

3

January 9, 2015

669 Days Until the 2016 U. S. Presidential Election

With her Religious Diversity class scheduled to start in less than a minute, Dr. Jefferson knew her parking spot was a full five-minute walk to the classroom. She was going to be late. Although students rarely made it on time for the 9 a.m. class, she still felt obligated to be positioned at the head of the class as scheduled. However, the night before, she had tossed and turned in bed, taking hours to finally fall asleep as she was excited for the day of civil action awaiting her in the Quad. By the time sleep finally came, her alarm failed to wake her, and she arose only 20 minutes before class started. She hastily dressed, ran a brush through her hair, sloshed a mouthful of Listerine for a few seconds, and headed out the door.

Finally bounding through the door at 9:06 a.m., she entered talking, “I know, I know I’m late, but I...” As she crossed the threshold of the door, she was taken aback by what she saw or more by what she didn’t see—her students. No one was there. Where 27 fresh faces were supposed to be ready to learn, there were only vacant desks. Her mind quickly cycled through the possible explanation for the emptiness. Was it the wrong day? No, a quick look at her phone confirmed it was Friday. Was it a holiday? No, just a normal day in January. Were classes cancelled for some reason? No, she could hear other classes down the hall. Then the most dreaded explanation came to mind. Was she fired for inciting the protest? She hadn’t checked e-mail that morning due to being late, and maybe she had a message to come to the president’s office. Just as she opened the cover of her laptop, she heard a voice.

“Dr. Jefferson.” It was Candace Lindsey, one of her brightest students who had just walked into the classroom.

“Candace? What’s going...” Before she could finish her question, Candace interrupted.

“Dr. Jefferson, can you come here a second?” Candace walked to the second-story window.

“But, what...?” Dr. Jefferson asked.

“Just come over here.” She gestured with both hands.

As Dr. Jefferson looked out the window, she could see a group of students—her students—lining the sidewalk, through the pine and oak trees, winding around the building. “But I don’t understand; what’s going on?”

“Dr. Jefferson, that’s your class. We’ve made a human chain from this building all the way over to the Quad. We think there could be no better lesson in religious diversity than for our class to kick off the day’s protest with you.”

Stunned, Dr. Jefferson struggled to piece together a coherent sentence, “But, the protest...is supposed to start at noon, not...”

“You don’t know what’s happening, do you?” Candace chuckled, knowing she had the honor of informing Dr. Jefferson.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” a still confused Dr. Jefferson mumbled.

“Dr. Jefferson, you’ve started something huge! Word of the protest has gone viral, and people were at the Quad all night. Over 100 students are probably already there, plus your entire class. All they need now is a leader.”

“Over 100? Really? But how?”

“People know injustice when they hear it, and having Elijah Mustang speak at our graduation is the absolute definition of injustice. Dr. Jefferson, your army awaits.” Candace pointed out the door as both headed for the Quad for what would be a most memorable day.



Delores Jenkins pulled into the Richfield College Student Center’s parking lot in her silver 1994 Mercedes Benz E320 whose odometer had recently surpassed the

300,000-mile mark. With the top up, as most crisp Tennessee January mornings would warrant, she stepped out of the door and paused to survey the campus that had meant so much to her career as a journalist. She was taken aback at the conflicting senses of familiarity and change. A few new buildings had been constructed and the trees were much taller, but what made the most impression was the color. Color was everywhere. Her memory of Richfield was a drab, gray, nondescript collection of mundane buildings and, more importantly, monochrome students. She wondered if her memory was accurate or if the image was conjured from the negativity she had retained from when it was still called Richfield Bible College. She knew her nostalgia would have to wait. She was here on business.



Following her class to the Quad was intoxicating. Dr. Jefferson felt like a star athlete entering the field of play with a throng of fans cheering her on. When she finally arrived at the center of the protest, over 150 students had assembled. The picnic table, which the day before had been her perch, had been replaced by a wooden stage with an actual podium. No one was quite sure where either had originated, and most were afraid to ask. Even a microphone stand wired for electricity and large speakers were at the corner of the stage. Yes, day three would be many times beyond

the humble beginnings of the protest's first two days and way beyond anything Dr. Jefferson ever dreamed could happen at Richfield College.

