

David Briley Lunch – Transcript I
2/19/2007

David Briley: Well I first wanted to say, thank you for taking time out of your day to come and sit and talk to me. I know most of you are not getting paid to be here, so I appreciate that you are involved in the political discourse. It's important to me and I appreciate the fact that it is important to you as well.

I grew up here in Nashville and graduated from high school in 1982. I then went away to college, I went to college in Washington DC, and then traveled for about a year after I graduated. I learned Spanish and got exposed to a lot of things that I never imagined that I would ever see until I had a chance to travel abroad. And then I went to law school in California and practiced law there for a couple of years before I came back to Nashville with my wife. We now have a 3 ½ almost 4 year old son and he attends Holly Street Day Care in East Nashville. He's a happy little guy who has got a mind of his own.

I'm running for Mayor of Nashville right now. I've been on the Council now eight years, almost eight years, and I've spent everyday as a council member trying to understand exactly what we are doing as a city and as a government. Some things we are doing well and some things we could do better at. I feel like I'm the best prepared candidate in this race to take advantage of the momentum we have as a community to keep us moving forward, and at the same time, look at some of the areas where we really could do better. Everyone knows where we are doing well. We are growing significantly and we have corporations from all over the country moving here. We've got people from all across the country moving here. The economic activity here is great, in fact, last year we had more building permits for Davidson County than ever before. 1.8 Billion dollars I believe is the number.

However, our public education system here in Nashville still has a long way to go. We are making progress I think, but we've got serious challenges in the education system that I think we need to confront. Regional planning and transportation is a big issue that we need to look at and I think that we as a community have not been forced to look at it as closely as we need to but as we continue to grow as a region we are going to have to confront this issue more aggressively than we ever have before.

Public safety is obviously the highest concern of Government and I'll make it my highest concern as the mayor. We had a recent spike in juvenile crime especially. That all goes back in my mind to the fact that we have got about 10 Thousand 16-24 year olds in this county who don't have a job and are not in school at all. Those are the kids who are committing about 80 percent of the crimes in Davidson County. We have to do some things with the juvenile court to address truancy, deal with recidivism amongst juveniles, and to start transferring to the adult court the juveniles who we know are going to create the biggest problems for us in the community.

One of the other issues that is really coming to the forefront as a country and is really important to me because of my background is environment. Last week I issued a

statement that included seven initiatives that will be the start of my initiative as mayor to make Nashville the greenest city in the Nation. Government is actually behind the curve when it comes to the environment. If you look at the private sector right now and you look at the resources that are being dedicated at companies like Walmart and Dell to make sure that they are more sustainable in approaching the way they make money, and compare that to Government, we're way behind the curve. Walmart is now looking at building zero emission buildings, and we aren't even thinking about that. We're not really pushing as hard as we need to push as a local Government to confront those types of problems. They look at it as something that threatens their economic vitality; we should look at it in the same way.

I don't want to say much more beyond that really, a big part of the campaign for me is that I want to hear what other people have to say. One, because I don't pretend to have every answer but I will be the most aggressive candidate when it comes to opening up doors to neighborhood and community groups who do have the answers. So that they have access to Government and so that we can make the changes that we need to make here. Educating myself in the campaign is the first step in the process. The other reason is that I generally feel like I learn more about how to think about this community every time I hear a question about where it is headed. So let's start the questions and I'll be glad to answer every question you have, if I have an answer, and I'll tell you if I don't.

Brittney Gilbert: Do you think that you will be putting off a lot of voters with your green initiative or your environmental initiatives simply because there seems to be a lot of politics in environmentalism these days? Do you think that is going to be an easy thing to implement or to run on; or do you think it is going to be a challenge?

Briley: We decided to emphasize the environment in this campaign because it's the right thing to do. As a community we have to get more focused on the environment if we want to sustain the growth we have here. That's why we decided to do it.

Now, I don't think that I'm any different than the average person living in this community. I'm concerned about the quality of life here, I'm concerned about air quality, I'm concerned about green spaces and I'm concerned about how we are going to be able to sustain the kind of life we have here in the long run. When I go to church on Sunday and my Methodist minister's sermon is about the environment I know that people in this community are already focused on the environment. So I don't think, that as the campaign goes along, that it is going to be an impediment, rather I think it's going to be a great asset in the campaign.

When you read on the January 29th issue of Business Week, it's all about how businesses are already incorporating sustainability into their business models and plans. That's an indication to me that it's a broadly accepted issue that lots of people are focused on.

