

## *Reflections from WT with Randy Ray and President Wendler December 2022*

Randy Ray: Welcome to Reflections from WT, this is the podcast that Dr. Wendler and I do every month from West Texas A&M University, and this is episode number 45. This is a special Christmas episode. Dr. Wendler, I just want to talk to you a little bit about Christmas today. The reason I thought this would be a good idea is because just the other day, I checked my mail and I got a really, really interesting special Christmas card from you.

President Wendler: Well, Mary and I, when we first got here, it started the tradition. I've been around large organizations basically my whole life, and there's always these cards. They're kind of what I'd call in quotation marks, "store bought."

Randy Ray: Generic. Yeah.

President Wendler: You get one of these things and you send out a Christmas card that says, "Happy Holidays from so on and so forth," and we thought we would work to personalize the card in two directions. One, to talk about something that was important about WT and use this time of year to reflect on it. That was the first one, and the second was for us to share a little bit about what the holiday means to us and so on and so forth, and others around the campus. We recognize our view of the holiday is one thing, but other people have different views.

Randy Ray: Well, it's a beautiful card and I like because it kind of has a theme and the theme is the Buffalo Marching band.

President Wendler: Yeah.

Randy Ray: Well, why did you pick that?

President Wendler: Well, the band is a very important part of this university campus for many reasons. First of all, the band camps that we have in the summers that have been going on for many, many years are absolutely essential to helping share what West Texas A&M University is.

Randy Ray: I can't believe we've had a hundred of those. This is a hundredth anniversary band camp.

President Wendler: I know. And by the way, the hundred and fifth anniversary of the marching band, this is part of who we are. This is like football at Notre Dame. You can't talk about Notre Dame without thinking about football and the legendary coaches and all that sort of stuff, and of course the Catholic Church at Notre Dame, but here, this marching band, it is part of who we are, and it's an incredibly important tradition and not just for the people that engage it through being in the band or people that come to the band camps in the summer or

excellent music program. It's important because it captures the spirit, I think, of West Texas A&M University.

Randy Ray: One thing that I've noticed is that a lot of my students, they're not music majors, but they're still in the marching band. I didn't realize that was even possible. When you see the marching band, you have students from all kind of disciplines out there.

President Wendler: Yeah. They're not just academic or wanting to be professional music teachers or musicians, but-

Randy Ray: They just love music.

President Wendler: ... they just love music, and that pride shows through. As a matter of fact, George Park said a band is not proud because it performs well. It performs well because it is proud, and I think that kind of institutional pride is very important. It marks that band and it marks a lot of things that we do at WT and back to the Christmas cards. That's what makes this time of year to reflect. We're coming to the end of a year. We're starting a new year. It's a time of, in my mind, a time of hope, looking forward, which I love to do. I'm a planner. I like to think ahead and look forward. This Christmas card in particular, this year's with the band, but in general, it's a time to both reflect and project. It lets us look back and look ahead at the same time.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I bet this is a really busy time of the year for you and Mary, isn't it?

President Wendler: Yeah, it is. Obviously, with our own family and trying to see the kids and the grandkids, we have six grandchildren. It's an important time for us.

Randy Ray: Plus all the stuff you have to do around here.

President Wendler: Around here. That's right. We just had the lighting of the lights, the campus lights last week. We've had Christmas choral and symphonic performance was this past Sunday the same time as the Christmas open house at the President's house. There are a lot of things going on, and what I fear about all of the activity is if we're not careful, we lose the central focus of what the holiday is about, and I don't mean just for me, but I mean just for everybody. The end of the year and the beginning of another year. Now for me, that has a lot of special meaning, but it does all different kinds of meetings around the campus.

Some people celebrate Kwanza December 26th through January 1st, 23. They'll be getting ready for that. Some may be reflecting on Hanukkah activities that'll occur December 18th through December 26th. Others may be looking forward or remembering actually, this year, [inaudible 00:04:50] the Festival of Lights, which was celebrated October 22nd through October 26th, and even though it's a few months passed, it's an annual celebration, very important to many people. Ramadan is coming up later in the spring, April 1st through May 1st. If you're

Japanese, you might be looking forward to celebrate the Emperor's Birthday on February 23rd. These are fall, spring, winter, turn of the year celebrations that I think help a society understand who it is and who the various groups in the society are. It's a very important thing now in my house, we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ on the 25th of December, and many people celebrate that, but not everybody, and I just think we can all-

Randy Ray: I think in general, December is just maybe a spiritual month and a month for rest and reflection and like you say, looking forward.

President Wendler: Yeah, I think it is. You conclude things, you look ahead and so on.

Randy Ray: One of the things that I personally am grateful for is that you keep me employed. I appreciate that.

President Wendler: I like having a job myself. It's nice. You can buy presents at this time of year.

Randy Ray: One of the great things about doing what we do is that we get to reboot, is what I call it, reboot. So I get to teach some of the same classes over, so how can I make it better? So I'm going to take a break and I'm going to do it again. Next time, I'm going to try to do it a little bit better, so I'm grateful for that.

President Wendler: Somebody asked me one time, "What do you like about being a member of the university community?" I said, "Well, it's a little bit like a farmer. My growing season starts in the fall in August or September. We plant a new crop. We bring in new students and everything, and then we make a harvest, in a sense, in May." I hope that's not a crass characterization, but that's what we do. That cyclical nature of it is what reinforces to me the power of these holidays. Everybody celebrates something, even if they don't say, well, I'm not interested in any of that. They eat, they exchange gifts even typically.

Randy Ray: And they sure don't mind taking the days off.

