

MANIPULATED

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671 Days Until the 2016 U. S. Presidential Election

“**N**o More Hate! No More Hate!”
The chants echoed through the Quad from the two dozen protesters assembled near the campus’s main pedestrian intersection. Situated in the middle of the sidewalk was Dr. Molly Jefferson, the leader of the rabble. Dr. Jefferson’s pride swelled as she admired the growing assembly, who had numbered only six the day before.

“What do we want?!” she shrieked through the bull-horn borrowed from the track coach.

“Justice!” came the reply.

“When do we want it?!”

“Now!”

Dr. Jefferson, dean of the College of Religious Studies at Richfield College, had spearheaded this protest.

“Is hate speech welcomed at Richfield?!” Dr. Jefferson asked the crowd.

“No!” came the compliant response.

Dr. Jefferson felt a great sense of pride that a protest she launched only the day before was beginning to gain traction.

The protestors felt they were part of a larger, important, maybe even historic movement. Little did they know they were all simply being manipulated.



In the Winchester Library, just off the Richfield College Quad, Jeremy Prince had found a table where he could observe the growing protest. He peered through the leafless branches of the Bradford pear trees that stood guard just outside the tinted window. The sun was giving way to the early January sunset, and he suspected the protestors’ resolve had not yet grown to a level warranting a stay past dark in temperatures expected to dip into the low 20s. As Jeremy watched the marchers, he couldn’t withhold the grin that grew to a smile, ultimately producing an unconscious chuckle.

“Shhh,” objected the students sitting at the tables nearby. “Please be quiet.”

“Oh, sorry, my bad,” Jeremy raised a hand of apology. “Won’t happen again.”

Finding the fortitude to suppress his audible excitement was almost achievable, but losing the grin was asking too much. After all, a plan he had hatched two short weeks ago in a fraternity house 275 miles away was now unfolding right before his eyes. Not just unfolding, but thriving. And to imagine he was just getting started. He knew he had to channel his energies to his laptop for the next step in his diabolical plan.



Richfield Bible College was founded in 1956 by the Southern Baptist Convention. It was situated in a rustic valley in East Tennessee, just outside the small town of Bard’s Ridge, 30 miles from the city of Knoxville. A local farmer donated 60 acres to get the college started. With the donation came a two-story hay barn, which served as the classroom for Richfield’s initial enrollment of 27.

Growth would come quickly to Richfield, as in four short years the freshman class of 1960 swelled to 80. By 1972, the college had grown to occupy over a dozen buildings, including the newly christened Winchester Library. Richfield enjoyed its peak enrollment throughout the 1980s. By 1988, Richfield Bible College’s enrollment rose to 927.

As much success and growth that Richfield had experienced in the 40 years since its founding, the 90s would usher in a decade of turmoil, challenge, controversy, and ultimately profound change.

Pinpointing the exact catalyst for the transformation is difficult, but many point to a seminal series published in 1992 by Knoxville's largest newspaper, *The Knoxville Chronicle*. The series ran four consecutive days, each highlighting a Richfield Bible College transgression.

Day one of the series focused on the lack of quality education the Richfield students received. Comparing a Richfield bachelor's degree with those of other area colleges, the article noted that in a 120-hour bachelor's degree program at Richfield, students took 90 hours of Bible classes. That first day's headline read RICHFIELD OFFERS SUB-STANDARD EDUCATION.

The second day's article focused on equality and diversity, hot topics in the early 90s. Noting that of Richfield's 875 enrollees, 780 were men, *The Chronicle* led with the headline RICHFIELD COLLEGE: WOMEN AND MINORITIES NEED NOT APPLY. The article blasted Richfield's racial uniformity, remarking that after spending three days on campus *The Chronicle* staff could find only two non-white students.

The third day's headline read RICHFIELD LEADERSHIP DISCONNECTED AND UNQUALIFIED. The article blasted Richfield's leadership, noting that its president had no advanced degree. A similar criticism was levied at Richfield professors with accusations of a chronic lack of experience and qualifications. The article's most biting criticism was of the Board of Trustees, composed of seven men—most of whom had no educational experience and who had rarely been to Richfield. By the time the third

article was printed, national publications were beginning to ask for permission to reprint the series.

The last day focused on Richfield's foundational belief system. Running on Sunday to guarantee maximum readership, its headline read RICHFIELD: VOW OF PURITY REQUIRED, referencing a "covenant" all students were required to sign as a condition of their college admission. This covenant required that students submit to the authority of college educators and administrators and that they commit to 60 hours of ministry service (with emphasis on UNPAID service). Having to accept the Protestant Bible as the inerrant Word of God, students also had to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life, and that no one would go to heaven except through Him.