Adam Kleinheider: I have a follow-up to that question. I remember in your initiative you mentioned the term "environmental racism", do you think that cuts off people? Just

to bring up the term racism, because I think what you described to me sounds more like Classism.

Briley: I think that is a good point to say that it's not just "race" that results in people living closer to toxic waste sites, or a landfill, or an industry that has an impact on the environment. It's true that it's not just race, but all of the empirical evidence that has been developed shows that race does have a role in those kind of impacts. So, I think it would be folly to say that there is not an element of race in it. It may alienate some people for sure, but to be honest when I first heard of it I kind of backed up a little bit and said "well it's not race, it's poverty." Well, it's actually a lot more than just poverty, it is race too. For example, if you look at Nashville and look where we have landfills in this community, to be sure they are in poor parts of town, but they're also predominantly in the African-American parts of town. If you look at Bordeaux which forever had a landfill, there were other poor parts of town, but that's an African-American part of town. It's something you can't ignore; it's something that you have to be open to, and you can't get your back up. You have to acknowledge that it is a component of where we place environmentally unfriendly buildings and industry in the past.

I think you're right, I think some people get their back up, but it's not the end of the story. Yeah, they'll get their back up, but if it's true you have to talk about it.

Rob Robinson: I guess my question would be, right or wrong, in the media you have been lumped in with Karl Dean a lot as someone who is progressive. Of the candidates available, I'm likely to vote for either Karl Dean or You, knowing what I know at this point. I'm curious how you would distinguish yourself from Dean?

Briley: Well, Karl is a friend of mine and I don't have anything negative to say about Karl as a person. I think that Karl certainly has the best intentions of the city at his heart and he's not running for any "wrong" reasons. I just think that I'm better prepared than Karl, to be honest. I've spent the last eight years focused on every issue that the city confronts, that people in this community are confronting, and not a narrow issue; really sort of abstract and alien from the average person's experience in the community. I've looked at education; I've been involved with our public education system. I've voted on the budgets and know how concerned people are about taxes in this community. I've worked to promote a safer community by sponsoring a bill that dealt with juvenile crime and truancy. That experience is not something you can get when you are abstracting from the politics of the community. I think I'm better prepared in that sense to do it. I think that as a parent of a child who is number 134 in a lottery where there are only three vacancies at Stanford Elementary here in Nashville. I'm unique in the sense that I really want to see our public education system get transformed and I want to see it happen immediately because I've got a three year old Son who needs to get into a good school in a year and a half; and I think I'm unique from Karl in that sense.

Brittney: Would you ever consider sending your son to a private school? I just wonder because lately it seems like privatization of public school and charter schools and school choice seems to be a hot topic and I'm just wondering your opinion on that?

Briley: Well...I have no criticism of any parent who decides that public school is the right thing for their child. That's a decision for any family to make at home without any Government intervention whatsoever; so I don't want anything I say to be considered a critique of somebody who uses private school, because its not. But, my wife and I have decided that we want our son to go to public school because the public school experience is important; and because we are committed to helping every child in this community to make progress. Getting parental involvement from a broad spectrum of Nashvillians is important; so I'm committed to sending my son to a private school.

Now, my son really hasn't been in school yet. So, if it turns out that he really needed something that the public school system doesn't offer, like any other parent, I would look at private schools...if I needed to do that. At this point, every indication is that he will be at hopefully Lockland Elementary, and that is our goal. I've been involved with Lockland since three years before it opened and long before my son was born I worked with Parents in East Nashville to transform Lockland Elementary to make it a school that would keep parents in Lockland Springs instead of sending them across the river to West Nashville when their kids reached school age; now it's one of the two or three best schools in the district. That's my goal and that's my objective; now, other people in my neighborhood didn't get in there, so I'm nervous about it.

Rob Robinson: I just had a follow up on that. I noticed on your website that the schools budget has increased dramatically since you've been on the council and I think that's great. I'm not opposed to increasing the budget; but, there is always that criticism that people are just throwing money at the problem instead of necessarily getting better.

I guess my question is two parts. One, what more than money do we need to do to going the right direction, and two, I'm specifically curious what you think about the teacher's unions and whether you see them as a help or hindrance to the process.

