

Reflections from WT- Dr. Tanya Larkin

- Randy Ray: Welcome to Reflections from WT, The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. My name is Randy Ray. I'm the director of broadcast engineering here on the WT campus. And today, like always, I am joined by the 11th president of West Texas A&M, Dr. Walter Wendler.
- Dr. Walter Wendler: Thanks Randy. Good to be here. Looking forward to it.
- Randy Ray: It's good to be here. This is a special podcast for us.
- Dr. Walter Wendler: Yes, sir. It really is.
- Randy Ray: We are not coming from our normal studio on the campus at WT. We are in Pampa, Texas. We are sitting in, do they call it the rotunda?
- Dr. Tanya Larkin: They do.
- Randy Ray: The rotunda here at Pampa High School. And we have some special guests with us today. To my immediate left is Dr. Tanya Larkin.
- Dr. Tanya Larkin: Hi.
- Randy Ray: And she is the superintendent for the entire school system here in Pampa. And it's an honor to have you here.
- Dr. Tanya Larkin: Thank you. We're honored to have you here. WT has a special place in our heart and we're thrilled to have an alumni and this opportunity for our kids.
- Randy Ray: Yeah. So tell me, I want to start Dr. Larkin, why does WT have a special place in your heart?
- Dr. Tanya Larkin: Well, I am an alumni of WT myself. I went to school there for my bachelor's degree, majored in English and communications to become a teacher. I received a master's degree in communications, a master's degree in educational administration. And it has been a bedrock foundation of my career, my profession, and many of my professional values came from my work and learning at WT.
- Randy Ray: How long have you been here in the school system in Pampa?
- Dr. Tanya Larkin: I've been in education for 27 years, but I've spent the last 23 leading, learning, and serving here in Pampa. I started as a teacher here at Pampa High School in 98. And worked my way through learning different jobs as a curriculum coordinator, an elementary principal at Wilson Elementary, a high school

principal, curriculum associate superintendent, and then I've been superintendent for the last six years.

Randy Ray: You've done pretty much all of it, haven't you? At one time or another.

Dr. Tanya Larkin: Well, I've had the opportunity to get a full systems perspective, pre-K through 12.

Randy Ray: That's the kind of boss that people want though. Someone who has been in the trenches with them.

Dr. Tanya Larkin: Well, thank you. It has served me well. And I've learned a lot of what not to do along the way, but mostly I had great people lifting me up and guiding me.

Randy Ray: Well. One of the reasons that Dr. Wendler and I wanted to come to Pampa is one of the things that Dr. Wendler is pretty passionate about is leadership, especially in our small communities. Dr. Wendler would you speak to that a little bit?

Dr. Walter Wendler: I will. About 20% of the Texans live in rural communities. I'm not sure Pampa is even a rural community, but it's a small community. And this is an important part of the population. These communities produce the food, and the fuel, and the fiber that makes Texas work. And I think that they deserve the very best in educational opportunity from pre-kindergarten through high school and indeed with universities. And WT proudly serves these smaller communities that often get overlooked for major metropolitan areas, the big cities, Houston, and Dallas, and Fort Worth, and San Antonio, and so on. Those are all great places. Don't hear me saying anything else. But the fact of the matter is Pampa is a great place too. And Miami, and Booker, and Wellington, these are great places, great communities that people love.

And the fact of the matter is we want to be known as a university that caters to those communities and their interests and needs. And the fact of the matter is to be able to do that, it's a little bit like Dr. Larkin's experience, we have to know what the people are in all these various places. So that's why I like to come out here. And that's what my commitment is as the president of West Texas A&M University.

Randy Ray: Dr. Larkin, let me ask you, what exactly does a superintendent do?

Dr. Tanya Larkin: Well, it's different every day. But really I think for the most part, my job is to create opportunities, create vision, communicate that vision to all of the people in the community and the school district. And inspire people to want to be their best selves through an educational system.

Randy Ray: So you are over, in charge of, supervise, over 3,000 students and you have over 500 employees. What's the biggest challenge you face every day?

Dr. Tanya Larkin: You know, I wake up every day and my husband teases me and he says, are you going to suit up and play today? And I do. I suit up every day. And I say a prayer to do the right things for the right reasons in the right way. And that's not always easy. And so that's the most challenging, but also the most rewarding every day.

