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January 8, 2015

670 Days Until the 2016 U. S. Presidential Election

As she started most days, Delores Jenkins strode into her office, flipped on the lights, and powered up her computer to see what e-mails came in overnight. Her desk was spotless, without a single pile of paper. The walls of her office were adorned with over 20 journalism awards, won as much for her tenacity as for her writing. As assistant editor of *The Knoxville Chronicle*, she often received over 100 e-mails from the time she walked out of the office at 6 p.m. until when she returned at 7 the following morning. On a normal day, her inbox would include complaints, praises, donation solicitations, meeting requests, and myriad advertisements. She even received the occasional hot news tip, as would be the case this day.

She was turning 70 next month but only those closest to Delores knew her real age. Her appearance suggested she was still in her 50s, and her health was that of a 30-something. At 5' 11" and a lean 135 pounds, she was still a striking figure. Her close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair only served to magnify the respect that she commanded from all she encountered.

In the past ten years, she had hiked all 84 trails in the nearby Smoky Mountains, recording over 1,000 miles. On her 65th birthday, she had even climbed Mount McKinley, the U. S.'s highest peak. Married to Gerald, the love of her life for 45 years, she was a woman content with who she was. To many, she was the most interesting woman in Knoxville.

In her 42 years at *The Chronicle*, she had done it all. Starting as a junior writer, she quickly displayed a penchant for taking on the toughest assignments. Her stories brought down a federal judge addicted to painkillers, revealed the leaders of the city's most notorious street gang, and exposed widespread corruption in the county school system's contracts division, just to name a few.

Delores caught the attention of *The Chronicle's* leadership team, leading to her rise through the ranks of senior writer, news director, and ultimately to assistant editor. In fact, she had all of the qualifications for editor, except dealing with the day-to-day corporate bureaucracy and glad-handing with the self-important whom she disdained. She knew she had reached as high as she was

going to, and she had made peace with that reality several years prior.

Through her years at *The Chronicle*, her most satisfying assignment was the Richfield Bible College exposé. She won awards and acclaim, but her greatest satisfaction was in knowing she had a hand in the monumental changes that had taken place at Richfield and had impacted thousands of student's lives through the years. This satisfaction made the e-mail she had received overnight from Dr. Molly Jefferson even more intriguing. Although her duties did not provide the time or opportunity to write very often, this could be an exception she would consider. Grabbing her coat and keys, she was back out the door to make the 45-minute drive to Bard's Ridge to see for herself what was really going on.



"Dad, when are you leaving for Costa Rica?" asked Rachel Mustang over the sounds of eggs crackling in the cast iron skillet.

"It's actually Honduras," replied Elijah Mustang, fastening the last button on his shirt. He was making one last trip to the office before leaving the country for the next two weeks.

"I thought you went to Honduras last time, Dad," Rachel asked.

"I did, but I didn't get everything done."

"It should be just like you like it." Rachel gently slid the omelet on her father's plate as she did each Wednesday morning. At 21, Rachel was the youngest of three daughters and the only one still living at home. She loved making her father happy; and preparing his favorite omelet with bacon, provolone cheese, and jalapeno peppers would always bring a smile to his face.

A true rags-to-riches success story, Elijah Mustang was CEO and founder of Promise Transportation, one of the largest trucking companies in the Southeast. Headquartered in Knoxville, Tennessee, the company had offices in 23 cities and operated over 2,000 trucks. But that wasn't always the story.

With both parents out of the picture by the time he entered first grade, Elijah was raised by his grandparents. What they lacked in material wealth, they more than made up for in the love they showered on Elijah. They also instilled a determined work ethic that yielded Elijah a solid "B" average in high school. With meager resources available to Elijah, college was out of the question; so he took a truck driving class right out of high school. He was in the driver's seat of an 18-wheeler by age 19.

Knowing he was capable of more, Elijah set aside enough savings to begin taking a few classes at Richfield Bible College, which had recently started a business curriculum. By age 21, he was taking 12 hours of college credits while driving a truck as many miles as he could. The pressure on Elijah was crushing, but he went

to great lengths to keep up the hectic pace. He started innocently with coffee, then caffeine pills, then stronger and stronger “helpers” until he was hooked. It all came to a crashing end when Elijah fell asleep at the wheel after 54 straight waking hours. It was, thankfully, a one-vehicle crash, but his semi-truck left the road, skidded down a 15-foot embankment, only stopping when the trailer wrapped around a tree. The paramedic said Elijah was lucky to be alive. Both arms and his right leg were shattered. Broken ribs had punctured his lungs. His pelvis was fractured in three places.

All told, his stay in the hospital and rehab was seven months. During that time, Elijah found what he would often say was the greatest gift he had ever received. He found God; or as Elijah often confessed, “God found him.”

