

Reflections from WT – Future Buff Saxton Ralston

Randy Ray: Welcome to Reflections from WT, the heart and the soul of the Texas Panhandle. This is episode number 32. My name is Randy Ray. I'm the Director of Broadcast Engineering, and I'm joined today by the president of West Texas A&M, Dr. Walter Wendler. And we have a special guest that I'm going to introduce to you in just a little bit, but first I want to quiz Dr. Wendler on a few things. Are you ready? You know this, you talk about this all the time, so it's not a big quiz. What do you think the most unique thing about WT is? The most unique thing?

President Wendler: Well, I'd like to say it's location, but that's every university. No two universities can exist on the same spot. I mean, it's just the law of geography, right? So I think the most unique thing is the people that populate this place.

Randy Ray: I agree with you, which leads into what I want to talk about today. You talk about people, and I think, in my opinion, one of the reasons that I went to school here, one of the reasons that I like working here is the relationships with people and the relationships that are formed. Talk about that for a minute.

President Wendler: Well, you're right, Randy. And those relationships are important. I don't care whether it's two people in, say, in a marriage or 2,000 people in a community. Those relationships, people to people relationships are what create... They create glue that bond people into a group that's larger than themselves. And this is a fundamental notion of our existence that it's good to be bonded into something that's larger than you are.

We express that in ourselves in many different ways, but becoming part of something is really important. What I really like about the Panhandle, this is what makes people unique for me is they can still be strong individuals. This place is made up of rugged individualists. I mean, very, very tenacious, tough, determined people, yet they still belong to things larger than themselves. And that requires a kind of a self-reliance, but also a sacrifice because whenever you join a group, there's compromise involved in that.

I've been married nearly 50 years and I can tell you there's compromise involved in that relationship. If Mary was here, she'd say, "Yeah." I mean, that's just the way it is.

Randy Ray: Well, we were talking about relationships. Yesterday, you and I were in a meeting and one thing that you talked about that I thought about some was you mentioned that there are other universities across the country that that are not really that concerned about their students. They're just there to get them. They're just cattle running them through. WT is different where you said that we have faculty here that actually care about the success of students that come through here.

President Wendler: Yeah, they do. The way I characterize this, like when I'm talking to new students at the New Student Orientation, or their parents, I tell this story and it's a true story. I

was standing around with a group of students. There were eight or nine, maybe 10 of us in a little group. I forget where we were. It might've been at the Presidential Scholar's recognition or something like that, and we're just chatting.

I said, "I'm curious, how many of you people have the cell phone numbers of at least one of your faculty?" And everybody raised their hand. I think it was about half the group, maybe more had the cell phone numbers of all the faculty. Now that may happen everywhere else. And maybe it's a kind of an accident of time that at this point in history people just give their cell phone numbers up. I don't know. But I've never...

Randy Ray: I don't think so.

President Wendler: I don't think so either.

Randy Ray: I don't think so either. I taught at another university before I came here, but when I came WT is the first time I ever had a meal with a student. I didn't have that. I didn't do that where I was before.

President Wendler: Yeah. There is a certain kind of humanness that I think and that's part of the Panhandle, this sort of openness and a willingness to share and so on and so forth, and never sacrifice individuality. That's what I like about it. That's what really rings my bell about the Texas Panhandle. People are still individuals, proud of their accomplishments. They take responsibility. They act in a way that benefits the whole community, but they never blend into the background. Not in my mind. Not when you get talking to them.

Randy Ray: Well, we've been talking about relationships today. One of the things that I want to start talking about, and I'm really excited about, and I think was a big deal is something that you did to foster that one-on-one relationship with potential students. And that was recently, you created over 3,000 videos for students reaching out to students that were thinking about coming to WT. Tell us about that. That's a big deal.

President Wendler: Well, it was a big deal. I didn't think of it as so much of a big deal. As a matter of fact, at a moment of weakness, I said, "Let's do this." I never thought through it. And then 200 hours later, I'm still a horse, by the way. I did these things like, finished two months ago, and I'm still a horse. It turned out to be a major undertaking. But the fact of the matter is it was also very useful.

As a matter of fact, and this is another true story. These are all anecdotes, but it's a true story. This wasn't told to me, it was told to one of the people at a New Student Orientation. A mother said to one of the people, she said, "Did you know that your president sent out personalized videos to the potential students?"

The person said, "Yeah, I do. We've read about that and it's very interesting." The mother said, "My daughter wouldn't be here if it wasn't for that. She was on the

fence with two schools and she was really on the fence. It was a coin toss," she said, "until she got the video [that] it was no more of a coin toss." And even for me, even if it's just that one student, it makes the other 2,999 videos worth it. I mean, it's just the way it is.

Randy Ray: Well, we are fortunate today to have a recipient of one of those videos. We have Ms. Saxton Ralston from Gruver, Texas.

Saxton Ralston: Yes, sir.

Randy Ray: Welcome to our podcast.

Saxton Ralston: Thank you. Thank you.