"We want Dr. Jefferson!" a voice yelled from the crowd, inspiring a cacophony of cheers until Dr. Jefferson relented and took the stage.

Before she spoke, she paused to see the faces—so many faces—staring back at her. Was this real? Was she still back in bed in her small apartment, dreaming of this moment? She took one last look around, breathed a large sigh, and then gave the students what they wanted.

"Wow! That's my first reaction, wow! You are truly amazing! Do you know that? I am both humbled and inspired. I am humbled that you would join me in this movement to protect and defend Richfield College's bright future from Richfield Bible College's dark past - a past that seems intent on regaining a foothold in this beautiful institution. And that's why I'm inspired. I'm inspired to walk...no, not walk...march arm-in-arm with you to make sure that doesn't happen. I see many new faces in the crowd, so I want to remind everyone why we are here. This college's leadership has invited Elijah Mustang, a symbol of the old close-minded Richfield Bible College, to speak at this year's graduation. Elijah Mustang graduated in the early 80s and retains that era's flawed core belief system. Let me remind you what the 60s, 70s, 80s and even part of the early 90s were like here."

She scanned the crowd to find a representative female face. "You! You wouldn't be welcome here! Richfield

Bible College was almost exclusively male. And you,” pointing to an African American man in the crowd, “you wouldn’t be welcome here. Richfield Bible College was lily-white, so sorry.” Pointing to a young man in the crowd with dreadlocks, both ears pierced, and tattoos on both arms, she used her best faux Southern accent, “And you, oh mercy me, good heavens, you might have even been arrested.” The crowd roared in laughter.

Feeling the energy from the crowd, she spoke with an old-time revival preacher’s fire and zeal, “Well, is this the 1980s?”

“No!!” Roared the students, drinking in the moment.

“That’s not what those guys think!” Dr. Jefferson gestured in the direction of the Administration Building, which housed the college president as well as most of the leadership team. “Those guys want Elijah Mustang to drag you back to those days. You know, one of the most refreshing things about this college is your spirit of acceptance and your embrace of diversity. Unfortunately, Elijah Mustang doesn’t share that same spirit. Last night I read an article in which Mr. Mustang was quoted as saying that marriage is supposed to be between a man and a woman only and that’s the way God commanded it. Hey, Mr. Mustang, the 80s called, they want their bigotry back!” Again, the students bellowed.

It would be a heady day for Dr. Molly Jefferson, and it was just getting started.



Elijah Mustang had asked his executive team to meet him in the board room for a 10 a.m. meeting. Although he still retained the title of CEO, he had delegated almost all of his day-to-day responsibilities to members of his leadership team, most notably, to Beth Hope, Chief Operating Officer. Beth had been with Promise Transportation for the past 20 years, rising through the ranks from a logistics analyst to her current post as second in command. In recent years the leadership team had seen Elijah’s passion slowly shift from Promise Transportation to Promise Ministries. In 2014, Elijah had spent over 20 weeks in Central America tending to ministry needs. The team also knew his new focus, Promise Connection, was driving him even farther away from the business.

As he started most such gatherings, Elijah brought in three-dozen donuts to keep his team energized. “Good morning, everyone. I appreciate your taking a few minutes out of your busy day. I’ll be quick. I’m going to be out of the country for a couple of weeks, starting tomorrow morning; and I wanted to see if there were any burning issues that needed to be addressed before I left.”

With a business as large and complex as Promise Transportation had become, there were, of course, many pressing issues; however, the leadership team had things well under control and knew Elijah’s attention was elsewhere anyway.

“Anyone?” Beth asked the leadership team. She only received head nods and a few “nos.”

“Elijah, it looks like we have everything under control.” Not dismissive, the response of the leadership team did not indicate that they failed to trust Elijah. They all knew about the 80-hour weeks he worked for so many years building Promise Transportation to what it was today. Their lack of response was out of respect. They knew his heart and accepted that he had found his new calling. They felt he had deserved his time away from the office, and most of them recognized the important contributions his ministry was making to the lives of Central Americans.

“Glad things are under control. I will be out of reach of cell phone and e-mail coverage for most of the time, so plan accordingly.”

Elijah was the first person out of his chair and out the door to make final arrangements for his trip.



