was in charge. They were in control.

When asked later, a spokeswoman for the agency said this was actually NOT their policy. Ms. Vernell should have been allowed to take photos.

At that moment, though, it was pretty clearly off limits.

After the break, Ms. Vernell comes to terms with the truth behind why she's really leaving Cayce.

<<Midroll>>

Ms. Vernell and I toured the apartment despite the restrictions, and it was lovely. The outside was a bright yellow and looked much like a single-family home. Inside, there were big windows that let in lots of natural light. It had butter-yellow walls, new vinyl flooring. There was a dishwasher, a large bathroom. Google Fiber had been installed.

It was, in short, worlds away from Cayce.

We regrouped back in my car.

MK: We got to do a recap since I couldn't record in there. OK, what'd you think?

VM: Umm, it's a little smaller. But I like it.

MK: I don't think it's smaller. You think it's smaller?

VM: I don't know, I'm just excited. (laughter) I am more excited than anything. I'm excited. I like it, It's homey. It's homey looking.

MK: So describe it a little bit.

VM: Well, I like the living room and the dining room section because I can fix it up. Fix my tables and put my flowers in there. Oh, I don't know. I'm just excited to where I can have me a porch of my own. I can put my flowers in there. I got me a little patio in the back where I can look at everything. I don't know. It's just beautiful. It's just beautiful.

MK: It's so different than Cayce.

VM: It's different and it's more like a little home. More like a little house now. My own little house. My own little house. And I have a back door and a front door. I like it. I really do. I really do. I can invite my friends over sometimes, and we can sit out in the back and maybe have a little barbecue.

Ms. Vernell went on: about how she'd arrange her furniture, what color curtains she wanted. She seemed so genuinely happy, but she also seemed a little nervous.

<<Music: Low Light Switch>>

Then, she got very quiet. And in almost a whisper she explained.

VM: I, I kind of think I am going to take a different change over here. It's been in my plan. Instead of going backwards, going back over to Cayce, I think I am going to stay over this way. I've been praying about it. And like my brother said, I need to take a new strategy. I mean, I got a lot of friends over there. But something telling me I need to take a move. Make a new move. You understand what I'm saying? I've been over there for 19 years. You know? I've been dealing with them for a long time. And ... they're just not doing me right, you know what I mean? So ...

I just want to stop and make sure you heard that. Ms. Vernell is saying she's not going back to Cayce, ever. And when she says they're not doing her right, she means the housing authority. She's spent years working with them — informing them, pushing them, trusting in them that they'd communicate clearly and always put the residents first.

But frankly, she feels abandoned. Finding out she couldn't live in the new Kirkpatrick Park was frustrating. And it seemed her only options to stay in Cayce was in one of the midrise buildings being built. Very similar to the kind she'd already said no to with Barret Manor.

Ms. Vernell was tired of waiting and tired of hoping and still being disappointed. She needed to detach from Cayce.

VM: This is a new beginning. And I like this. I like the apartment. And, umm, I'm getting too old to be moving back and forth. I really am.

MK: Why are you getting emotional?

VM: (sniffles) I'm happy. I'm happy. I don't want to leave, but ... I'm just getting tired of keep moving. And, I'm just getting tired of being juggled around. They want to just put me in a high rise. I feel like they just throwing me where they want to put me. You know?

Think about it: when you're older, you don't want to be closed in. You know what I mean? You can come outside, look at the sky. Talk to God. It's easier. But when you're closed in, you got to come all the way downstairs, go down the elevators, you know. Unless you've been in my shoes, you don't understand. Being locked up and closed in is not cool. You know, I talked to my psychiatrist about it. I talked to other people about it. But I know if I go in that high rise, I know I'm going to have panic attacks. That childhood is going to come back. And the more I think about it, the more the dreams come back.

<<Music: Waypost>>

The closets come back. Being locked up. Being locked in those rooms. Being locked in the closet for days and days. You come out, "What you doing out?" If you have not been abused, you don't understand what I am saying. You know, things happen. Things trigger. You know what I mean? That's the reason why I try to stay busy. Not to sit in the house. Not to go backwards and get on drugs. Do you get where I am coming from? I come over here because I knew if I stayed over there in Cayce, started getting around the wrong people again, it's going to come back again.

I'd never seen Ms. Vernell this emotional.

I've known her for two years now, but this was the first time it really made sense to me. For Ms. Vernell, the stakes couldn't be higher. This wasn't just about preference, or even about a social life.