After what his doctors called a miracle recovery, Elijah renewed his college pursuits, enrolling in a few hours per semester and eventually earning his bachelor’s degree in business by the time he was 26. Upon graduation, Elijah was a new man with a new passion for life. Applying what he had learned from Richfield’s business curriculum, he purchased four semi-trucks and founded Promise Transportation in 1982. One decree that Elijah issued with those first four trucks was that all Promise Transportation trailers would have the following words painted prominently on the side:

“For God so loved...” John 3:16

Elijah hoped that the verse was so well-known that those reading it would be bound to finish the verse in their heads: “...the world, that He gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life.” The thought of hundreds of motorists mentally reciting this verse every day brought a smile to Elijah’s face. This was a decree he continued to maintain with now over 2,000 trucks on the road.

“So, when did you say you were leaving, Dad?”

“Tomorrow morning, first flight out of Knoxville.”

At age 59, Elijah was beginning to feel his years. A chronic 20 pounds overweight, Elijah carried most of the excess as his spare tire. He ate fried foods most days for lunch and seldom sought intentional exercise. His work and ministry commanded a frenetic pace, and he inherited a high metabolism from his parents; otherwise, he’d likely be tipping the scales at 350 pounds. Despite a nervous habit of running his hands through his hair, he somehow managed to retain a full head of snowy white hair that he wore combed straight back with just a touch of gel.

One core belief that Elijah Mustang fostered while at Richfield College was that everything he had, and ever would have, was a blessing from God. As an acknowledgement of those blessings, Elijah vowed to honor God through giving back a portion of his material gains.

Many Christians strive to devote 10% of their earnings to the church. In Christian terms, this is called a *tithe*, which translates from Hebrew to *a tenth*. Elijah started by

giving 10%, but he vowed to increase his giving every year by 5% until he reached giving 90% and living on 10%.

For many years, meeting this lofty target was a struggle; and in 1997, when he was planning to donate 45%, he fell just a bit short. In every other year, he met his goal, reaching 90% giving in 2002 and maintaining that level of giving ever since. In fact, for three years Elijah gave away 100% of his personal earnings.

Early in his career, Elijah accompanied a friend on a trip to El Salvador. It was a trip that changed his life. He was moved by the love and warm spirit of the Salvadoran people but was heartbroken by the conditions in which the poorest citizens were forced to live. In much of the country, poverty was widespread and medical care was almost non-existent. But what affected Elijah the most was the number of children living on the streets without parents. A little girl named Maria first stole his heart. Only seven years old, she carried the filth and odor from the nearby garbage dump that she called home, which she shared with her ten-year-old brother Hector. Maria was drawn to Elijah immediately and climbed into his lap. He found a book and started to read.

Before he knew it, two hours had passed. Somewhat embarrassed that he had lost track of time, Elijah responded, "I am sorry. Where are the parents of this child?" People were silent at first; then most heads turned away, to avoid eye contact with Elijah. Finally, someone simply shook his

head. Unsure of the gesture at first, Elijah asked, "What... what are you trying to tell me?"

A local priest finally responded, "Like many Salvadoran children, Maria does not have parents, any other family members, or even a home."

"But, where does she live?" Elijah asked.

"She lives on the street."

"What?!" Elijah was floored. "But, she's what, four years old?" Elijah was told Maria was actually seven, her growth stunted by malnutrition. Maria was one of many Salvadoran children who were dependent on the scraps from garbage cans for their daily sustenance. It was an encounter that would change the course of Elijah's life, as well as the lives of many Salvadoran people. Before he returned to the U. S. from that first visit, he vowed to do something about the deplorable living conditions he had encountered. He wasn't sure what he could do, but he knew he had to do something.

Over the next 30 years, Elijah did more than just "something"—and not just in El Salvador. As Promise Transportation grew exponentially, so did Elijah's ability to serve the people of Central America. Shortly after that first trip, he started Promise Ministries. Now thriving, with a presence in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, Promise Ministries has built a dozen medical clinics, over 30 churches, and more homes than anyone could count. Elijah's proudest accomplishment was the construction of nine orphanages,

which provided homes for many of the region's neediest children. He called them Promise Homes.

While his time and dedication to Promise Ministries were most rewarding for Elijah, four years in the 90s were the worst of his life. During this time, he stepped away from Promise Transportation for what he considered a genuine calling to enter the contact sport of American politics. He was later quick to admit it was the worst decision he ever made.

The midterm elections of 1994, coined the Republican Revolution, saw the GOP gain 8 seats in the Senate and 54 seats in the House of Representatives, one that Elijah Mustang won, representing Tennessee's Third District. The election was historic because it was the first time in 40 years that Republicans held the House majority. It was heady times for a then 38-year-old Elijah.