The Chronicle noted other practices it considered Puritanical, such as a prohibition on students engaging in sex and a ban on homosexuals. *The Chronicle* even included excerpts from an interview with a former Richfield student who claimed he had been dismissed from school after admitting his homosexuality to his college advisor in what he thought was a private conversation.

The series won *The Knoxville Chronicle* and its author, Delores Jenkins, three Tennessee Press Association Awards, as well as significant national acclaim and attention. It brought Richfield Bible College scorn and ridicule throughout the country as the articles were printed in over 100 U. S. newspapers.

After the series was published, Richfield Bible College was never the same. In just a few months, the president resigned from office. Not long afterward, a mass exodus of faculty followed as enrollment began to plummet from 875 enrollees at the time of *The Chronicle* series to 550 in just over a year. The snowball continued as the Southern Baptist Convention decided to divest its sponsorship of Richfield, leading to a loss of all seven members of the Board of Trustees. Richfield Bible College was in freefall. Were it not for an anonymous donor, who for three consecutive months made payroll for the remaining staff and faculty, the college might have been forced to close.

In these most difficult times, a handful of remaining faculty members and staff assembled in an emergency session to determine how to pick up the broken pieces of the college they all loved. They knew if Richfield were to survive, a new beginning was required. They decided to hold their initial planning meeting symbolically in the still-standing hay barn, which had been converted to a Richfield museum. Many options were thrown on the table, all involving keeping the college alive. Not a single voice suggested closure as an option.

In times like these, natural leaders tend to emerge; in this case, that leader was the Dean of the fledgling Business College, Joe McArthur. Mac, as everyone called him, listened to the various opinions before writing down a few common concepts he was hearing. After two days of meetings, a consensus emerged of how to move

Richfield forward. As frustrated as most were with *The Chronicle* article, they all admitted some valid concerns needed to be addressed. The first was that the college should broaden its educational offerings and drop the word *Bible* from its name. Efforts were also made to diversify the college in both the student body as well as in the administration and teaching staff. A new Board of seven trustees consisted of three women, including one African-American, and four men.

Once seated, the trustees selected a new president, a PhD who had over 20 years of educational experience, and who was not affiliated with the Southern Baptists.

Throughout the 2000s, the Richfield College transformation was remarkable. The student body was now 55% female with a growing multi-cultural population. Tattoos and piercings were commonplace at Richfield, which now reflected the diverse culture of most college campuses across the U. S. The curriculum was completely overhauled to be more aligned with that of similar size colleges. Most Bible classes were dropped and were replaced by the Religious Studies Department, which Dr. Jefferson was hired to chair in 2012.



With the most recent cheer, Dr. Jefferson sensed the crowd begin to lose energy. Knowing they didn't have the experience she did with protests, she recognized this moral stand would be a marathon, not a sprint. She

decided it was time to send the crowd away but not before a final word of inspiration.

Stepping up on a park bench, she reactivated the bullhorn, drawing all eyes and ears in her direction. "I hope you all have an appreciation for the historic action that you have started today...and I do mean *started*...because we are just beginning to let our voices be heard." Cheers sprang up around her as the original two-dozen protesters had been joined by 30 curious onlookers, not all of whom were fully invested in the movement, at least not yet.

"We all know the sordid past of this institution, a past of exclusion, hate, and intolerance. Do we want to return to those days?!"

"No!"

"That's right; none of us want to go back to those dark days. And we're not going to let that happen!" Again, enthusiastic applause filled the Quad.

"If it is the last act I do at this college, I will stop the bigoted, close-minded, hatemonger Elijah Mustang from speaking at this institution! We're going to bring today's protest to a close, but I'm going to ask—no, I'm going to plead with—those of you on the periphery listening to my voice to join us tomorrow at noon to resume this movement. We don't want to go back. We only want to move forward! I truly believe that together we are doing God's work!"

As she stepped down from the bench, she was greeted by hugs and cheers. She could tell she had reached

a new constituency. She prayed that tomorrow's crowd would be even larger than today's; the same for the next and the next and the next, until justice was served.



Among those standing in the periphery was Jeremy Prince thinking to himself, "I can't believe this is actually working." Again unable to suppress the smile that consumed his face, he took a step back toward the library thinking, "Now, let's see if the next bait is swallowed as voraciously as the last." Would he be so lucky?



As Dr. Jefferson unlocked the door to her apartment, she didn't remember the three-mile drive from campus. She wondered if she had driven or just glided on the winds of change. She had been part of many protests in her career. She joined a movement that kept the ladies' swim team going at Delaware State, picketed for gender equality pay at the Connecticut State Transportation Department, and was among the throng who successfully got a fraternity shut down for a pattern of abusing its little sisters. However, the Richfield College movement was her maiden voyage as the leader of a protest. She quite liked it and felt she was a natural. In fact, she felt a special calling to this important undertaking. She was a true social justice warrior!

