

Reflections from WT- Fabiola Hernandez and Sedrick Knowlton

Randy Ray: Welcome to Reflections from WT, The Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. This is episode number 24, and this is our July episode. My name is Randy Ray. I'm the Director of Broadcast Engineering here on campus. And I'm joined today by the 11th president of West Texas A&M, Dr. Walter Wendler.

Dr. Wendler: Morning, Randy.

Randy Ray: Morning.

Dr. Wendler: How you doing?

Randy Ray: I'm good.

Dr. Wendler: Good.

Randy Ray: Just a few weeks ago, we celebrated his Father's Day. And I was looking around on Facebook and I saw something that really touched me, and I liked to read it today. This was from Christie Wendler. This is your daughter-in-law. She said that she loves to hear the story of how you, she's talking about you, grew up in a tiny house with six kids in Long Island, New York, the grandson of immigrants from Italy and Switzerland. "They didn't have much. He got a strong work ethic, I'm sure from his dad. He worked long hours at the gravel mines. My father-in-law was the first to graduate from college in his family and went on to get his masters from Berkeley, his doctorate from UT in Austin. He served as professor and then Dean of the School of Architecture at Texas A&M, then served as the Chancellor of Southern Illinois University, and now serves as the President of West Texas A&M University in Amarillo. While his professional accomplishments are amazing, I'm most thankful and admire how he treats and loves his family.

Randy Ray: "I've always loved how Walt prioritized me and the kids over everything else. And since knowing his dad, I know exactly where he got it from. I benefit every day from his character and habits that he instilled in his sons. He also has taught Sunday school and has led Bible studies the entire time I've known him for the past 14 years in spite of his busy schedule. Thanks, Dad, for treating me like part of the family from day one. We love you and appreciate you today." Those are very powerful words.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah.

Randy Ray: And that had to have made you feel good when you saw that post.

Dr. Wendler: I did. I actually just read it this morning. I didn't look at Facebook over the weekend. And I looked at it this morning, and it touched me.

Randy Ray: Yeah, it touched me too. And here's one of the reasons why it touched me, is, one, knowing what kind of man we have leading our university. And two, I've always said that a university kind of reflects the personality of its president. And if that's the case, I think that we have a powerful leadership right now. So thank you for all you do.

Dr. Wendler: Well, that's very kind of you, Randy. And my daughter-in-law's overly kind. She's a wonderful woman. And I told my son he married way up. So yeah.

Randy Ray: Well, let's shift over and talk about what's going on this summer. The university is always a little quiet over the summertime, but there's still a lot going on.

Dr. Wendler: There is a lot going on. Our summer enrollments are about where they were last year. Fabiola or Sedrick will know when you talk to them exactly what the numbers are, but they're pretty close. The difference this summer and last summer is we're 100% online this first summer session. Last summer session, we were about 85% online. So it's not a huge difference, but it's still a significant difference. We're not offering any classes on campus. There may be a few individual studies and maybe a few laboratory things, but very, very modest, almost none. For all practical purposes, no summer classes. Second summer session will be a little different, but we're tracking very diligently. And our admissions people are working their fingers to the bone to try to make sure that we're in contact with applicants and that we're paying attention to what their needs are, which, by the way, is good anytime.

Dr. Wendler: I think it's especially important during this COVID-19 crisis because people have been exposed to different ways of doing business, and many students who never took a course online took courses online, finished courses online, last spring. I'd be foolish not to think it's going to affect what they do in the fall.

Randy Ray: Yeah, from my perspective, and I've said this to other people, I had really avoided teaching online. Kind of part of it is what we do over here is very hands-on, so I really tried to not do online stuff. But this COVID-19 pushed me into doing that. And now I'm glad I did. And I think it gave me another tool in my toolbox.

Dr. Wendler: That's what I think, Randy. I think that that is precisely the point. It is another tool in a toolbox. My guess is in the fall semester, we're going to be prepared to start fully on campus the way we were last year, which is still not fully on campus. About three quarters of our students are on campus. The other quarter are off campus, and some live in, I'll say, in London. I don't know. I'm sure we have a student in London, from around the world. And others live in Amarillo, but they choose to come to school online because they have jobs, they have families and so on and so forth. And I'll use the phrase customer service, that kind of customer service becomes increasingly important after students have been exposed to what you can do online. And I think we'll be ready to start 100% on campus. But overnight, within a 24 hour timeframe, if we have to shift to online instruction, we'll be able to do that-

Randy Ray: We can do that.

