

Reflections from WT with Ralph de la Vega

- Randy Ray: All right. Welcome to Reflections from WT, The Heart and The Soul of the Texas Panhandle. My name is Randy Ray. I am the director of broadcast engineering here on the beautiful WT campus. And I'm joined today by can I call you my co-host? I feel I-
- President Walter Wendler: You can call me pretty much anything.
- Randy Ray: No, I can't.
- President Walter Wendler: Except because [crosstalk 00:00:30]. Yeah. Well, that's true. You do need to use a little discretion.
- Randy Ray: I don't feel right calling you my co-host. Well, I'm joined today by my big boss, Dr. Walter Wendler. So, today's going to be an interesting podcast, I think. I'm looking forward to it. We have been doing this over two years now. We have primarily, always gotten people on the WT campus, but today we have a very special guest. Today, our guest is the very first speaker for the Stan Sigman Leadership and Innovation Speaker Series, Ralph de la Vega. Ralph, thank you for being here.
- Ralph de la Vega: Pleasure to be here.
- Randy Ray: Ralph. I want you to tell your story, but, and it's an impressive story. Just start at the very beginning coming from Cuba.
- Ralph de la Vega: Well, it's a story about sacrifice. A story about inspiration and how you should never let anybody put limits on what you can achieve. I was-
- Randy Ray: ... which is what your grandmother used to tell you.
- Ralph de la Vega: Yeah. Which is what my grandmother always told me. I was raised in Cuba and after the Cuban revolution, my family lived in a constant state of fear and anxiety. Anything that you did could be deemed to be against the government, so you could be hauled away and put in jail. And in addition to that, the communist government that took over Cuba, nationalized my father's business, was just a food distribution business. They basically took all the assets and he was out of business. And so, my mother feared that young people like me were being influenced in the schools to turn their parents... To have their children turn their parents in if they did anything that was against the revolution.

So, my mother felt like I would lose my soul if I stayed in Cuba, it was pretty dire. And that's what made her and my dad decide to leave Cuba. When you left Cuba in those days, you had to leave all your material possessions to the government. Your house, your savings account, your car, every single material possession was inventoried by the government. It had to be left there when you left the country. And despite all of that, they made, what I thought was a really difficult decision to leave, because we had no family in the United States, but we knew it was a beacon of freedom of hope and of opportunity. So, we went to the airport along with my sister, Barbara. I was 10 at the time. And the militiaman that look at our exit papers said five words that changed my life and my family's life forever. And those five words

were, "Only the boy can go." Only my papers were correct that day. The entire family could stay behind or they can send me ahead to United States by myself. I was 10 years old and we didn't have any family in the United States. So, my father frantically called friends and asked them to look after me. These were recent immigrants to the US as well, and that he would soon follow. I got on that airplane. And I said goodbye to my parents. And I wouldn't see them again for four years. So, I found myself in a new country with a new family. I didn't speak a word of English. I didn't have a penny in my pocket. And I tell the story that I didn't even like the food. The first food I got in the United States was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And in Cuba, we

always used to have ham and pork and I open and I go, "I'm in the greatest country in the world-"

Randy Ray:

Where's the meat?

Ralph de la Vega:

Exactly. What? They put no meat in the sandwiches. What is this? So it just highlights the difficult transition from language to country, to culture, to family, to even food. But the message in that story is that you can start life over again. That the human spirit is incredibly resilient. And that's exactly what we did. And it's no different than millions of other immigrants have done from not only the Caribbean, but Europe and every other country around the world. And that's why this is such a great country because a 10 year old boy can get to its shores, without his family, without a penny in his pocket. And is speaking to you as a former vice chairman of AT&T. It has to be a great country that allows a young kid like that to succeed.

President Walter Wendler:

You know, Randy, there are two things about this that are moving to me, almost move me to tears actually. The first is the power of the family. I've known a number, pretty good number of Cuban families in New York. There were many fairly strong Cuban community in New York where I came from. And also some here in Texas and the power of the family and the value of the family. It's unquestioned, it's important. And for Ralph to be separated from his mother and father, obviously hard on a 10 year old, but for the father, his father and mother to allow that is tremendous to me. A tremendous statement, a testimony of their love for him and also their confidence in things

generally through, probably through their faith. I'm not going to project that onto to them, but that's what I would guess probably through their faith. That, and then the other thing again, from

knowing a number of Cuban families and many of them, immigrants from Cuba, a level of patriotism and appreciation for the American dream is marked in many as Ralph just said, many immigrant families. But I think it's especially strong in those that come here under duress and they appreciate the opportunities of freedom and so on and willing to work hard, I mean hard.

