

Reflections from WT – Shawna Kennedy-Witthar and Sidnye Johnson

- Randy Ray: Welcome to the latest edition of Reflections from WT, the heart and the soul of the Texas Panhandle. I'm your host, Randy Ray. I'm joined by number 11 since West Texas A&M University, which first started out as West Texas Normal College and West Texas State University. We've had 11 presidents and we have the 11th one with us today. Dr. Walter Wendler. Good morning, sir.
- Dr. Walter Wendler: Good morning, Randy. I'm glad to be here.
- Randy Ray: Well, I'm glad you're here. I wanted to start off by commending you on helping us navigate through the waters of the crazy year we've had. I think we're starting to see a light at the end of the tunnel.
- Dr. Walter Wendler: Yeah, I think we are too. I just hope it's not a train. You've heard that story before. First of all, I don't deserve any thanks. We've got a tremendous group of faculty and staff and leaders of every type on the campus. I believe in leadership ladders and the campus done a remarkable job. Even the students and student leadership through student government, have been very responsive to trying to think through the ways that we can best serve our students and the extended community of Panhandle. I'm very proud of it. We've done a remarkable job.
- Randy Ray: Yeah. I've been really proud of the students. I have not had a single issue in the classroom with any of the students with mask or any of that kind of thing. I think we've all pulled together and worked as a team.
- Dr. Walter Wendler: I agree, Randy, and there was a lot of concern about what happens if a student refuses to put a mask on. There was a little bit of that, but very little. Some incidents around campus, but very, very little. I think most people are very responsive.
- Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, we work with you on creating a video blog. We shot that yesterday. One of the things you talked about in your video blog was an article that you're writing with the chancellor... Or is a series of articles?
- Dr. Walter Wendler: Series of articles. Yeah.
- Randy Ray: What is that all about?
- Dr. Walter Wendler: Well, it's about how regional universities contribute to Texans and to the state of Texas. Nationally on a statewide basis, we tend to look at the big universities. The big name institutions and the leaders of those institutions and think about those as, in a sense, the prototypes of universities. Well, that may be true. For example, Joseph A. Hill at WT, was not WT when he started as president in 1918-
- Randy Ray: He was the first one?

Dr. Walter Wendler: No second. Cousins was first, and he replaced Cousins and came from a very... Had a lot of different life experiences, but came here to teach history. A few years, I can't tell you exactly how many years after we started as a faculty member, Cousins retired or resigned. I don't know the circumstance of that. Not important, but Hill was there at the door and he was appointed by the board to take over and lead WT. Lead as he did, through the end of the greatest war at the time and a depression and then the great war. As I think about it through the birth pains of a Social Revolution, even though he left in '48, in my mind that was the beginning of the sixties. It's only 12 years from the sixties, right? He had a range of experience that's nearly remarkable. Through all that was a tremendous leader in so many ways. I'm sorry Randy, you asked me about these articles. That's what we're writing about. We're writing about how regional universities impact the state...

Randy Ray: State in the region. Yeah.

Dr. Walter Wendler: In the region. They make a contribution. It's not just the campuses that have stadiums that seat a 100,000 people, important though they may be. We're important too.

Randy Ray: I agree with you in how this university has impacted the region. We say that West Texas A&M is the heart and the soul of the Texas Panhandle. But I want to talk about the heart and the soul of West Texas A&M University today. That is the library. Don't you think the library is the heart and the soul of the campus?

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yeah, I really do. I'm not just saying that because there's two librarians here. They've actually got me out numbered, I do believe that, actually. It used to be about books. Now, maybe it's more about internet access, but it's still about things of learning. I mean it's a-

Randy Ray: Things of learning. Yeah.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yeah. The intellectual resources that help people become something that they want to be, that they're not. Whether it's a teacher or a chemist or an architect in my case, or a communications' person in yours. The library is the storehouse of those tools. With internet access things have changed a little bit but the libraries are changing. That doesn't change the fact, that I still consider them to be. I've referred to them... I've been writing these pieces that we just talked about. I've got almost 600 of them on my website. Now I've been writing them since 2007. One of the first ones I wrote was on the power of the library. In this case, it was a-

Randy Ray: Well, you and I talked about it yesterday, how much the both of us, just like the library. I just liked the feeling of a library. [crosstalk 00:05:52] I could spend all day in a library.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I can still smell the library at Berkeley. There was oiled wood floors. I can hear people, kind of creaking across the floor, to get from the card catalog, which nobody even knows what it is anymore, to the stacks. I could feel that and hear it and smell it. It's so much part of my experience. I spent a pretty good bit of time in the library, much less now. I think I mentioned to you is there's somebody recently, Tom Friedman's book on the world is flat, which came out in about 2004 or 5. Something like that, maybe three, he bragged that he, it was in a way to be illustrative. He wrote the whole book, very heavily referenced and never went in a library.