Arriving at the Richfield Quad just as Dr. Jefferson began speaking, Delores Jenkins captured the entire discourse on her camera phone. She was now in the Richfield Student Center seated at a table watching the speech again, this time on her phone, listening to the audio through her ear buds. She wanted to make sure she had captured everything accurately.

Her duties as assistant editor were heavy on administration and light on writing; so three years ago she started Delores’ Doodles, a blog in which she wrote about

everything from hiking in her beloved Smoky Mountains to activities in the Middle East and even the best way to prepare quinoa. She used Doodles as an outlet to feed her unfulfilled love of writing. While *The Chronicle’s* website was sometimes linked to her blog, it was totally freelance and not considered part of her official duties as assistant editor.

This morning’s entry would be among the hardest hitting and personal that Delores had written in months. She knew there were many angles to this emerging story, and she wanted to make sure she correctly prioritized them. First, there was Elijah Mustang. As CEO of one of Knoxville leading employers, she knew the name and may have even met the man but really didn’t know much about him. Her writing about Elijah would center on his representation of everything that was wrong about Richfield Bible College’s history and how his invitation to speak sent conflicting messages about the past decade’s hard-fought progress. She hyperlinked this blog entry to her original series on Richfield to give new readers some historical perspective of what was transpiring at the Quad today. She wrote about Dr. Molly Jefferson and her courageous leadership of the protest. Saving her highest praise for the Richfield student protestors, she focused on how they represented the bright and optimistic future of, not just East Tennessee but the entire country. She didn’t realize how furiously she was typing until she noticed it was almost noon. She had been working on the blog for two hours straight without looking

up from her keyboard. With a quick read through and a few minor edits, she was ready to publish. Just settling into Richfield with no plans to leave any time soon, she hoped this would be the first of several blog entries she would post throughout the day.



As the protest continued growing in strength, Dr. Jefferson slipped away to her office for a short lunch break and some much needed rest. She hadn't realized how exhausted she was until she took a moment to exhale and relax. She was obviously running on adrenaline from the excitement of the morning. Having overslept, she just realized in her rush out the door that she had failed to prepare her lunch. She rummaged through the drawers of her office and found a package of ramen noodles, a bag of roasted peanuts, and a package of skittles for dessert. As she quickly consumed the makeshift lunch, she opened her laptop to again find social media abuzz about the protest. A short three days before, she had 237 Twitter followers. Now she had over 2,000, a number that was growing rapidly. Quickly checking her email, she found a message from Dr. Rosenberg, who had some news about Elijah Mustang that thickened the plot:

Dr. Jefferson,

I have been following with great admiration your progress at the Richfield protest. I can't

believe what a groundswell you've been able to generate in such a short time. Very impressive!

I have discovered some new and interesting information about Elijah Mustang. There are still some dots to connect, but I wanted to get this information to you as quickly as possible. The subject is a 501c3 charitable organization that Mr. Mustang started a few years ago. It is called Promise Connection. With this charity, Mr. Mustang will take children from Central American countries and place them in homes in the U. S., where these children are adopted. This arrangement seems very suspicious to me! First of all, how do we know these children really are orphans? It could be they have been taken from their parents. Even worse, perhaps their parents are selling them to Mr. Mustang's organization. Secondly, how are the U. S. homes where they are sent selected? How does Mr. Mustang confirm they are safe? How does he ensure they are not human traffickers? How much do the U. S. families pay Mr. Mustang's organization to have these children uprooted from their native countries? Who is to say that these children are better off in the U. S. than in the country in which they were born? Isn't it arrogant for us Americans to assume everything is better here?

As I noted, some of the facts need to be checked, but there are enough troubling issues that I felt compelled to pass them along.

*Take care, keep the faith, and press on!!
Your friend in the struggle,
Dr. Rosenberg*

Wow! Are things with Mr. Mustang possibly even worse than she originally thought? Maybe even human trafficking? She had to get back to the protest and share this incredible new chapter in the story.