Dr. Wendler: ... because this COVID-19 is a roller coaster. And we're not sure how to respond. That makes us a better university. We'll be able to respond to students' needs. There's times in a regular semester when a crisis comes up in a student's life, and they may need to do something differently. But the fact of the matter is we may be able to accommodate them two or three years from now or even next year in a way that we couldn't in the past because we're going to be prepared.

Dr. Wendler: I'll just give you one example. I'm advocating, whether it's going to happen or not I'm not sure. Universities are very different kinds of business organizations. The faculty play an important role in the leadership of the organization. But I would like the faculty to use lecture capture for essentially all of the lectures they give. So they're always available to students to review. I kidded with a faculty member the other day. The faculty members themselves could watch the lectures and say, could I do something differently? Could I improve the way I deliver the material? I think that's an important component.

Dr. Wendler: So we are going to be high flex hybrid. And some of this is in response to this COVID-19 of virus. We're going to be more responsive than we've ever been in the past, I think. So this cloud, in my mind, has a silver lining in the sense.

Randy Ray: Has this changed us permanently?

Dr. Wendler: I think it's going to change the way we do business permanently. It's an opportunity. I told someone the other day, I remember going to the Kansas City airport. I can't remember what year it was, but it was pre-2001. And I went to the Kansas City airport. And you got dropped off at your airline ticket counter, and then you would walk to the gate. And somebody could come with you to the gate. And overnight, that changed in September of 2001. It changed. And it changed the industry forever. I think in many ways it's better. It's safer. Sometimes it's a nuisance.

Randy Ray: It's more frustrating at times.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, at times it's frustrating.

Randy Ray: But safer.

Dr. Wendler: Safer. And I think this COVID-19 is going to have an indelible impact on what we do in universities.

Randy Ray: Do you like working in the summer?

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. Yes, I do. And I always have. When I started to teach in Baton Rouge at LSU, from the time that I started, I always taught in the summers. And I practiced architecture there too. I had a practice. We were pretty busy. We

were doing pretty good bit of work, actually. It was a couple of us and then some interns and so on and so forth. There was half a dozen people in the office. We were busy, but I still like working in the summer. I had a passion for university life. I liked it. There's an old adage that those who can, do, and those who can't, teach. Well, nothing could be further from the truth in my mind. I find teaching more work than practice for me ever was.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I agree with you. I like the summer. Summer classes are long, and they happen every day. So I kind of like that. We get in the groove of doing that, and we come back every day. So I think it's focused.

Dr. Wendler: I would agree with you.

Randy Ray: Yeah. More focused. All right, well, we are going to take a break. And when we come back, we're going to talk to a couple of people that help bring others to campus. We'll be back in 30 seconds.

Speaker 3: West Texas A&M University is a student body that learns by doing and is always seeking opportunity. Talented and accomplished faculty that teach both in and out of the classroom. Programs that provide timeless information and meet the challenges of today's world. Facility's rich in technology as well as WT history. Now is the time to strengthen connections and open doors for tomorrow's leaders. Share your experience. Share your heritage. Share your pride.

Randy Ray: Welcome back to episode number 24 of Reflections from WT. On this segment, I'm talking to Fabiola and Sedrick Knowlton. So Fabiola, you are the Campus Visit Coordinator. And Sed, you're the Assistant Director of Recruitment. So let's talk a little bit about what's going on in the summer. Are we even open for visitors right now?

Fabiola Hernandez: We are. I'm excited that we finally have visitors on campus. We started back up June 1st. So June 1st with very limited families, and we'll be continuing on throughout the summer.

Randy Ray: So Fabiola, so what you deal with is just people wanting to come and visit the campus. So tell us about what they see when they come to campus. What's a normal tour like?

Fabiola Hernandez: We see everything. Well, the good thing about our tours, they're very personalized. So according to the student's major, if they are interested in engineering, we make sure we focus and go inside of the engineering building, show them what the classroom is going to look like for them, the labs. So we go inside. And of course, every student wants to see Activity Center, the main area of campus where students hang out at. So we pretty much cover everything all on campus.

Randy Ray: What's your favorite part of your job?

Fabiola Hernandez: The emotions that the students see. I'm able to see a life-changing moment for our students of realizing this is home, this is where I want to be for the next four years.