Randy Ray:

Well, Ralph, let me ask you that. Do you think that you and this may be a strange question, do you think you have a deeper love for our country than some people that were even born here? And, because you came from another one you came here, you saw both sides of the story.

Ralph de la Vega:

I have the experience of what it's like to live under communism, and it is not good. So I am a fervent believer in this great country of ours and specifically the freedoms that we have and the entrepreneurial spirit of the people who created this country. It is that entrepreneurial spirit that is missing from Cuba today because in Cuba, everything is controlled and controlled very tightly by the government. But Dr. Wendler to your point about my parents, it is their sacrifice that made me being successful here. It was their sacrifice of their future so that myself and my sister could have a brighter one. And so, it was so hard on my mom that I always cooked the family Turkey on Thanksgiving, the family get together, I carve it. And this last time mom came and I thought she was coming to get a piece of the Turkey as I was carving it. But what she said was, "Did I do the right thing?" I said, "Mom, what are you talking about?" said, "Did I do the right thing in sending you alone?" I said, "Mom, I think I turned out okay."

Randy Ray:

You turned out okay. So, talking about turning out okay. You ended up being well, you were an executive at AT&T, the vice-chairman and CEO of business solutions and internet. Your resume is one of the most impressive resumes I've ever seen. Tell me about your educational background after you got to the United States so that you could become those impressive things.

Ralph de la Vega:

Well, it's an interesting story. I almost didn't get an education at all. I went to see my high school counselor after my parents arrived four years later. And of course they had no financial capability and I was still a novice at English. So they, the counselor looked at my records and said, "Ralph, I know you want to be an engineer, but son, you have to be a mechanic. You should turn to be a mechanic so you're not a burden to your family." And I think that that advice caused me to actually leave high school, regular high school, and actually go to trade school. And it really was going to impact my life in a very significant way had I stayed that course. I was intercepted by my grandmother who came from Cuba, was a school teacher, a mother to seven children. And when I told her that I wanted to be an engineer, but was

studying to be a mechanic, she gave me some rough feedback. Let's call it that. But then the next thing she said is that "Ralph don't, don't let anybody put limitations on what you can achieve. If you want to be an engineer, you can be an engineer." And I stopped in my tracks. I had a lot of respect from my grandmother. I know she was right. So, I quit school, the trade school went back to high school and then got my engineering degree. But I got my engineering degree by first, going to what Dr. Wendler recommends for many of his students. I went to a two year college because I couldn't afford to get into a four year school. And that two year college allowed me to get a degree in pre-engineering. And once I got a degree in pre-engineering, I could become a draftsman for the Tampa Bay Engineering Company. So, got into engineering and then I paid my own way, including some loans to get my four year degree at Florida Atlantic University. So, it is the classic case where you had to work your way up in the education field and to keep learning because then I got my MBA and I went on to do other things. So to me, education changed my life and the message to your students and to your audiences. It really doesn't matter the size of the school. What matters is how much you put into it. And I'm convinced after spending a couple of days here at West Texas, that this is a great school, and it's a great place to get a great education. And once you get a great education, what my grandmother told me sticks in, you'll not have any limitations imposed of you.

Randy Ray:

Dr. Wendler, don't you think that WT has that same spirit about it?

President Walter Wendler:

Yeah, I think it does. And I appreciate Ralph mentioning this because I keep reminding people to be careful of getting in too much debt. And, I went to a community college too. He studied pre-engineering, I studied pre-architecture. I had a counselor that essentially said the same thing to me. I won't tell you the whole story, but it was my first cousin, Elaine Spisado. She told me, "You don't need to go to college, be a carpenter, like your uncle Artie." And I was already a carpenter's apprentice in high school. But anyway, I couldn't concur more. And the value of starting at a community college in finishing the associate's degree, which I'll bet you did.

Ralph de la Vega:

Yes.

President Walter Wendler: I know it, Ralph. I know you did. I can tell by talking to you, you would've finished that and then move on to the senior institution and have saved a lot of money and been able to work along the way. They're just... I tell the students all the time, don't pay attention to what you see on the Facebook or YouTube or Rumble or any of those other Snapchat. Any of that stuff, TikTok. Make a plan for yourself, make a plan for one that works for you. Talk to people you love. People that you can respect, just like Ralph's grandmother. He respected her, she respected him, and that's what happens. And we forget that, we so worry about where somebody graduated from what kind of a college it was and so on and so forth. Get the cognitive insights and skills, get empowered and get out there and do something. I just think that is, it goes beyond words to say how powerful it is.