Dr. Walter Wendler: He did it all on the internet. He also talks about the fact that the whole time that he traveled while he was writing that book, he never made a reservation by seeing someone in person or calling on the phone. He did it all on the internet, whether that's true in exaggeration, I don't know. By the way, this is almost 20 years ago and that things weren't as powerful and as robust as they are today. We'll hear from the librarians about what they think about this, there is access to so much insight on the internet. The question, is, for me, what does the library become because of this? How does it change? And I see some things going on over there that make me believe that our library is resilient and reflective of changing times.

Randy Ray: I agree. We're going to take a break. And when we come back, I want to talk to a couple of ladies that can answer a lot of our questions. What direction the library is going. We'll be back in 60 seconds...

Speaker 3: [Ad Read1 00:07:46-00:08:16] West Texas A&M University is proud to call the Texas Panhandle home, and providing the top 26 counties with opportunity and qualified graduates as 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, to reach their full potential. 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.eu.

Speaker 4: [Ad Read2 00:08:17-00:08:46] 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. Facilities, rich and 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: Well welcome back to reflections from WT. Dr. Wendler and I mentioned how we believe that the heart of the campus is the library, and we have a couple of guests with us today that help it beat. So I want to welcome Shawna Witthar and Sidnye Johnson. Ladies, good morning. I want to get to something that's really exciting that we want to talk about in just a little bit, but first I want to talk to both of you about something that we talked about, what is a library to a

campus these days? Is it still about books? Is it a place where people study?
What is it?

Shawna Kennedy-...: Yeah, I'd say it's both... One thing about libraries is that libraries know change, not only what we see as basically, once the internet took off, it's just another format. If you think back through time and you look at libraries, they adapt to the formats. Now, especially we're dealing in multiple formats, we have to basically recognize that some students still like print, some prefer electronic-

Randy Ray: You could say a library is just an information hub, and we can get information from a lot of different ways.

Shawna Kennedy-...: Well, and I think it's wonderful here on our campus that we are centrally located. It's perfect too.

Randy Ray: Do you still find students go there for reasons other than books? I mean, and internet, do they go there just to study or they go there to socialize?

Shawna Kennedy-...: Yes. Well pre-COVID. Yes. But yes, we really... I'd say in the last several years trying to create more group spaces because they want to work in groups as we start to kind of open back up again. And I mean, they come in now and use study rooms, but it's generally, one person, individual study room, but we're looking at our space knowing that the fall, we'll be opening back up a lot more, allowing more group work. We're looking at other places that we can create these group study spaces, but I'd say the first floor of the library pre-COVID was a very busy place. You know, we have a coffee shop and we had lots of events there in our atrium area. We have an art gallery, so a lot going on.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I love it over there. Sidnye, I'm going to ask you, have you always wanted to be a librarian?

Sidnye Johnson: Yes, I would say so. I started working in a library when I was 14. I thought for a while I might be a teacher, but my love is books, and helping people find things.

Randy Ray: Do you still like holding a book? I mean, the reason I ask that is I find myself reading more and more on my Kindle and my iPad these days, but there's still, to me something special about holding a book.

Sidnye Johnson: I would agree. I read a lot on a Kindle also, but yes, there's a special something about a book.

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler. You're a reader. This is not our curve ball. Do you have a favorite book?

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yeah. I have a couple of favorite books... This one is going to seem self-serving, but I have just been taken recently with a text of speeches by Joseph Hill that I've been reviewing called One Man's Faith. The reason I like it, is it integrates all

aspects of this man's life into the leadership of the university. I'm not a kid, but I still have a lot to learn by looking at what other university leaders say, and have done and so on and so forth. So this one right now is very powerful to me, because I'm trying to... I read the Bible every day, every day for 30 minutes or so in the morning-

Randy Ray: Which Dr. Hill did too.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Yeah. He was very committed. That's true. That's just me. That's what I do, it's how I start every day. I mean, I get up at 4:00 AM that's the, well, the first thing I do is take a shower, but I'm not going to get it. [crosstalk 00:13:11]-

Randy Ray: I recognize one, four o'clock in the day and that's not the one.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I know. That is currently one of my favorite. I'm reading it over and over again. Another one that I've read over and over again, I probably read it 10 times is a CS Lewis's Mere Christianity. It has a very strong impact on me and my thinking about my faith life and so on. There's a lot of books. I like Ron Chernow and pretty much anything he writes. I'm just been... I do like to read, I enjoy, I enjoy reading.