Randy Ray: Yeah. So Saxton, first of all, I'm going to ask you about your name. That is a unique and cool name. Tell me where that comes from.

Saxton Ralston: So it comes from my dad's side of the family, from my great, great, great grandmother. So they decided to bring it back.

Randy Ray: Yeah, that's cool. I don't know that I know another Saxton.

Saxton Ralston: Me neither.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

Saxton Ralston: Well, Saxton, let me ask you, how did you feel? How did you feel and what did you think when you received a video from a president of a university?

I certainly thought it was something that not other universities do. It hit a personal level that you don't see very often especially coming from a university.

Randy Ray: Did it make you feel like WT was different than other universities maybe?

Saxton Ralston: Oh, certainly.

Randy Ray: What did Dr. Wendler say to you on the video?

Saxton Ralston: He told me how he looks forward to seeing me in the fall and hopefully that everything goes good and how he's excited to see them enrolled in the biology program.

Randy Ray: Yeah. You study biology?

Saxton Ralston: Yes. Pre-vet.

Randy Ray: Pre-vet.

Saxton Ralston: Yes, sir.

Randy Ray: We can take care of that too.

President Wendler: Yeah, we can. In spades, we could do that well.

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, are you surprised at all to see Saxton sitting here after between your video? I mean, that's the reason you did it.

President Wendler: Yeah, it is. And quite to be very honest about it, I mean, Saxton probably would have come here anyway. I mean, she was probably committed and all that sort of stuff, but it is a kind of a reinforcement. So you build this web of relationships somehow and people say, "Well, it can't happen when you're dealing with thousands of students." Well, it can happen. And it requires, I'll say, a two-way street of determination.

Students have to be determined that WT is a good place to be. And we have to be determined that we're going to serve the students. I don't mean bring them donuts to class every day or give them an A when they earned a C or any of that. I'm not talking about that kind of service. That would be ill-conceived. I'm talking about the service where a student comes and says, "I want to be able to think and be ready to enter vet school." And we say to that student, "We get it, and we want to work with you to help that happen. We want to help you get into vet school. That's your aspiration. And we want to work with you to help that become a reality." In terms of secular work, I can't think of a much higher kind of, I'll call it a calling, a much higher calling than helping people achieve their dreams.

Randy Ray: I totally agree.

President Wendler: And by the way, it's hard work. And Gruver, by the way, is a town of hard work.

Randy Ray: I agree.

President Wendler: I'm really proud that she's from Gruver and taking a chance, taking the opportunity that's provided by what I call the Corn Scholarship.

Randy Ray: Well, I want to talk about that. We're going to take a break for 60 seconds. And when we come back, I want to talk about Saxton's community and what they do to help students like her get to college. We'll be back in one minute.

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 date, the WT experience is a challenging series of steps that will embolden our students 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

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Randy Ray: Well welcome back to episode number 32 of Reflections from WT. We're talking today with Saxton Ralston who is a native of Gruver, Texas. Gruver is a unique little community, ain't it?

Saxton Ralston: Yes.

Randy Ray: What was it like growing up there?

Saxton Ralston: Certainly, everybody has your back. Now, everybody might know what you're doing three Saturdays from now, but I mean certainly-

Randy Ray: You can't get in trouble without everyone knowing, right?

Saxton Ralston: Yes.

Randy Ray: I grew up in a similar kind of community. Gruver has a unique background and a unique history to it. Dr. Wendler, you wrote back in March of 2020, you wrote a really interesting piece on Gruver. Tell us a little bit about Gruver and tell us, especially about the Gruver Farm Scholarship.

President Wendler: Yes. Gruver felt like the community could be improved if, as a community, they help their graduating students go to college, go to community college, go to trade school, if they would provide merit-based scholarships to people, if they had resources to do it. A gentleman named Carl Nielsen... Actually, I think it's pronounced Nielsen, Carl Nielsen, but, provided a tract of land, basically a section, or roughly a section 410 acres and said to the city and to the school, you can use this land, grow corn on it and keep the proceeds to fund scholarships for deserving students.

Basically, what Gruver did through the sweat of their collective brow was provide free college to residents of Gruver. Free college. We hear about it all the time from politicians on the national level, even at the state level in various locations. But no president has figured out how to do it, but Carl and the people of Gruver figured out how to do it, and it was by hard work and commitment.

By the way, it's not for everybody. It's for people that earn the opportunity to study. They have to have good grades and they use standardized test scores. A lot

of people don't like standardized tests. They're not afraid of them in Gruver. They use these vehicles to assess student readiness to go to college. And then they fund tuition and fees for those students. It's free college. It's free college and it's not politically motivated. It's motivated by a community that cares about its own and they believe this makes the community better.

I will tell you people like Saxton, and I don't want to speak for her, but the chances she wants to be in pre-vet wants to be a vet eventually. If she becomes a DBM and decides that she wants to practice somewhere, she will never forget that Gruver stepped up to the plate on her behalf. And it wasn't just an anonymous city. It was friends and neighbors on my website. There's a picture of all of these students that work and help and families and farmers lend equipment and so on and so forth. It is maybe one of the best examples of cooperative democracy that I've ever seen at work anywhere towards a high purpose.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Or put it another way, just a community coming together to help their own.