Ralph de la Vega: Dr. Wendler, the best story to describe this is what happened to the students of my grandmother, who was a teacher. They left Cuba without any material possessions, but they did leave with the knowledge that my grandmother gave them that's in their head. And once you get a great education, nobody can take it away from you. Not even a communist regime. And with that education, they were able to start their lives over in a new country and succeed in almost every single case. So it really highlights the importance of getting the best education you can get. It doesn't matter where you get it. It matters that you really exert your own influence to learn as much as you can.

President Walter Wendler: Yeah, I would agree. And the power of good teachers, mentors and so on.

Randy Ray: Absolutely.

President Walter Wendler: Very, very critical. And by the way, I think many of our listeners, Randy would know this, but Stan Sigman, who is the namesake of this event lecture series, and so on, he's a WT graduate. He went a long, long way on his... And I would say it was a combination of a few things, family life, the education that he got here at WT, but also West Texas values. He had a value system that said he should have high integrity. He should work hard. He shouldn't expect to be rewarded when he didn't do a good job, these kinds of values, he appreciated his family. I could go on and on. I could list 10 or 12, but the bottom line is Stan knew those values were important. I didn't know him nearly as well as Ralph or others, but in the five years that I was here and did have acquaintanceship with him, I learned a lot from him in a very short period of time. And he got it from West Texas A&M and never forgot that.

Ralph de la Vega: Exactly. And, Dr. Wendler, I like your slogan of from the panhandle to the world because Stan Sigman came from the panhandle and the company that he formed and the leaders that he grew took that message that you just stated and spread it throughout the world. I can assure you of that.

President Walter Wendler: How many countries did you do business in?

Ralph de la Vega: 200.

President Walter Wendler: As from the pan, that may be the ultimate expression of, from the panhandle to the world.

Randy Ray: Well, Ralph, how did you, how did you meet Stan?

Ralph de la Vega: I came to singular wireless from being the President of BellSouth Latin America, and had not met Stan until he had an opening as his Chief Operating Officer. I never met Stan, but the minute that I interviewed him, I liked him. And he liked me. And like I said in some of the meetings today, outwardly we may look like different people, but inwardly we're very, very similar and we hit it off. His values are my values and we just put a great team of people. I think if you look back at the legacy that Stan Sigman left, it was not just the performance of the company, but the people that made that company and continue to keep it alive and keep it successful.

President Walter Wendler: I will tell you how I first met Stan. When we were building this building in 2006, we were looking for people to underwrite one of our studios. And Stan was one of the first ones to step up to the plate and said, "We would like AT&T to help name one of your new studios." So, today we have our AT&T production studio. When I think about Stan and I think about his values and principles every time I walk by and I see that sign on the studio.

Ralph de la Vega: And it is a high, high class act. I mean, I saw it today and it... What an impressive, I know that Stan and everybody at AT&T would be proud that their name is displayed.

Randy Ray: I was honored to show it to you.

Ralph de la Vega: Thank you.

Randy Ray: I'm proud of that room.

President Walter Wendler: And, and by the way, this is something that I picked up from Stan. He really liked applications, driven education. Education, towards a purpose of getting something done. I'm doing work and so on. And we see that around the campus. But it's especially here in the broadcast aspect of what goes on here in the Sybil B. Harrington College of Fine Arts and Humanities. This unit really is a hands-on approach and gets people ready to enter the industry with very valuable skills. I've hired somebody that's a graduate of this program, worked in one of the local affiliates. She was a news producer and a weekend host and so on and so forth. She works for me now. And I will tell you, it's amazing the insight and energy and pragmatism she brings to the task.

Randy Ray: And I think a lot of that comes from those values and principles we share from Stan. Yeah. Ralph, let me ask you this. What advice would you have for a student that's contemplating college?

Ralph de la Vega: I would say do everything possible to go to college and get the best education you can. Once you get a great education, nobody can take it away from you and it will help you in your career and in your life. It will open doors that otherwise would've been closed, but not just get an education by going to a two or four year school, but to continue learning your whole life. Because even if you go to a school today, whether it's two, three, four years, the information and the knowledge you have becomes stale. And in some cases obsolete, so you need to continue learning. Is get a great education and then continue learning your whole life. If you do that, you'll be very successful.

President Walter Wendler: The old adage, you can give a man a fish and he has a meal, but if you teach him how to fish, you can feed him for a lifetime. And I think it's the same thing about learning. We forget that. Yeah, we forget it. It's a process. It never stops.

Ralph de la Vega: Dr. Wendler, I love that quote. In fact, I like to modify it a little bit. And I say, "If you teach a man a or a woman about entrepreneurship, they can not only build a place that will be successful, and then they can eat fish or chicken or meat the rest of their life."