This was about trauma, about triggers and about addiction. Ms. Vernell knew herself better than anyone. And she knew, Cayce was no longer good for her health.

She had to let it go.

VM: It's going to be hard. I know it's going to be hard. It's going to be hard adjusting. But I'll be all right. I've got that kind of willpower. But being locked up in them high rises, that's not gonna work.

And so she'd turn away from all her work at Cayce, let go of the idea of getting a brand new apartment, and move into John Henry Hale.

VM: You know, it's not the best. But it's better than what I had. I can do something with this. Baby steps.

Ms. Vernell was resolved.

I wonder: how many other Cayce residents are going to follow her lead, who are also tired of being juggled around? The housing authority says it's trying to be thoughtful and considerate during this process. But, rebuilding the city's largest low-income housing development while promising not to displace anyone is much harder in practice than it is on paper.

Is it prepared for what that really meant? And most importantly, are the residents prepared?

They could build all the units they promised, but it doesn't mean that people will stay.

VM: They're here. The movers are here. Dadadada. Welcome to my new home.

When the moving truck pulls up, Ms. Vernell is standing in the entryway of her new apartment, the door in one hand, and her cane, which she calls Susie, in the other.

As the movers begin to unload, her son Vernato comes with one very important item.

MK: Oh my gosh, you've got the chair.

V: yes, I've got the chair. This is the chair.

It's the beach chair. The sandy beach, blue water, palm trees, purple Victorian, pineapple spritzer with an umbrella chair.

V: Hey, young lady, where do you want this chair?

VM: Right here by the door. Right here where the queen can sit. Right here. My chair for my new palace.

Around the back of the apartment, which is set high on a hill, Vernato surveys the view. From here you can see downtown. You can see the football stadium. The pedestrian bridge that lights up at night, and the many cranes peppering the skyline.

V: Could you buy a better view than this? Now imagine this at night time.

Below the apartment is a well-kept community garden. Vernato jokes his mom is so close it'll be an easy commute to her new garden plot.

V: Just roll down the hill, get up, dust yourself off. Walk over there with Susie, say, "Open this gate up." They'll say, "Who are you?" "I'm Ms. Vernell." (laughter)

<<Knocking>>

MK: Hellooo!

VM: Good morning.

MK: Good morning! How you doing?

VM: I'm doing fine this morning.

It's almost three months later, and Ms. Vernell is settling in to the new apartment. She decorated it in her favorite colors: a mix of earthy reds and browns. There's a painting on the wall of a black Madonna and child. Two big couches with end tables packed with framed family photos. She has lots of plants, too, each named after a loved one: there's Yolanda, a large green philodendron. And Clarence, a tiny creeping purple vine.

Ms. Vernell seems positively blissful.

VM: I can sit on my back porch. Enjoy the sun in the sky. And enjoy my flowers. And I can sit on the front. I have neighbors with children. They come and speak. And talk. And so I love where I'm at.

It's not where she thought she'd end up. But it's a happy ending nonetheless.

<<Music: Sunday Lights>>

She's somewhere new. Out of her dark musty apartment. And while it's not Cayce, and her landlord is still the housing authority, Ms. Vernell seems energized.

She's attending resident meetings, getting to know her neighbors.

Ms. Vernell is gearing up to try to make change, once again.

<<Music fades>>

MK: Hold on. Do you have ice?

VM: Oh my goodness!

MK: I don't quite know exactly how to make <<liquid pouring>> a pineapple spritzer, but I'm gonna try.

<<Aluminum can opens>>

MK: Gotta get our garnishes.

<<Laughter>>

MK: What color umbrella do you want?

VM: Uhhh, give me ... the blue one, sister.

MK: OK, Ms. Vernell.

VM: All right, thank you!

MK: This is your pineapple spritzer.

VM: All right, thank you!

MK: We may not be in a purple Victorian, but ...

VM: Thank you! We're in a yellow Victorian.

MK: A yellow Victorian.

VM: Cheers!

MK: Cheers!

VM: Cheers! Tastes good.

<<Music>>

This episode was reported and produced by me, Meribah Knight. It was edited by Emily Siner and Anita Bugg. Thank you to Tony Gonzalez for mixing and to Chas Sisk and Samantha Max for additional editing help.

The music in this episode is by Blue Dot Sessions.

And this is likely the last update we'll do for Season 1. But look out, a sneak peek of Season 2 will be dropping into this feed very soon.

And if you haven't already, please leave us a review and rate this podcast. It really helps.