Briley: I'll answer the second one first, and then I'll try to remember the first one. With teachers, they don't start along that career path because they are greedy or think they are going to make money. The vast majority, if not all teachers, start because they are idealistic about wanting to make a change and they think the best way to do it is to get into a classroom and help people who are trying to learn. So, I think that nothing I ever say about the Unions should be taken to impugn the teachers because they are separate. I think over the recent past, the fight over incentive pay has been a negative for the community overall. Because the teachers union has been involved in that, I think they are going to take some blame for the discourse. I think there are plenty of ways to reward success, both financially and non-financially, to get us out of the fight with the unions and the private sector in Nashville.

The best thing we can do to help teachers is to untie their hands so they can teach more and spend less time reporting back to Bradsford Ave. That's the first thing we need to do when it comes to rewarding teachers. There will be some areas where we need to compensate our teachers more than they currently are because they have a harder job.

We need to come to a consensus as a community about how we are going to do that. I'm optimistic that the Teacher's union will play a significant role of leadership in that context; they need to if we are going to move forward as a community.

In terms of funding, I'm going to steal from Lamar Alexander here and say that the three things a good school will have are a: good principle, good teachers, and involved parents. That last thing, involved parents, money can't buy; but it's probably the most critical element lacking in our school system. As Mayor, I will lead an unprecedented effort to get more role models in schools, specifically middle schools. Middle Schools are really the area where we are failing our kids. We know pretty well what to do in K-4, but in 5-8 we are identifying the kids who are not going to succeed in High School but we're really not doing the kind of intervention we need to. Really what it has to do with is role models and we need to get every church, community group, civic group, Big Brothers and Big Sisters; engaged in our middle schools so we can get a generation of kids and get them through high school in four years and we will know at that point how we are doing as a community.

If you talk to any criminal defense lawyer and get them to identify more than one percent of their clients who have a High School diploma you'll be doing great. The vast majority of people in the criminal justice system haven't graduated, and there is a correlation between success in high school and success in life. We've got to get parents engaged; we've got to get more community members engaged because that's what is going to get us what we need to transform this system.

Brittney Gilbert: What do you think about vocational training in our secondary schools; and maybe making a different path for those who might not be likely to graduate in a regular college track?

Briley: Governor Bredesen has started thinking about this and he deserves credit for it. What we need to do is...clearly we are going to have a lot of kids who don't want to, or shouldn't, or can't go to a full on four year degree after high school. But they also need skills to compete in a market place that are beyond those that you learn in High School. What we need to do is start a program, and it's already in the works I believe, where starting your senior year you'll start taking classes at Nashville Tech and you'll automatically flow after your senior year into Nashville Tech and get a degree in something more technical and less of a B.A.

Governor Bredesen, through lottery funds, is going to find a way to see that every young person can go through Nashville Tech without paying a penny. Absolutely that is something we need to be thinking about getting integrated into the K-12 system here.

Ned Williams: I was wondering what efforts, if any, are you making or going to make to reach out to Republicans, or traditionally Republican (Conservative) voters?

Briley: You know, it's a non-partisan race for a reason and it's not just that we don't want partisan politics in this race; it's because the issues are non partisan. When it

comes to education in our community, the greatest concerted leadership we have on a consistent basis is the Chamber of Commerce. When it comes time for tax increases I dare say that I'm lobbied more strongly from Republican groups that are involved with education, than Democratic ones who are not. I believe that I'm going to reach out to everybody in this community regardless of what label is attached to them...D, R, or whatever.

I will reach out to Conservative voters by focusing on things we can do with education that doesn't require more money, and I think there are a lot of things we can do; talking about economic sustainability. There is a strong contingent among Evangelical Christians that are focused on the environment and I will be reaching out to them. I do believe it's a moral issue and not just an economic issue. A lot of the issues we are going to talk about in this race are non-partisan. So expect me to have a large contingent of Republicans voting for me at the end.

Sarah Moore: My main issue was education and I'm a former public school teacher and that is one of the things that have discouraged me from public schools. Last year I read a study which showed that 27-28% of public school teachers send their kids to private schools, and I want to be able to send her to a public school but I'm not beholden to it and I guess I just want to hear about what you have to say about advocacy of choice and charter schools.

Briley: Let me say something about choice and charter. I think that one of the reasons that parents get disengaged from the system is that there is a lack of choice. I'm optimistic about what I hear from the school board in terms of choice that Dr. Garcia is willing to open that up. I don't think we need a blanket, "you need to wear uniforms across the board", system. But I do think Parent's need to have the option. I think parent's need to have the option to send their children to a school that has uniforms. I think parents need to have the option of sending their kids to single-gender schools. I think parents need to have all kinds of options when it comes to the system. That's what we need to get focused on, making sure there are enough options for parents out there, because once they have choices they get engaged. Then they are willing to invest their own time and money into the public schools...that's what we are lacking right now.