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, I've heard you say some of the same things.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yeah, very similar in many ways. And as a matter of fact, Dr. Larkin, and I was just talking about this, and I think this is good thinking for all of us that are gathered here. And that is to find your purpose and stay focused on that purpose. And there are so many distractions that will try to pull you from your purpose. They don't set out that way, but they can. And the important thing is to stay focused. And I know Dr. Larkin stays focused on the wellbeing of each of you as students in Pampa ISD. I try my best to stay focused on the needs of students at West Texas A&M University. And Dr. Larkin and I have a challenge every day. And I've been at this a long time, 45 years.

And I said to myself, not long ago, as a matter of fact, it was just a little over a year ago. I've experienced about everything you can experience in a university and then came COVID-19, which I had no idea about. And I know Dr. Larkin shares some of those same things. There's something new every day. And I like the idea of suiting up. I get up in the morning, I say my prayers, I get ready for the day. And I want to go to work ready to be suited up and to do a good job in service to others.

Randy Ray: Well as you both know, the last couple of years have been a bit of a challenge. Aside from that, what are the normal challenges that we face in education in society today?

Dr. Tanya Larkin: Well, I think we're probably both going to say a lot of things. But I think, society is always evolving. And I think your communities and the institutions that are working within those communities, there's a dichotomy. You are a reflection of your community, but you're also a beacon of hope for a better community in the future. And so I think some of the things that we are challenged with is some of it's logistically like financial support. To make sure that we have all the resources we need to build the systems to serve the people we serve. I think finding quality people to work in our organizations is something that we're blessed to do in the Panhandle. I think we have wonderful people grounded in good, strong values. But finding those people who want to serve in a school setting is challenging in public schools. And I'm sure at the university level as well.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yes, it is. It is. And you're right. I agree with everything that you've said in terms of a kind of day to day issues and challenges. And people think the greatest challenge is money, we need more money all the time. And it's important to be sure. But I live by a simple principle. Some people think if you have good resources, that good ideas will follow. I don't think that way. I think if you have

good ideas, the resources, the money to support those ideas, will follow the good ideas. I actually believe that.

So I try to focus on that even in times of shortage. And in many communities across the Panhandle, there are financial challenges. People don't have enough money to do all the things they'd like to do. And I think it's very important that we recognize that the most important thing is our creativity and our inventiveness in solving problems. That's, what's critical. And again, I'll say it again, staying focused on mission. And that's hard for someone in Wilson Elementary School. It's hard for a high school student. It's hard for school superintendent. It's hard for a university president. It's hard for Randy Ray and Johnny Story. Ky. It's hard for all of us. Stay focused on what's right. And you learn what's right. You learn it from your families and community leaders of various kinds. In places of worship, you learn to stay focused. And I think that's the most important thing. Stay focused.

Dr. Tanya Larkin: I think it's important to keep strong people around you to help you stay focused as well. And those are the people who do the generation of the ideas and the solution seeking. I think that's part of what we're trying to do here is educate our kids to know how to have those skills moving forward.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I agree with you. As a matter of fact, Tanya, just recently somebody asked me, how are my senior staff, the vice presidents and so on that I work with on a day-to-day basis. I've never had a group as gifted as these people are in helping move the organization forward and contributing their ideas and so on. Very important. Absolutely critical.

Just recently, I wrote a reflection on leadership and the university's job to teach leadership. And I would say Pampa ISD and especially Pampa High School, as children become adults through the school system, to teach leadership skills and understand the value of leadership in a free society. We need to know how to follow. We also need to know how to lead. And I think it's exceedingly important. And we have a fundamental responsibility to teach that. Because as Dr. Larkin says, that makes our communities stronger. And strong families, strong communities, a strong state, a strong nation, all of those things are glued together. They're absolutely glued together and you can't have one without the other. Up and down what I call the leadership ladder. It's exceedingly important. So, Tanya, I concur with you.

Dr. Tanya Larkin: Thank you. I do want to just add that when we're talking about leadership, it's leading where you're at, leading from where you are. It's the students in front of us that are in our student news network. It's our student ambassadors that are here. They have signed up to do more and go above and beyond. And that's the first step of being a leader and serving. And I meet with many of these kids and so does Ms. Williamson. And we talk about the traits and characteristics of being a leader. And it's not just something you hope for. It's something you work for and constantly reflect on and learn how to do. And I'm proud that

these kids are here today wanting to learn and have so many great models around them.

