

Reflections from WT with Amberly Hildebrandt

- Randy Ray: Welcome to Reflections from WT, the heart and the soul of Texas Panhandle. I'm Randy Ray. I am director of broadcast engineering here on the WT campus, and I'm joined by number 11, the 11th president of West Texas A&M University, Dr. Walter Wendler.
- Dr. Wendler: Hey, Randy. How are you this morning?
- Randy Ray: Well, the world has changed a little bit since we last spoke.
- Dr. Wendler: Yeah, it has. It has. A lot of stuff going on.
- Randy Ray: A lot of changes.
- Dr. Wendler: Yes, sir.
- Randy Ray: You and I were talking before, and I'm just going to say it, I think we're tired of hearing about COVID-19. I know I'm tired of thinking about it, I'm tired of talking about it, but I do want to talk a little bit about WT's response to COVID-19. We've done a lot of things to get our students through this strange time, and I like to talk a little bit about those. One of the things I heard about yesterday, which I thought was really cool, is our drive-in Wi-Fi.
- Dr. Wendler: Right. Right. We have three parking lots on campus, and we've had them for, gosh, two or three weeks now. I can't remember when we started. A lot of places are doing it now, you read in the national news, but we were early on. We put Wi-Fi access in those parking lots. I was thinking it'd like kind of a drive-in movie. You could bring your laptop or your cellphone, and on high-speed internet, high-speed Wi-Fi, watch or participate in class, do whatever you needed to do. It turns out that for some of our rural residents, yeah, it's a good thing, because some of the bandwidth out in the, you know, when you get a little further away from Canyon, Amarillo, sometimes, the bandwidth is a little bit less.
- Randy Ray: Yeah, I haven't thought about that.
- Dr. Wendler: So I think it's a good thing. It's just a way to try to be friendly. I was kind of hoping that there'd be big crowds of people, there's been some, but it hasn't been huge crowds, and that some kids would be entrepreneurial and set up a soda stand and sell popcorn so it would be like a drive-in movie, but that never materialized.
- Randy Ray: I know you would agree with me, but a big shout out to James Webb and his team. Those guys do ... They're the hardest-working people on campus, especially right now.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, right now, because there's been so many adjustments to internet access, and everybody going to Zoom and Teams and WebEx and all these things. I've become capable on all those three pieces of software that I've hardly used prior to. They're pretty simple, and faculty have gotten used to it. I think one of the dangers is people think if you can get a little bit of a handle on that technology, it makes you a good online teacher. It doesn't necessarily. Here's what I know, and somebody could write a dissertation on this, a PhD dissertation, that effective teaching on campus by an individual will also, that same person will yield effective teaching online. Good teaching is good teaching, and it's more than just the vehicles that you use to transmit the voice and all that sort of stuff.

Randy Ray: Yeah. You know, I'll be honest with you. I pushed back on online teaching because what I teach, production classes and that kind of thing, I didn't feel like would acclimate very well to online teaching, but I was forced to do it. Honestly, I've kind of enjoyed it a little bit. It's a new challenge, and it made me think about my teaching chops a little bit.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. You just said it, teaching chops, or what we're all about. We're teaching university. We really want to make sure students get a good classroom or studio or laboratory or theater experience, whatever kind of learning experience it is, and we want that. I just read about a music program today. I forget where it was, but they are breaking new ground in teaching music online, which is one of my pet things. I'd like to see WT in the future attack online teaching and learning in fields where it's thought to be very difficult. I'm convinced, and I'm no expert, so I can say this, that you could teach 80% of thoracic surgery online. That doesn't mean that that 80% is more important than the 20% you get face-to-face or face-to-chest.

The fact of the matter is, though, if you think about it, and think about the cognition and all for surgery, there's a lot of that stuff you could teach online. It can never replace the hands-on part of it, but you could teach a lot online. In fact, in surgical theaters, that's what people used to do, watch from a distance, which is basically what online is, and you sit around and watch a cadaver get taken apart. You can do a lot of that. Still, eventually, you've got to hold somebody's heart in your hand.

Randy Ray: So, this COVID-19 mess, not only is it going to change teaching. How do you think it will change society as a whole?