As a single, 30-something college professor with degrees in philosophy and religion, Dr. Jefferson knew the stereotype many would foist upon her: a shrill, angry, unattractive female—a stereotype that many of her colleagues unfortunately reinforced. However, she worked diligently to establish her own persona. She was known as kind, professional, even deferential to her peers. While she had strong opinions, she didn't eagerly share them. She chose her opportunities wisely for when and with whom to make her thoughts known. At 5' 2" with a petite figure, she was not an imposing physical presence. She was also a Christian, a fact that brought derision from many of her university contemporaries. Her Christian beliefs were the primary inspiration for her seeking a Richfield faculty position.

She also considered herself significantly out of the mainstream of American conservative evangelical Christian orthodoxy. While she believed that Jesus Christ offered a path to a heaven-like afterlife, she did not consider that the *only* path. She considered the Protestant Bible a mix of theology, history, and fantasy, much like other holy books such as the Koran and the writings of Confucius and Buddha. In general, she considered herself open to new ideas and teachings; and she read voraciously, always seeking a deeper truth.

Although she normally led with her gentle spirit, Dr. Jefferson held great passion for where she saw injustice and unfairness, especially if a Christian institution was involved. This passion was driving her voice of

leadership in the Richfield protest. She knew the history of Richfield's injustice and how hard those who came before her worked to correct it. Thus, she felt obligated to pick up the baton from the trailblazers who worked for almost a decade to make Richfield the more open, diverse campus it was becoming. The more she learned about Elijah Mustang, the more she was convinced that inviting him to speak at the graduation ceremony was a step backwards from the significant progress already enjoyed. His speaking there could even usher in a return to the college's dark past. This would be a battle to which she was willing to give everything she had to win.

Receiving her B. S. in religious studies from Vermont State University in 1990, Dr. Jefferson had studied the country's religious journey from the growth of the Christian Conservative Movement as a political power in the 80s to the backlash and decline during the Clinton years of the 90s. She had even written a paper on Jerry Falwell titled "The Immoral Majority," making her case for how the Christian Conservative Movement had blurred the lines between church and state, causing major damage to the country in the process. In her doctoral thesis written at the University of North Carolina, she chronicled the Southern Baptist Convention's rise and decline with a particular focus on Southern Baptist colleges. Now finding herself a professor at Richfield College seemed surreal to her. The notion that she was at the center of such a protest seemed implausible.

Walking through the door of her small, one-bedroom apartment, she instinctively popped a vanilla hazelnut decaf cup in the Keurig and took a seat at the kitchen table. Flipping open the cover to her laptop, she began perusing social media as Anthony, her rescue cat, navigated a figure eight around her outstretched legs. Twitter was her first e-destination, and she was delighted at what she found: “Awesome day on the Richfield Quad.” “Actually doing something to make a difference.” She even found that a hashtag #Richfield Protest had been established. Her movement started a hashtag! Although she knew it wasn’t “her” movement, she felt a sense of profound satisfaction.

Next came Facebook, with similar results: a half-dozen statuses from students with inspired posts, positive comments, and many “likes.” Not a single negative comment or snarky retort was found. As she scrolled through her posts, she found what she was hoping to see: a new post from Dr. Jocelyn Rosenberg, a women’s studies professor, who had befriended her on Facebook a month prior. Although they had only been acquainted a short time, they were obviously kindred spirits. Dr. Rosenberg was the first to bring Elijah Mustang’s transgressions to her attention. This new post was linked to an article in *The Chattanooga Observer* that included excerpts from an interview Mr. Mustang had given to a reporter in 2011. In this interview, Dr. Jefferson found even more bigotry and hatred. When the reporter asked Mustang about his stance on gay marriage, he stated, “It is my belief that

marriage is between a man and a woman. That’s not just my opinion, but I believe the Word of God is clear and consistent on that point.”

“So now he’s deciding what the Word of God is?” she asked her cat, Anthony. Dr. Jefferson had found even more fuel for her passionate protest. She felt her heart race as she quickly typed three e-mails: one to Dr. Rosenberg thanking her for the link to this article and for her inspiration to pursue this issue; another to the president of Richfield College detailing her concerns about Elijah Mustang; and a third to an old acquaintance, Delores Jenkins, now *The Knoxville Chronicle*’s assistant editor. She sensed what started as a modest protest was about to hit it big. However, she couldn’t begin to predict what the next three days would bring.