Dr. Walter Wendler: And I will also just add behind us on the wall are pictures of people who had been very successful in many walks of life. And they learn the skills to be successful right here in Pampa ISD and at Pampa High School. And little by little, and many of those people, I know Randy Ray would've never thought that he would have his picture on this wall. It's something that happens over time. And it's the attitudes, and values, and the principles of living that he learned. And it came from his family. It came from his membership at First Baptist Church. I mean, it comes from all of these different things. They all contribute to this concept of leadership.

And I think it's a remarkable thing to see that blossom. And I think it's very good that Pampa ISD recognizes these people and the work that they've undertaken to become good leaders.

Randy Ray: I'm enjoying our conversation and I am enjoying talking about leadership. We're going to take a break. And then when we come back, I want to introduce everyone to a young man that I think is a future leader. Not only at Pampa High School, but also West Texas A&M. We'll be back in 30 seconds.

Speaker 4: West Texas A&M University is proud to call the Texas Panhandle home and providing the top 26 counties with opportunity and qualified graduates is an important WT mission. From their first experience on campus to graduation day, the WT experience is a challenging series of steps that will embolden our students to reach their full potential. And then in turn, go out into the Panhandle and make a difference. Quality education with a big local return is one thing you can find here at WT. For more information about West Texas A&M University, visit our website at wtamu.edu.

Randy Ray: Welcome back to part two of Reflections from WT, The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. Today, I'm joined by Dr. Tanya Larkin, who is a superintendent of Pampa Independent School District. Dr. Walter Wendler, who's the president of West Texas A&M. And I have another special guest. I want to introduce to you, Mr. Ky Parnell. Ky, welcome.

Ky Parnell: Glad to be here.

Randy Ray: So you and I have emailed back and forth a few times.

Ky Parnell: Absolutely.

Randy Ray: And that's because you are kind of considering going to West Texas A&M. Are you a senior?

Ky Parnell: Yes, I'm a senior.

Randy Ray: I want, from a senior perspective, I want you to tell us how you pick a college?

Ky Parnell: Well, It wasn't that difficult to me. I mean, right before you're supposed to start considering colleges, I was filming a video for the Pampa Hall of Fame. And it just so happened to this kind of special guy who does something for some college that I never heard of was getting inducted into the Pampa Hall of Fame. And it just so happened that he was doing exactly what I wanted to do. And when I went and talked to him, he was like, come down and take a look at our facilities and see if you like it. So it kind of came a little bit easier to me than probably other students. So I don't really have [crosstalk 00:14:26].

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, do you see how I'm out recruiting? Do you see that?

Dr. Walter Wendler: Oh yeah.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yeah. I see all that.

Randy Ray: Yeah. So Ky, you're around other seniors. How much time do you spend thinking about, where am I going to go to college? And is that something that freaks you out a little bit?

Ky Parnell: For most, I think so. I definitely have some friends who had to think a lot harder than I did about where they were going. Pretty hard decision. You're not just thrown into it like you are Pampa High School or Pampa Junior High. It's not as required. So it's a little bit more of a choice. And there's a lot of choices out there. So it's definitely, I'd say maybe 50% of the time in your second semester, what you think about.

Randy Ray: So Dr. Larkin, Dr. Wendler, I want to ask you both, how does a student choose the right university?

Dr. Tanya Larkin: Well, from my perspective, I think it's important that we've helped them discover who they are, what they're about -

Randy Ray: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Dr. Tanya Larkin: What their passions are, what they value. And then they do their best to research and find a university that will compliment that and support that, but also take them to that next level of challenge.

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, you've talked about this before and I like your perspective on it.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Well, I think a very important thing to do like Ky has done, is study about the schools and look at what has the opportunities that fit your interests. To look for that fit. I visited 132 high schools, all but two in the top 46 counties of Texas,

the Panhandle, and also the South Plains. There were two schools I didn't get to, but I got to all the rest, public and private. And in every school, I learned something about how people see universities by doing this, by talking with people. And what Ky has done, which is start to think about what he wants to do and see where that fit might be. That fit is incredibly important. And I think that's the very wisest thing to do. Visit the campus. I got lucky. I started school at a community college in New York.