Dr. Wendler: Well, I think it's going to open up doors for learning opportunity for working parents who may have started school and never finished, or maybe they were in a position where if they had an additional degree, it would provide them advancement within the company, for example, as a primary way to get ahead. I think as people recognize that this can work, that it will open up huge, just big doors of opportunity for people that were otherwise unable to attend a university and come here on campus to do the things that we do. It's never going to do away with the importance of the campus activity. It's a little bit like the surgery. 20%. I would like to see all of our programs hybridized where no

matter what you do online, you may come in the summer for a couple of weeks. It would be a hardship for some families, but what you value, you'll work for and make a commitment to.

Randy Ray: Yeah. As an architect, I'm going to ask you this. I was talking to a local contractor yesterday. Do you think that through this COVID-19 thing society is going to realize that working at home is more viable, more possible, and do you think, as an architect, we will see homes start to have a specific workspace, maybe?

Dr. Wendler: It's quite possible. I mean, that's an interesting concept, and over the last years with internet access, that more and more is becoming a case. It is one of the things that's nice for me, and I'm blessed beyond measure, actually: I have a study in my house that's my study. I work in there, and it's got everything I need to work in there. I really can be fairly effective from home. I miss the human interaction and the banter back and forth about ideas and concepts that you can't necessarily put on an agenda, but some of that can happen online, too. But I think everything's about hybridization. I really think that that is the future of education.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Yeah. So a business just, instead of having all these offices, it just has a conference room, and maybe once a week, workers come in to have the staff meeting or whatever. Then they go back to their home offices to work.

Dr. Wendler: It's possible.

Randy Ray: Maybe. Maybe.

Dr. Wendler: It's possible. Brave new world, I guess.

Randy Ray: Before the break, I want to talk to you a little bit about you've done something really amazing here. I want to talk about the application fees that have been waived.

Dr. Wendler: Yes, we have. This is in response to COVID-19, really, to allow people ... This is one of my commitments to West Texas when I came here, and that was to make sure we were responsive to local needs. COVID-19 I think is begging questions from traditionally-aged college students, 18-year-olds. You know, they're not really the preponderance of college students anymore, so now our average age is 28 at WT, but those that have come in straight out of high school, I think appealing to those students locally is very important right now because some families may say, "You know, given all this stuff, we'd really like you to stay close to home." Well, this is what drove the no-charge application fee, to give people a chance to seriously look at WT. Maybe a student from Pampa was going to go to, I'll say University of Houston. I'll just pick that out. The parents might say, "You know, we think that'd be a great thing, but maybe I'll try WT for a year, see what happens."

I know what'll happen. I know exactly what's going to happen. They'll come here for a year, and they're not going to want to leave, just like you did. I mean, that's just the way the world works, because this is an intellectually challenging environment, the people work hard, they care about students and so on and so forth, so I want to encourage local engagement with the university. That's why I went out and visited all these high schools.

Randy Ray: How many?

Dr. Wendler: 132.

Randy Ray: Wow.

Dr. Wendler: Every high school north of Klondike, Texas, except one, Friendship High School. They didn't have room to schedule me to go in there, so I couldn't go there.

Randy Ray: That's a lot of visiting.

Dr. Wendler: It's a lot of visiting and a lot of schools, but I feel like the message has been put out. I talked, of course, a lot about money and trying to reduce costs and go to community college first instead of borrowing for the first two years. That's a message. Now the state comptroller's office is putting out that message. We've been putting that out for three years. We're serious about it, and we weren't afraid of it.

Randy Ray: So this program's called the Buff Promise, is that right?

Dr. Wendler: That's another program. The Buff Promise is ... That's an arrangement whereby we used to, if a family's adjusted gross income adjusted by the Pell application process and the FASFA forms that people fill out to get financial aid, they've come up with an adjusted gross income for each family, and what the family should be able to spend for a college education. That sounds like Big Brother stuff and so on and so forth, but it's a legitimate effort to try to figure out who should get Pell grants and student loans or student grants. Okay. The Buff Promise used to allow up to \$40,000 in adjusted gross income. We doubled that. It's now \$80,000, so if your family income is less than \$80,000, and that's after you fill out all these forms and everything, if it's less than \$80,000, we pick up the tuition and fees, so you go to school and you don't have to pay any tuition and fees, and that includes a lot of people.