He had little interest in politics but had an unabashed love for his country and was concerned about its direction as both a citizen and business owner. This concern led Elijah to meet with influential Tennesseans who quickly saw political potential in his genuine nature and sharp intellect. They convinced Elijah that the best way to remedy the issues he had raised was to run for office himself. After no small amount of coaxing and stroking, Elijah reluctantly agreed. To his surprise, he won his first election, unseating an incumbent by a comfortable 10-point margin.

Within a month of being sworn in, Elijah began to have doubts about his decision to run. He quickly

realized his new Tennessee "friends" had encouraged him to run for office so they could profit from his power, a *quid pro quo* relationship that he detested. He also realized that the only thing dirtier than politics was a politician. Except for a few of his fellow freshmen, most colleagues were out for themselves and were working to accumulate as much power as possible, regardless of the cost. To the intrinsically humble Elijah, this mentality sickened him to the pit of his soul.

Despite his early misgivings, he decided he would focus on his primary objective: to truly represent his Tennessee constituents. He would do everything within his power to avoid the quagmire of party politics. This approach didn't sit well with his Republican leadership, who expected him to toe the line. He quickly gained a reputation as a contrarian and was given junior roles on mundane committees. He was being marginalized.

He did his best to wade through the Washington morass but after reluctantly running for and comfortably winning a second term, he decided he couldn't stomach another year in Washington and ended his political career after four tumultuous years. He told anyone that tried to convince him to run for a third term that our nation's capital was a steaming cesspool of corruption and that he hoped to live long enough to forget everything he encountered there.

After his time in Washington, he happily returned to his post as CEO of Promise Transportation and redoubled his efforts to grow Promise Ministries to the

thriving charity it is today. Promise Ministries now employs 30 staff members whose primary responsibility is to coordinate the acquisition of equipment and materials needed to construct homes, clinics and churches. Another staff role is to partner with churches throughout the U. S. who provide both funding and labor for operations and maintenance. Maria, now age 36, serves as liaison to the work that Promise Ministries does in her home country of El Salvador, improving the lives of the Salvadoran people.

Among Elijah's most rewarding projects is Promise Connection. Started in 2010, Promise Connection is a ministry that works to connect couples in the U. S. who are unable to conceive with children in Central America who have no parents or extended family members to provide for their care. Since starting, Promise Connection has successfully placed over 40 children with loving parents in the U. S.

"Best omelet ever." Elijah was pointing to the empty plate with his fork, mumbling as he chewed the last bite of his breakfast.

"Yeah, Dad, you say that every Wednesday."

"And I'm right every Wednesday." A huge smile came across his face. It was an easy smile felt most deeply in the wrinkles around the corner of his eyes—wrinkles that had grown more prominent with each birthday.

"What are you doing back in Honduras?"

"We are acquiring land for a new..."

"Let me guess, a new orphanage," Rachel interrupted, knowing her dad's passion had shifted in recent years to providing homes for Central American children.

"Yes, but you know I don't like the term orphanage. It conveys a lack of hope for these kids and suggests that they will never find a home. So we're just calling them Promise Homes."

"Promise Homes. I like it."

"You know, if I were forced, I could probably choke down another omelet."

"Dad, you're going to be late for work," Rachel warned.

"One of the perks of being the boss."

Playing along, Rachel asked, "Hey, Dad, would you like another omelet?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Maybe a few more jalapeños this time."

Reaching for the last two eggs in the carton, Rachel announced, "Omelet number two, coming up."

"Love you, Rachel."

"Love you, too, Dad."



"Next on the agenda is the matter of the basketball trip to The Bahamas." Richfield College President Richard Curtis involved himself in the minutiae of everyday decision-making, a habit that frustrated most of his staff. Barely a year in

the position, Curtis saw his hands-on approach as a means to both educate himself about the college and leave his fingerprint on the overall culture of the campus. Most others simply saw it as micro-managing.

“What is there left to discuss? I thought we decided the trip was a go in the last staff meeting,” responded an irritated Chip Collier, who served in the dual role of athletic director and basketball coach.

“We agreed to sponsor the trip with a budget of \$24,500, but we did not finalize who would be accompanying the team on the trip.” President Curtis was renowned for his encyclopedic memory of the most insignificant details, and that’s how most of his staff viewed the details he retained—insignificant.

“The trip is still seven months away! Why is that something we have to decide today or even something that has to be decided at all in the president’s staff meeting?” Chip was clearly exasperated.