President Wendler: Yeah. It is very endearing to me-

Randy Ray: I agree.

President Wendler: ... about the community.

Randy Ray: Saxton here is the kind of people we want here at WT.

President Wendler: Actually, because she knows-

Randy Ray: Because they know how to work. In your article, you have a line in there that they know how to work.

President Wendler: They do know how to work.

Randy Ray: They know how to work in Gruver.

President Wendler: They watched work produce benefit. Not just profit, but benefit to the people that labor. And I'll tell you the truth. There is, in some places and in some people's minds, a malady in our nation and in various spots around the nation where people somehow don't feel the need or the drive or the aspiration to go out and break a sweat and do a day's work. Not true in Gruver.

Randy Ray: Not true.

President Wendler: Not 100%. I'm sure, but it's enough that it makes a difference. The community thrives because of hard work. And I think that is a value that's in some way is being diminished or lost.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Saxton, there are around 500 students in Gruver. What was it like growing up

in a smaller kind of community, smaller kind of school system? Was it good for you, you think?

Saxton Ralston: Yes. I certainly believe it was very beneficial to me, especially growing up knowing that, well, I can always go to this teacher if I have a problem and she'll understand, especially if there's like family matters going on. "Oh, okay. I understand. Yes, I can help you out. We can stay after school and get it done." It's just the little things that certainly help.

Randy Ray: I think we circle back around of what we were first starting to talk about on this podcast is WT, Gruver both have that relationship kind of thing going on that I believe makes students better, and I think it keeps them engaged more. We all want to feel like someone cares about us and not only our family and our faculty too. So Saxton, in every one of our podcasts, we traditionally do something that I call a curveball. Okay? So I'm going to throw both of you... This was not a tough one today, but I'm going to throw you kind of a different kind of question. I want you to think about it. I'll start with Dr. Wendler first. Dr. Wendler, you rarely take a vacation, but if you did, what is your perfect vacation?

President Wendler: Well, I've been a lot of places, just in the nature of work and everything. Mary and I have traveled to a lot of places, and it is true. I don't take a lot of vacation. It's probably a fault. I liked going to visit the grandkids on my vacation. Some people say, "Well, that's not a vacation. You need to go sit on the beach." And do what? Absorb a lot of vitamin D, which I don't mind doing, but I like being around the kids, the grandkids and our children and the families.

Both Mary and I tend to like that. At times, it's not a vacation, it's even work, but I'm not afraid of hard work. I actually cherish it. I thank God every day that I can work.

Randy Ray: Yeah. That being said, everyone needs to recharge their batteries every once in a while.

President Wendler: Yes, they do. So Saxton, what would be a perfect vacation for you?

Saxton Ralston: So a few years ago, the opportunity to go to Italy was offered to my class. But unfortunately, due to COVID-19 that didn't end up happening. But within this trip, they would have taken us to multiple different farms or cheese places, and just gotten to see the different food cultures of Italy. And that was something I was certainly looking forward to because I feel like here in the Panhandle, especially the agricultural lifestyle, is totally different thing from what it can be in Italy.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Well, I will tell you this, and Dr. Osei-Hwere who's a fellow faculty member here in communications. She and I are taking a group to South Africa next year. And I'm extending you an invitation right now to come along with us.

Saxton Ralston: Wow.

Randy Ray: So I guarantee you, the ag world is way different in South Africa. I guess if I had to think perfect vacation for me. I always think about mountains or beach. So Dr. Wendler, you're not a beach guy. Probably the mountains for me. I really like the mountains.

President Wendler: By the way, we're going up to Durango here, the 1st of August. It's not for a long time, but [crosstalk].

Randy Ray: Beautiful up there. You're going to have a good time.

President Wendler: Just cool air and get out of town a little bit.

Randy Ray: Well, Saxton, thank you for being here today and thank you for coming to WT. We need more students like you, and we're grateful that we have people like you. And I like that you're already wearing your WT jacket today. So thanks for being here. Dr. Wendler, any parting words of wisdom?

President Wendler: Nope. Thank you for the time, Randy. I share your appreciation for Saxton and coming here to West Texas A&M University to study. I often tell people I would like to have our population of students always be nearly split half from the Panhandle and half from elsewhere. And I don't care where. I want the Panhandle half to bring with them and challenge us every day with a kind of values that are resonant in the community of Gruver, because you bring them with us. We can't forget them. We look at you, we see the values. We'll watch you work. We'll be engaged with you. And you will come here and affect the university.

The university is going to affect you, but you're going to affect us, especially when there's so many of you. If half of our students are from the Panhandle, there's a certain consistency there. So I'm thankful too.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Well, thank you for joining us today for episode number 32 of Reflections from WT, the heart and soul of the Texas Panhandle. Please join us again next time.