The Richfield campus was situated like a town square with four main thoroughfares running north, south, east, and west with a large, five-acre grassy area in the center known as the Quad. The Quad had many large oak, maple, and hackberry trees to offer shade to students who curled up to study, throw football, and hang out. Along each major thoroughfare, streets and sidewalks meandered off in all directions providing access to classrooms and dormitories. The normally peaceful roads were now buzzing with activity. President Curtis, concerned about the growing protest, ordered the entire security force—all three of them—to the campus. He also called the Roane County Sheriff's Department, who sent two deputies just to ensure the situation didn't get out of hand. To add to the excitement, three Knoxville-based television stations had just arrived with

news crews and satellite trucks to capture the emerging story for their live evening news broadcasts. Richfield was certainly getting its 15 minutes of fame. The excitement was just getting started.



Dr. Jefferson hurried back to the scene of the protest, finishing off the last few skittles during the brisk walk. She could see the crowd had not dissipated, but she sensed the energy waning ever so slightly. Perhaps the students were nervous about the police or the television cameras. She assumed responsibility for reigniting the flame, and she felt very much up to the task.

At first she made the rounds to personally interact with the pods of students congregating in the Quad. She told them she had some important information to share. She then slowly climbed the three steps to the stage and strode toward the podium. She could sense every eye was on her as a hush came over the crowd.

“Friends, I have some disturbing news to share about the subject of our noble gathering, Mr. Elijah Mustang.”

Boos rang out from the crowd as the name was spoken.

“It would seem that our friend Mr. Mustang runs a charitable organization.” She used air quotes while uttering the words *charitable organization*. “Its primary purpose is uprooting children from their home countries in Central America and shipping them all the way to the

U. S.” Now almost quoting directly from Dr. Rosenberg’s e-mail, she groaned, “This seems very strange! How do we know these children are orphans? Were they ripped from their parents’ arms? Were they sold by their parents? How can we know if the U. S. homes are safe or even if they are homes at all?”

After much internal deliberation, she decided using the words *human trafficking* would be irresponsible without any substantiation but felt there were enough suspicious circumstances to warrant sharing this new information and to continue questioning Mr. Mustang’s already shaky reputation.

“In fact, who is to say that these children are better off in the U. S. than in the country in which they were born? Isn’t it arrogant for us Americans to assume everything is better here?”

She had succeeded in inspiring the crowd. They were at a fever pitch by the time she finished.

“You can check this out by doing a simple web search for Promise Connection, the name of Mr. Mustang’s new charity” (using her most sarcastic voice on the word *charity*). “So many unanswered questions. And this is the guy that is supposed to be an example to Richfield students at graduation? I don’t think so, Mr. Mustang. Go sell your hate somewhere else because we’re not buying it!”

She continued, “To call even greater attention to our worthy cause, we need to hit Mr. Mustang where it hurts the most—right in that swelled bank account of

his. Today, I am asking for corporate America to join our struggle and boycott Promise Transportation until Richfield College disinvites Mr. Mustang or until Mr. Mustang does the noble thing and steps down himself. How about it? Are you with me, corporations?!”

A compliant crowd cheered their approval of Dr. Jefferson’s latest call for action.



As Delores Jenkins furiously penned her latest blog entry, she felt a bit conflicted. She was convinced this latest information Dr. Jefferson shared was terribly troubling. However, the journalist in her knew that she didn’t have all the facts. A quick web search confirmed that Promise Connection existed and that the organization’s mission was to pair children from Central America with U. S. families. Otherwise, the search results were short on details, with only an e-mail contact for more information. She found a blog written by a mother in Iowa who had adopted a child from Nicaragua through Promise Connection. It described the process in general and even showed pictures of the child’s first trip to Iowa but again lacked facts and didn’t address any of the concerns Dr. Jefferson raised. How was this family selected? How much money did they have to pay? What was the story behind the child? Did she have a family in Nicaragua? How was this family selected over the thousands of other families hoping to adopt?

The competitive spirit of Delores was also piqued as she knew her Knoxville television and radio counterparts had arrived on the scene and would certainly be sharing this story live during the local evening newscasts. The last thing Delores wanted was to be scooped by this group of talking heads on TV! Besides it was Delores who first put Richfield on the map with her seminal series 24 years ago. Thus, she decided she would simply report what she'd heard Dr. Jefferson share with the crowd. She wouldn't editorialize or sensationalize because she saw herself as above such journalistic mischief. She would simply tell the story.