Randy Ray: I teach an introduction to mass communication, media communication class, and that's one of the things I have my students do is write an essay on their favorite book. I'm amazed. I had some of them struggle with that. Some of them struggled because they love so many, and other ones struggled because they've barely read in their lifetime. It's interesting. So we have.. You guys have some exciting news over there at the library, and I was really thrilled to hear this for a number of reasons. Tell me about the big announcement.

Shawna Kennedy-...: Yes. Quite an announcement. Last Thursday, we announced a gift of \$2.8 million to the Texas Poet's Corner at Cornette Library. That was the gift of Dr. Jenny Lind Porter Scott, and her husband, Lawrence Scott. It was an estate gift. I think we're still trying to process it as, like I said, quite a gift, a lot of things we're going to be able to do in the Poet's Corner.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I want to say something about this gift, because I think it highlights to me. What's important about our library here at WT. That is that, this will amplify the importance of one aspect of our special collections. I really do believe that special collections are the future to these smaller libraries. We can't be everything to everybody. We need digital access to many, many things, but there are some things which... They may be available digitally, but we really want to have them online. These are collections that have some meaning, and embodies some aspect of WT through a particular author or genre of literature or study or something.

Dr. Walter Wendler: I'm really looking forward to a day 20 or 30 years from now. I'll be dead, but somebody... I'm still looking forward to the day when there's, a whole series of

special collections that really helped define WT through its history and also what its future might be. I think this Jenny Lind Porter Scott gift, is that kind of gift. I just think it's remarkable.

Randy Ray: So in addition to some funding, she left part of her collection. Right. That was kind of interesting to tell us about her collection.

Shawna Kennedy-....: Well, she started giving to us in about 2000. The Poet's Corner itself was dedicated in 2003. I say, started giving to us. That's when a lot of the books came and those what three years, probably between 2000-2003. Over the years I would get phone calls and she'd basically say, I've got something coming your way. This gift is going to make it possible for us to continue to purchase for the collection. She was doing the purchasing, prior. She passed away actually in June of last year.

Randy Ray: And the both of you knew her personally, tell us a little bit about her? She taught on campus for a number of years, didn't she? Two years-

Shawna Kennedy-....: Two years, 1959 to 1961. When you think about two years, did two years have that kind of impact as far as what she did. It was when we... After conversations with her and looking through some of her papers and things, it was kindness. It was kindness of a former president, James P. Cornette and his wife. She was very close to her mother. Her mother lived here with her. She was single, young woman at the time. Mother lived, her mother passed away suddenly, and the Cornette's kind of took her in and supported her. It was that kindness. I think that all these years later, so you never know the difference you make.

Randy Ray: She was a poet Laureate of Texas. So what is it? I don't even know what that means.

Shawna Kennedy-....: Generally it's once a year, but it's up to the governor. It's a... Governor appoints a poet Laureate and she was actually poet Laureate twice. I don't know that it's necessarily every year. Like I said, it's up to the governor, but most times it is.

Randy Ray: I was looking at some of the collection that she gave. So, so cool. Like the first edition of The Scarlet Letter, stuff like that. A first edition of Emily Dickinson's poems [inaudible 00:18:06] second series, a collection of poems by Francis Scott Key. Just some really interesting old books that we're really privileged to have in our collection now.

Shawna Kennedy-....: Yes. And art too. She gave us quite a bit of art, the Poet's Corner, actually the furnishings, the art, all the books, all are donations over the years, since, like I said, about 2000 from Jenny Lind Porter.

Randy Ray: So the gift from her estate is also going to endow some professorships?

Shawna Kennedy-....: Yes.

Randy Ray: For our listeners that don't know what does an endowed professorship mean? Dr. Wendler?

Dr. Walter Wendler: Well at WT, and this is typical at most state institutions. It doesn't provide the funding for a state position. We provide that out of our budgets. What the professorship does is create an endowment. Basically, I'll say a savings account. It's not quite a savings account because the moneys are invested. Then the earnings off of that corpus that's in this investment are then dedicated to the professor who holds the endowed position and they are able to use those earnings to support their study or students, or buy a computer, anything that contributes to their academic and intellectual life to benefit students.

Dr. Walter Wendler: This is my wording on what it is, is a legitimate expense for those professors. The point is its green money. It's money that doesn't come with state attachment to it. We have some requirements and so on, but they're very modest. Usually it's a very open.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I was excited about the three that got chosen; Dr. Pat Tyree, which I really don't know, but a couple of other ones I really know, well, Dr. Marty Coleman and Dr. Mary Liz Brooks. Dr. Coleman and I taught a class together a few years ago, and then Dr. Brooks and I have taught a class together too. I really think a lot of them, and I was really excited to see those three chosen.