The most tangible evidence of that is Miags Middle School. They have about three hundred kids applying for one hundred spots each year; 100 get in, the other 200 we lose, I think, the vast majority of them to another county or a private school. Clearly that shows there is more demand for an academic magnet here in Davidson County. So let's take East, which is already a magnet school, which is focused on writing, which is very academic. Let's have the B standard and advanced reading and math, because there is clearly an unmet demand, which is for parental choice, and we're just not dealing with it. So let's aggressively deal with that. Now, there is a conflict in the system that you don't want to extract all of the good students from the zoned schools; but it would just be folly to pretend that it's not already happening; through flights to private counties and other schools. You've got to confront parental desires by having lots of options in the school system.

Sarah Moore: When you talk about getting the parents more involved, there is also an issue with disseminating the information about school choice, because I know that it is a criticism of them; that not all the parents are involved and that they aren't going to know about these options and it will become a segregated private/public issue again. What do you think will be the best way to go about reaching parents who aren't necessarily as involved with the schools...is that a Government responsibility?

Briley: I think it is partially a Governmental responsibility. I look at Lockland as the example of how to do it, because Lockland is primarily...the parents who helped with the redesign of Lockland Elementary are predominantly engaged and relatively affluent parents; that would be my perception of it. However the principal who was chosen knew well enough that the school would be a failure if it was not socio-economically and racially diverse. So she, as part of her role as Principal, reached out and went to the Casey homes which are close by and said that you guys need to understand that there is a new school and you need to apply and here is what we can do to help with transportation; those kind of things. There are models out there for doing it. It's not a one sized fits all system which is the real problem with a big, 70K student school system. It can't be one sized fits all; it has to be intelligent, you have to realize that it can't be homogenous, and you have to go out and tinker.

With Charter schools, we have a totally broken system right now. Because the way it works right now is that only if you have failing schools, can you have a charter. So only if you have a totally failing middle school, the students who are zoned for that middle school can go where they want. Well, maybe that broken middle school can be fixed. What we need to do as a community is say that we have a big bureaucratic system that can't or won't do the following things, so we're going to use charter schools under those circumstances. And Kipp (?) is the perfect example of how there is a need that is not being met by the regular school system, and a charter school can do it. Year round, they are focused not just on the student but the entire family, and that's just not something we are doing well as a big system. The charter school can do it well.

John Hutchenson: To follow up there; do you think it should be easier to charter schools, and make it easier for them to do that outside of the replacement for a failing school?

Briley: I think the first step is to come up with an objective basis for chartering schools, and an objective way of deciding if a school is going to go there. I'm concerned personally that having the school board approve charters is kind of like WalMart deciding if a Target can come into town. Other communities have decided to allow the Mayor be in charge of chartering schools instead of the school board; Indianapolis and DC for example. I don't think that is where we are at as a community right now, but I think that we can push the school board to adopt more objective standards. I think there needs to be leadership on that role, but I think you have to keep that option open for the future if we can't get charter schools more objectively chartered and more objectively defined the needs.

John Hutchenson: Is there room for vouchers in that?

Briley: I don't believe that we need school vouchers, I guess is what I would say about that.

Sean Braisted: Sort of a follow up to that...The Metro Council doesn't have much authority over the school board, and one of your proposals in the green initiative is to make all metro facilities green, whether you renovate or build new ones, and you can't really do that with Metro schools. Do you think maybe the Charter should be changed so that you have more authority over the environmental aspects of Metro Schools or Metro Transit Authority?

David Briley: The Mayor sets the budget in this town, regardless of whatever the charter says, they Mayor does it and the council approves it. They Mayor has a lot of authority over what the schools do. That gives the Mayor the opportunity to show great leadership and I think that anything the Mayor wants to see done in the school district, he or she can see done without any change to the charter.

For example, then Mayor Bredesen rewrote the core curriculum, which is way beyond anything I would ever consider, and I think that is really something that if the school board can't do that; let's get rid of the school board. That is something that is beyond what the Mayor should be doing, but our Mayor did it. So clearly, the Mayor can play a very significant role in the school district without any major changes to the charter.

If after four years a mayor couldn't accomplish the things that he wanted through leadership, than he or she would have to consider taking a look at the legal relationship between the council and the school board.