Richard Curtis was the first Richfield president who was both a PhD and an attorney. Hired by the Board of Trustees to tighten the reins on the razor-thin budget, Curtis was a pure administrator who had never spent a day in the classroom as an educator. For most of his life he was a corporate attorney. He entered the education profession only within the last decade. There was much he didn’t understand, a fact he failed to fully grasp.

“Chip, I know you sent me a list of personnel you’d like to accompany you on the Bahamas trip, but I’d like

to have another month to review it before we take action; so let’s table that until the next meeting.”

Chip had no verbal response, but his body language and deep sigh spoke volumes.

“Next on the agenda is graduation. It is less than a month away, so hopefully everything is in order.” Something in Curtis’ makeup called for, even demanded, order.

“Everything is in place. The chairs are ordered, the caterer is under contract, the caps and gowns have been received, the gym is reserved, and the speaker is confirmed.” Victoria Melendez had been dean of academic affairs for just under a year, coming on board with President Curtis. She had worked with him in his two prior jobs, providing her an understanding of his penchant for detail.

“Is everyone aware of the dust-up that the graduation speaker Elijah Mustang is causing with some of the faculty and students?” asked David Lanter, dean of students.

“What do you mean?” Curtis had not heard of the growing protest. As he asked the question, his assistant Anna sorted through a stack of papers pulling out a printed copy of the e-mail Dr. Jefferson sent the previous night.

Dean Lanter continued, “It apparently started modestly a couple of days ago but grew yesterday to over two-dozen students. Dr. Jefferson in the Religious Studies Department appears to have spearheaded it. The group is protesting against Elijah Mustang. They don’t want him to be the graduation speaker.”

Fidgeting nervously in his chair, President Curtis asked, “What is their primary grievance with Mr. Mustang?” Before anyone could answer, he noticed the e-mail his assistant had placed on top of his reading pile. “Wait, Dr. Jefferson sent me an e-mail last night. She says, and I quote, ‘Elijah Mustang would be an inappropriate choice to represent this college at graduation. He is very much out of the mainstream of widely-held higher education beliefs. He’s not inclusive, does not embrace diversity, and is opposed to gay marriage. His speaking would signal a return to Richfield’s dark past, setting back decades of progress that so many fought so hard to achieve.’”

“That is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard!” exclaimed Joe McArthur, dean of the Richfield College of Business. The man most people called Mac had a 35-year tenure, was the longest serving dean on the leadership team, and was a friend of Elijah Mustang. “Elijah Mustang is none of those things! He’s a wonderful man who is among the most supportive alumni we have!”

“Am I right that you were on faculty here when Mr. Mustang was in school?” asked Natasha Hagood, Richfield’s general counsel, fresh on the job for only six months. Natasha had become Curtis’ most trusted advisor on almost every issue that arose.

“You are absolutely right; I know Elijah very well!” an enthusiastic Mac responded, not aware that he had scrunched to the front edge of his chair and raised his voice to a level that was making some people

uncomfortable. Mac was among the true gentlemen at Richfield, and it took a lot to get him excited. He was loyal, trusting, and always sought the best in people. Unfortunately, this trait would not serve him well because he failed to recognize the path down which Natasha was mercilessly leading him.

“Weren’t you Mr. Mustang’s faculty advisor during his time here?” Natasha continued.

“Why, yes, yes I was.” He was a bit surprised she would know that kind of detail.

“Didn’t Mr. Mustang attend Richfield Bible College...” (adding the word *Bible* intentionally) “in the late 70s and early 80s?”

“Yes, he graduated in 1982, third in his class. It took him seven years to graduate as he worked full time while taking classes when he could but in the end his hard work paid off and now...”

Before Mac could continue, Natasha interrupted, “The late 70s and early 80s, wasn’t that a period of significant turmoil for Richfield Bible College?”

Finally realizing Natasha’s questions weren’t so innocent, “What are you getting at, Counselor?”

“The staff is attempting to have an open conversation about the appropriateness of having Elijah Mustang speak at the graduation ceremony; and I believe your relationship with Mr. Mustang renders you unable to be objective on the matter.”

Now as animated as anyone remembers seeing the normally mild-mannered Mac, he responded, “Objective!?!?”

You gotta be kidding me! I'm the only one at this table that even *knows* Elijah Mustang. How can any of the rest of you even have an opinion on the matter?!" he exclaimed, emphasizing the word *matter* as a retort to the counselor.

Attempting to diffuse the growing hostility, Dean Lanter interceded, "I am afraid this discussion is my fault. I brought up the concerns a few students and faculty raised, but this protest really didn't have much traction as of yesterday. Why don't we just let the next couple of days play out and see where it leads? More than likely it will all blow over by the end of the day, and we can forget about it."

Everyone in the staff meeting agreed that patience was in order and that this protest would likely be a flash in the pan. They couldn't have been more wrong.