Dr. Walter Wendler: Let me say, I'm talking more than I should. Let me just add one thing to this that is really important to me. I'm fairly pragmatic. I get it. I know that I'm a person that wants to get things done, like see progress and so on and so forth. In some ways maybe believe, maybe I'm drawn to disciplines... I'm an architect, engineering and kind of practice disciplines. One of the things about this gift that is so critically important to the whole organization is we neglect or forget Sybil B. Harrington College of Fine Arts, at our peril. It is an incredibly important part, but it's not, we say about our college of ag. and the food animal industry that it supports. We produce 30% of the beef that's consumed in America. We produce nearly a 100% of the humanities. If I may, that are consumed in the Texas Panhandle. We never need to forget that.

Dr. Walter Wendler: We need to always be mindful of fact that this is a core, the critical thinking and those aspects of what you learn in history and English and philosophy and communications. Those things are critical to the rest of the campus and anybody that doesn't think so, is ignorant.

Randy Ray: No, I totally agree. I want to say big kudos to our Dean, Dr. Jessica Mallard. Great job.

Dr. Walter Wendler: To the library and the staff, Sean and Jenny, they worked for years on building this thing since 2000. You had no idea what culminated in this. In some ways it says the law of sowing and reaping at work, you go to work every day and you

do a little bit and wonder, you turn around a few decades later and something has happened.

Dr. Walter Wendler: That's bigger than you ever imagined it. You know, it's like a bump of crop. We use, thoughtfulness and kindness, a commitment to progress, aspirational progress for the students and so on and so forth and boom, all of a sudden, something like this happens. I don't know how big, and in some ways I shouldn't even say this, but I'm going to say it. I don't know how big this gift is compared to other gifts to libraries in the state of Texas. But my guess is it's a pretty significant gift for this year. That's an empirical question. We could answer it. As a matter of fact, we probably ought to know, just give me a bragging point.

Randy Ray: Without doubt, it's going to make a big difference.

Dr. Walter Wendler: It is going to make a huge difference in the lives of our students. It's like being a teacher, if you don't want to do that, you're in the wrong place. We are all in the wrong line of work. Yeah.

Randy Ray: All right, [inaudible 00:22:51], ready? I traditionally throw a curve ball and this is my curve ball today. I don't think I've asked this one before, but if I did, I'm going to ask it again-

Dr. Walter Wendler: I'll act like it's new.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I'm going to ask you everyone. Ladies, we'll start with you. What is your favorite sound?... I hear silence right now and that's not one of the favorite sounds. I'm hoping that we're after him. Favorite sound. I'll give you a minute to think about it. I was thinking about when I was going to ask you guys-

Dr. Walter Wendler: What's yours? Let me ask you that. Smart Guy.

Randy Ray: I'd say it's my kids and my new grandson. Laughter... I love hearing their laughter and it usually involves me wearing a swimsuit I think, [crosstalk 00:23:44] I liked hearing their laughter. So what's your favorite sound? Do you have one?

Dr. Walter Wendler: I would say it's the voice of Mary at [crosstalk 00:23:53] Yeah. It just, it's very comforting to me to hear her voice. You know, some days I hear so much stuff all day, a lot of noise. I create some of it. I go home and there's a softness and a sort of settledness in Mary's, now some days it's not always that way, but by and large, it is a very restful and peaceful sound man. I also really like the crack of a fast pitch on a wooden bat. I'm you know, I just, that's a whole different thing, but anyway, there you go.

Shawna Kennedy-...: I would say the violin. Yeah, I don't think everybody would say this about... Enjoying their children, playing music because you know, we go through all those periods early on, but yeah, both of my children were violin players.

Randy Ray: Sidnye?

Sidnye Johnson: I'm not trying to copy you, but I would also say laughter. Yeah, I think just the sound of people being happy and sometimes it's... Instantaneous laughter, just unexpected.

Randy Ray: I bet there was a sound that we'd all agree that we do love and that's the sound of students across campus. I sometimes I will leave my office and a walkout across campus and we have a beautiful campus and just hearing the students enjoying being in a learning place. I like that. I really enjoy that.

Dr. Walter Wendler: By the way, with Sidnye's observation, I would have said laughter also, I didn't want to be a copy cat, but I do enjoy hearing people laugh. Especially after I tell a joke, [crosstalk 00:25:39] when there's dead silence. That's the sound that scares me.

Randy Ray: All right. Well thank you for joining us for this edition of reflections from WT, the heart and soul of the Texas Panhandle. We are looking forward to you joining us again. Next time. We'll see you then...