I played a little hockey there, club hockey, and it really was club hockey. We tried to club each other to death with the sticks. It was rough. And when I was coming to the conclusion of these studies, I thought about being an architect. That's what I wanted to do. And I transferred to Texas A&M. I had never been to Texas. As a matter of fact, I had never been West of New Jersey. And if you look at the map, that is pretty far East, but that's where I lived. And I had never been out of that. And I got off the bus in College Station, Texas. And I said to myself, Lord, what have I done? Because it was a strange place. And I was a stranger in a strange land, but I fell in love with it. And I was lucky. But I would say investigate very carefully the places you want to go.

And I didn't investigate Texas A&M, but I didn't have the resource to just fly there and look and come home again. My family couldn't do that. So I read what I could read and I studied as best I could. There wasn't even any internet. Here you all you guys are with laptops and pads and all that. We had none of that. I could ask you to Google, Texas A&M right now and you find out all kinds of information. I had to write and ask for a brochure, and then they sent it. I'd get up a week later. And so on and so forth. But Ky's doing the right thing. Think about it carefully. Think about what your dreams and aspirations are. I use the word aspirations a lot when I think about college. And I think people should have a set of aspirations, not mine, yours. You need to think about what they are and make it fit for yourself. Again, have a plan that works for you. One person.

Randy Ray: Ky, what do you want to do when you graduate from college? Not from high school. What do you want to do when you graduate from college?

Ky Parnell: That's a tougher question. I don't know. There's a lot. Something in the video world is all I know. I mean, contract videography has been thrown around. Wedding videography is a big one. Working for a company somewhere is a big one for me. Somewhere in that field. I just want to stay with my roots. What I know that I love to do so that I don't have to dread the rest of my life doing something I don't want to do.

Randy Ray: So Dr. Wendler, Dr. Larkin, Ky is getting ready to go to college. What is the one bit of advice each one of you would give him?

Dr. Walter Wendler: I'll start, I'll start. I'm going to give-

Dr. Tanya Larkin: Okay. You go there.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I'm going to start.

Dr. Tanya Larkin: I've known Ky his whole life. So I probably know too much.

Randy Ray: Maybe, maybe so. Ky, I'm going to tell you something that I tell my students. When you go to college, don't get behind. Stay on top of things. There are so many things that's pulling you and they're cool things. There's organizations, there's fraternities, there's events going on. There's a lot of things that will pull you away from your studies. And I'm speaking from experience. Don't get behind, stay on top of things. That's my bit of advice.

Dr. Tanya Larkin: Well, mine is on that same vein, but I was going to say, keep focused on your goals. And that same thing about getting distracted, which falls into not getting behind, but also Ky, you said you want to stay in your roots and do something that you know, you love. But I challenge you to hold onto those roots, but be ready for what you don't even know you don't know yet. And be willing to experience new things, but stay focused on the right things.

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler?

Dr. Walter Wendler: Both of those are great pieces of advice. Mine is much more practically oriented. I say, don't borrow too much money. A lot of people graduate from college and owe too much money. Be very careful about getting into debt. You may think, well, if I get the degree, everything will be worth it. Sometimes yes. Sometimes no. And I'm willing to be very honest about that because I see people struggling with over-indebtedness. Find a way to go low. Just go low.

Randy Ray: Go low.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Go low.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Well, normally at this part of the podcast, I'm throwing a curve ball question, but I'm not going to do that this time. We're going to do some special today. Dr. Larkin, we have a room full of young people. Would you introduce them to us?

Dr. Tanya Larkin: I would be honored to. In front of you today is our first ever cohort of student news network students who have been interviewed, they've applied, they've gone through a grueling process to be selected, to share the news and share the story of their campuses and our community. And we're thrilled to have them here and we're excited for what they do for our school district, but also how they represent us in the larger Panhandle and in the state.

Randy Ray: Well, I agree. We are honored that you guys are here and we're going to ask you to help us on our podcast. If you would help me and Dr. Wendler, we're going to

get you guys to help us say Go Buffs so that all the students back at WT can hear what you had to say too. Okay. All right. On the count of three, I want to hear Go Buffs. Okay, everyone ready? One, two, three. [Go Buffs!] All right. Nice job. All right. That's going to be a wrap up. This edition of Reflections from WT, The Heart and the Soul of the Texas Panhandle. Thank you for joining us. We will see you again next time.