Randy Ray: I've said this before. I believe that you can tell in 10 minutes when you're on a campus if that's the place for you or not. We took my daughter around when she went. I can remember when we took her around to different schools to check it out. She knew exactly when the place was right. Do you agree with that to certain extent maybe?

Fabiola Hernandez: To a certain extent, yes. I'm there to greet them when they're first arriving on campus. And the majority of them are a little hesitant of being here, nervous, and sometimes their parents are making them be here. But then I've been able to see that from beginning to end completely different body language, facial expressions of the students. So I think within the first 10 minutes might be a little too much. I think throughout the tour, I've had many experiences where mid-tour a student, she stopped, looked at the mom and said, "Mom, is this what Nana-"

Randy Ray: This is it. Yeah.

Fabiola Hernandez: Yes. She said, "Is this what Nana said I would feel when I would know." And she starts crying. Mom starts crying, and they're hugging. And it's like wow.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Just a light comes on.

Fabiola Hernandez: Yep, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Randy Ray: Sed, you are Assistant Director of Recruitment. Tell me what your job is all about.

Sedrick Knowlton: Just to make my coworkers look good. My overall job is to basically get students from different organization, different places, different schools to hear about WT, not come to WT. I tell people, oh, your job is to get him here. My job is to get him here to take a tour. And so I think I let the campus and the people let it speak for itself. And so we get a lot of people from, what, from California to far as Maine to come to campus. And our job is to outreach to them and help them become a student at WT.

Randy Ray: Did you go to school at WT?

Sedrick Knowlton: Yes, sir.

Dr. Wendler: I was going to say he did a few other things at WT also. Sed, tell him what you did at WT.

Sedrick Knowlton: Well, I played football here. From '05 to '09, I play ball here. So I drove on a Greyhound bus. 12-hour drive from Dallas back then. And I stepped foot on campus. And it wasn't as pretty as it was. And so the first 10 minutes, that wasn't for me. It was the people. I think when the people got here, it was southern hospitality all over again. It was people wanting to know were you fed, do you know you're going and just a simple hello. And I think that's what really sold me out here on WT.

Randy Ray: So you have a passion for WT.

Sedrick Knowlton: Oh, yes. Probably too much. I was here for a recruiting visit for athletics once. My son was born on a Tuesday. I was here that Saturday with recruits trying to get him in. My wife, but she's a Buff too, so she's okay with it.

Randy Ray: Do you travel a lot?

Sedrick Knowlton: Yes. We travel New Mexico, Kansas, Oklahoma, Houston, El Paso. We go within about a five state region.

Dr. Wendler: By the way, Randy, if I can interrupt just a second. Sed, how many tours do you think you and I went on together when we visited high schools? Sed went with me to a lot of high schools, especially in the South Plains.

Sedrick Knowlton: Yeah, so Region 16 we went to four schools total. But Region 17, we did about maybe together maybe in the 20s, I believe. As big as Lubbock High and the small as... Was it-

Dr. Wendler: Did you go to Dawson?

Sedrick Knowlton: Dawson, yes.

Dr. Wendler: Dawson, the principal came out and met us in the parking lot. We drove up in the company car, and he had never seen that car before. And he knew every car that went in the parking lot. And Sed and I drove up, and we got out of the car. And he came out and asked. He said, "Listen, we were going to just have you talked to juniors and seniors, but would you mind talking to the whole high school?" I said, "No, not at all." I knew it was small. I said, "Just out of curiosity, how many students are there in the high school?" He said, "Well, 12." 12. Grades 9 through 12 were 12.

Randy Ray: That was in Dawson? I'm not even sure where Dawson is.

Dr. Wendler: It's down there. It's southwest, I think, of Lubbock.

Sedrick Knowlton: Lubbock.

Randy Ray: Oh, yeah.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, it's way down there, and it is small. As a matter of fact, they have law enforcement can't get to that school in less than, I think, about a half hour. They have a sign out front that says our teachers and administrators are armed and will do everything necessary to protect our students. And I asked the principal. I said, "How long would it take for law enforcement to get here?" Because I'm not a genius, but I knew we were out in the middle of nowhere. He said, "30 minutes. An active shooter on a campus like this, it'd be too late by the time that law enforcement arrive." Anyway.

Randy Ray: So Sed, when you go to a place like Dawson, if they said, tell me about WT, how do you describe this place?