Randy Ray: They don't have to have peanut butter and jelly.

Ralph de la Vega: They don't have to have peanut butter and jelly or only fish.

Randy Ray: You guys ready for my curve ball. This one's not too tough. Ralph, we'll start with you. What celebrity would you like to have dinner with?

Ralph de la Vega: Oh my gosh. What celebrity would I love to have dinner? I don't know. That's a really good question. I think probably if I had to pick one, it may be Warren Buffet. I think Warren Buffet is an amazing individual. Comes out of the Midwest, has some very, very good financial acumen. And I think his advice would be invaluable just to learn from the man who has done so much and done it in a very, very good way.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Warren Buffet. That's a good answer, Dr. Wendler.

President Walter Wendler: Gosh, that's a tough one. That is a curve ball, Randy. What's celebrity?

Randy Ray: [crosstalk 00:19:37] everyone ready to go?

President Walter Wendler: No, it's interesting. It's a hard one for me. I actually would like to have dinner with Greg Abbot, the governor of Texas.

Randy Ray: Well, who you've met before.

President Walter Wendler: ... just briefly, but I would like to sit and talk with him. He's in a tough spot in so many ways, there's so many contemporary challenges for some reason, and maybe he's not a celebrity, he's an elected official. But, like Warren Buffet he does a job every day and you know how they do that and how they navigate these constantly changing waters that they have to navigate, it's not easy. And I just like to talk to him about it, see what he thinks and how he thinks about issues and challenges and so on would be very interesting to me,

Ralph de la Vega: By the way, both those individuals are very authentic in what they do. There's no mistaking where they come from, where they've been and what their values are.

Randy Ray: Ralph, I think it's interesting that you said that because that's the number one value in principle that Stan Sigman appreciated was authenticity. And he was a very, authentic kind of guy.

Ralph de la Vega: Not only was he authentic, he enabled you to be your authentic self. And, it seems simple when you say it, but I know many people who were afraid to talk about their backgrounds. Would it help them in the company or not? Maybe they shouldn't be talking about it. Once Stan talked about his background, it opened the door for me to talk about my background and for me to share my story and for others to do the same thing. And then you realize almost everybody has a book inside them. Everybody has a great story. Everybody, especially if you've gotten a great education and you've been successful, should be a role model for young people to follow, because it's so important to give young people encouragement like my grandmother gave me. It just took minutes for me to get completely turned around. And, I think young people today deserve those kinds of advice and encouragement.

Randy Ray: You said everyone has a book in them. You certainly had a great one in you. And I want to tell everyone about "Obstacles Welcome: Turn Adversity into Advantage in Business and in Life". And that's published by Thomas Nelson. So, I'm going to encourage everyone to go out and get a copy of that. I'm just starting it, but it's already really intriguing. So, I appreciate you taking time to write that important book.

Ralph de la Vega:

You know, I wrote the book, but interestingly enough, I never really went on tour because the purpose of the book was not to make me famous or to have any financial gain. But working with the AT&T Foundation, we gave away 50,000 copies to kids, to high school and middle school kids, primarily from underserved communities to give them hope that if I made it, they could make it. And to me, I wrote the book thinking that if I could just change one life, one trajectory, like my mother changed to me, it'd be worth the effort that it took. And it took me two years to write it on weekends while I had a full-time job. So I think I tried to do the best to inspire people to achieve greatness. And that is what I'm here because we're here to celebrate the greatness of Stan Sigman, the greatness that exists in this region, and the greatness that was helped to provide that seed of greatness. This institution helped to provide the seed of greatness in Stan Sigman. And that is why we're here. There is greatness here in West Texas.

President Walter Wendler:

I'll tell you what we should do. And I shouldn't say this on the air, but I'm going to, Johnny can always cut it out if he wants to, but we should use this as a freshman reader. All of our freshman class read something in common and then bring a speaker in. It'd be interesting to bring Ralph back and to give a talk, campus talk sometime.

Ralph de la Vega:

I'd be glad to do it. I get so many compliments sometimes, but the interesting thing is a lot of parents buy the book to give it to their children. To help them explain how obstacles are only opportunities in disguise. And you should never let yourself become a victim of this situation and the adversities that life presents us and will always continue to present us.

Randy Ray:

Well, those are some very wise words and some good thoughts for all of us to remember. Ralph, thank you for joining us, Dr. Wendler. Thank you for being here again. And thank you for joining us this time for Reflections from WT, The Heart and Soul of Texas Panhandle. We'll see you next time.