President Wendler: No. That's exactly right. You said it best, Randy. It's a time for reflection and taking stock of where you've been and what's going to happen. That's what I like, back to where you started, about these Christmas cards. Every year we do something different. We've looked at the College of Education the first year through a legendary teacher up here in the Texas Panhandle. We've looked at the buffalo as a symbol of WT. We've looked at the old ed building as an icon on the campus. This year. We looked at the band, I think I'm leaving one out, but we've looked at a number of different things that are important to WT rather than just a Christmas card that says, "Seasons greetings," that you buy for 15 cents when you get the thousand of them or 2000 of them, and we always give a gift. This year, the gift is a rendering of the band. I forget exactly what year it is, but it's a rendering of the marching band. That's a very nice rendering and it's given not to everybody. It's expensive, but we give that out to hundreds of people.

Randy Ray: Am I getting one? I don't remember seeing one the mail.

President Wendler: No. You could print one digitally off the Christmas card if you'd like. We got you, you like getting your paycheck.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I'll take it. So we're going to take a break and when we come back, I want to talk to you a little bit about some of your favorite Christmas memories. We'll be back in 60 seconds.

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Randy Ray: All right. We are back. This is reflections from WT. I'm talking to Dr. Walter Wendler, the 11th president of West Texas A&M. You've talked a little bit about Christmas and how important it is and how special it is to the campus. I want to talk a little bit about how special it is to you. Do you have a favorite Christmas memory?

President Wendler: Yeah, I have a number. As a matter of fact, just yesterday or the day before, Mary and I were talking about this, when I was a child and I come from a family of six kids. There was five brothers and sisters, well, one brother and four sisters. We were outnumbered. Family of six children and working parents. My father was a janitor in the high school I went and my mother worked in the kitchen in the same high school. That's what my family did. By the standards that I'm used to now, it was very, very modest. Some people would say poor. I'll just say modest because we didn't know any different, but we had a very strong Western European Christmas tradition. Both my mom's family and my dad's family were immigrants. My dad from Switzerland, my mother from Italy, my mother's maiden name was Patron and they came through Sicily and my dad was Swiss.

His family came from Bern, so they had this kind of Western European Italian Swiss idea about the holidays, which are very strong and in many ways very traditional kind of Christmas thing about the holidays, we were brought up to believe Santa Claus actually set up the Christmas tree in our living room on Christmas Eve. Now how he did that, I don't know. I don't know how he got down the chimney. I didn't know anything, but I was a baby, a kid, a young child. I believed it. Mary and I were just thought, we'd go to bed like at six o'clock and of course try to stay awake to see if we'd be there when ... somehow hear him in the living room or whatever.

But we went to bed and my parents set up that Christmas tree. My father would go out on Christmas eve and buy it, usually spend a buck or a buck and a half for a Christmas tree. Nobody was buying them. They were gone and he gets scraggly looking trees. We didn't care. It had whites and ornaments on it and

there were presents underneath it. It was good. We were good to go. Good to go. That memory of waking up on Christmas morning, it's wild.

Randy Ray: And the going out there, the tree was set up and presents all there. Yeah.

President Wendler: Yeah. I had triplets sisters. They were all around the Manhattan in New York. They would get so excited. They were the youngest. My father said after the triplets were born, we had three and then doubled the population in one fell swoop. He said, "That's enough of that." We was afraid he might have three more, I guess, but at any rate, they were the youngest and they would get so excited. They'd be jumping and all excited around the Christmas tree and all that sort of stuff, and it just touches my heart and we didn't get Xboxes and iPhones and stuff. We got socks and underwear. Like a lot of people my age, the children of depression era, parents and grandparents. It was remarkable how much joy they could bring to us.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

President Wendler: I'm a romantic about family life. I'm not a father knows best or a leave it to beaver family type guy. I recognize that family has all kinds of challenges and they come down all shapes and sizes, but I will tell you, the family is the founding social unit for a free society. It is absolutely the bedrock on which this society's built.

Randy Ray: I have a similar kind of memory. My dad worked in the oil field and my mom was a secretary like yours. They were very much, we were working class family, so I don't know how they did it. They would save up all year long just for Christmas. I can remember one Christmas getting the bicycle that I had been wishing for all year. They got one from me and my sister both, and I know looking back, that was a struggle for them to do, but we always had a good Christmas. We always had a good Christmas. They made it a point. Christmas was a time of celebration. We spent a lot of our Christmas in church too.

President Wendler: Yeah. Well, you were family of faith, right?

Randy Ray: Very much family of faith and we always celebrated the birth of Christ. Santa was a part of it, but it wasn't a big, huge part of it. I love Christmas. Man, looking forward like you to being able to spend time with my family this year, but the family is, like you say, the bedrock.

President Wendler: Yeah. Well, it's a remarkable time in the Panhandle. It's a remarkable time at WT. And yeah, people can say that about wherever they live and so on, but good, say it. I say it and remember it and celebrate it and I'll go back to where we started with these Christmas cards, trying to express to the best of our ability, which is always wanting in some form or fashion, trying to express the purpose and power of this change that occurs and the reflection back and

projection forward this time of year is exceedingly important and I thank God for it every day.

Randy Ray:

Well, normally at this time I throw a curve ball and I'm not going to throw you a curve ball. This time I'm going to throw the curve ball to our audience, people listening. I want to challenge you if you're listening to, just to reflect, and I want you to think about your favorite Christmas memory as we here at West Texas A&M University, wish you a very merry Christmas.

President Wendler:

Thanks, Randy.