Sedrick Knowlton: I describe it as a place, a second home. I tell people it's a good place to get stuck. When you hear the word stuck, you're thinking bad, like, oh, I can't get out. I told them it's a good place to get stuck, good place for your son or daughter to go to school, one of the safest campuses in the nation, and then also a place where you can get an education but be hands on, a big experience in a small shoe box. Because some people are like, oh, it's big. No, it's not that big, but not that small. So we're big enough to serve, but also small enough to serve as well.

Randy Ray: Don't you both agree that the one thing that WT needs to be better about is bragging on itself?

Sedrick Knowlton: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Fabiola Hernandez: Right.

Randy Ray: I've always said we are the jewel hidden in the Panhandle, I believe.

Sedrick Knowlton: Yeah.

Randy Ray: I appreciate what you both do. I really do. And I wish that more people across campus would reach out and just tell people about how great we are, if I can just brag on us.

Sedrick Knowlton: Yes.

Randy Ray: So yeah.

Dr. Wendler: I have another story, and it's a true story. And it reinforces both what Fabiola and what Sed have told you. The first year I was here, I was out on I think it was a new freshman orientation or something. It might've been a parent visitation. I bumped into a family from Tampa, Florida. And I introduced myself, and we started to chitchat a little bit. And I asked the student, "Is this the first campus you visited?" And he said, "Well, we're from Tampa. We flew up to Amarillo. We rented a car, and we were going to drive back to Tampa and visit seven

campuses." And the father waved his finger, and he said, "But that's over." He said, "My son wants to go here." He interrupted the son in a very nice way. I can't remember the boy's name, but he said, "He wants to go here to school." And I said, "How long did it take you to figure that out?" And he said, "Well, less than a day," so it was somewhere between 10 minutes and the midpoint of the tour. But he said, "The people are so kind and the campus is beautiful and there's just no other." He said, "We've canceled rest of the trips. We're going back to the airport. We're going to fly back to Tampa."

Randy Ray: And the dad was happy he didn't have to drive back to Florida.

Dr. Wendler: Oh, he was really happy, I'm sure. That's a long haul.

Randy Ray: Every episode, I throw Dr. Wendler and our guests a curve ball. And we mentioned earlier in the episode that this first summer session, we are all online. So I am teaching an online class of Intro to Media Communication. And one of the assignments that I give is I want you to write me an essay on your favorite song. So I'm not going to ask you guys to write me an essay, but want you to tell me what your favorite song is today. It's tough one, isn't it? It's a tough one. Who wants to go first? You know?

Fabiola Hernandez: I already have mine in my head. I listened to it this morning as I was driving up here. So it's called Surrender by Natalie Taylor. I think that's the... I'm not sure, but that is my favorite song.

Randy Ray: Surrender.

Fabiola Hernandez: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Randy Ray: What's it about?

Fabiola Hernandez: Surrendering and letting the Lord guide you in the right direction you're headed.

Randy Ray: Yeah. That's a good one to start the day out with. Sed, what's your favorite song?

Sedrick Knowlton: Okay. This may seem kind of different from where she's at. Mine is Cowboys Like Us.

Randy Ray: Who's that by?

Sedrick Knowlton: Well, let's see. Is it George Strait? I have no clue. See, the reason why this song is my favorite song is I had a teammate in high school, passed away. And I would never listen to country ever. He said just listen to this one song. Well, I guess I will. And he would drive it every time we go to morning workouts. And then when he passed away, I had it play at his funeral. And to this day, that's my favorite song.

Randy Ray: Just because of the good memories from it.

Sedrick Knowlton: Yeah. The relationship that we had every morning going to practice, and I told myself I'll never listen to country. And for him-

Randy Ray: Now that's your favorite song.

Sedrick Knowlton: Exactly.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Songs are powerful. Dr. Wendler, what's your favorite song?

Dr. Wendler: Well, I got a couple of them, but I'm going to tell you In The Garden is my favorite song. "I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses."

Randy Ray: Yeah. It's tough. When I give that assignment to students, they struggle over that one. But I think it really tells a lot about a person when they tell you what their favorite song is. All right. So thank you guys for being here today. I think episode number 24 was a good one, and I appreciate y'all stopping by. And I think we had a good talk today, don't you?

Dr. Wendler: I do, Randy. Thanks so much. And thanks to Fabiola and Sed for the great work they do in admissions. These people are the front porch of West Texas A&M University. And I'm telling you, when you see them with other students and hear their stories and what they value, I'd stand us up against anybody.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I'd totally agree. All right. Well, we will see you next time on episode number 25. Until then, thanks for listening.