As a matter of fact, Kel Seliger, he put out a very nice tweet about it. It said he thought it was good for the working families. That again was driven as a response to ... We've been talking about it for a while, but COVID-19 pushed it over the edge because there's a lot of people that are worried about their income potential in the next couple of years, and it's legitimate. It's absolutely legitimate, so I'm excited about it. I think it's going to present an opportunity, again, for students to stay close to their families in the Texas Panhandle. I'm not

trying to limit somebody's experience. On the contrary, I'm a guy that's bounced all over. I've been to school on four coasts, the East Coast, the Gulf Coast, the West Coast, and then the banks of the Mississippi River. I mean, I've been to four different locations, and that's been a good thing, but the fact of the matter is there's a lot of opportunity right here. This is a wide world right here at WT.

Randy Ray: I agree with you. We're going to take a break, and when we come back from our break, we're going to talk to a student that's local. We're going to talk to her about how important localism is. She's a former student of mine, and a current staff member of Dr. Wendler's. We'll be back in 60 seconds.

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 in technology as well as WT history. It's our alumni and donors that make the big difference and set us apart from other universities. With your support, WT will continue to award scholarships to deserving students and strengthen our programs, which means a better campus, more in-depth education, and a lasting cultural and economic impact on our region. Now is the time to strengthen connections, support students, and open doors for tomorrow's leaders. Share your experience. Share your heritage. Share your pride.

Welcome back to Reflections from WT, the heart and soul of the Texas Panhandle. Dr. Wendler and I are talking to a young lady that we're both very fond of. We're talking to Amberly Hildebrandt. Amberly, I'm glad you're here.

Amberly Hildebrandt: I'm so glad to be here. I'm excited.

Randy Ray: So, you were a student in some of my classes, and you graduated from WT what year?

Amberly Hildebrandt: 2017.

Randy Ray: And what was your degree in?

Amberly Hildebrandt: Mass communication, broadcasting, and electronic media.

Randy Ray: All right. You actually got to use that degree for a good while, and you're really still using it, so after you graduated, what did you do?

Amberly Hildebrandt: Actually, before I graduated, I got hired as the weekend reporter at Channel 4 in Amarillo, and so I did that for a few months, weekend reporter, and then I got promoted to be the Studio 4 associate producer and reporter and fill-in host, so then I did that for about two and a half years.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Pretty impressive. How long have you worked for Dr. Wendler now?

Amberly Hildebrandt: Since October, so I guess six, seven months?

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. Seems like six or seven years.

Amberly Hildebrandt: Yeah.

Dr. Wendler: To her, probably.

Randy Ray: So why the change?

Amberly Hildebrandt: Well, when I got out into the business, I loved telling stories and I loved meeting people, but I always knew I wanted to go back to somewhere in higher education, whether that was a teaching capacity or what I'm doing now, and so I applied to grad school at Stephen F. Austin so I could do it online, an entire mass communication degree. Got accepted, did that. My graduation was in December of 2019, and my news contract was up in October of 2019, so it was kind of the same time, I was like, "Okay, well, I'm getting my master's. I need to figure out if I want to stay in the news or move on," and so then, after talking with my bosses there and then just applying here at WT, I decided that this was a good move.

Randy Ray: Yeah. How's it going so far?

Amberly Hildebrandt: It's great. It was a lot at first, the first-

Randy Ray: Is he a slave driver?

Amberly Hildebrandt: No. He's really awesome. Thankfully, he doesn't call me before 8:00 because he knows I am not an early riser.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Well, I'm with you. I think it has to do with maybe our media, mass communication background or something. I don't know. So Amberly, we talked a lot this morning earlier about how important localism is and staying local, and WT being local. Talk a little bit about that. You graduated high school in Amarillo, right?

Amberly Hildebrandt: Yes, sir. I graduated from Randall-

Randy Ray: Why did you go to WT?

Amberly Hildebrandt: Well, I knew it was a good school, and I had looked into the mass communication program, and so I knew that that was a good program, and then I actually came here on a cheerleading scholarship, so that got me here in my freshman year. I lived and breathed cheerleading, and I thought that that's all that I was. Then actually getting here, starting my mass comm classes and hearing, "You need to dig in," I realized I could be more than just a cheerleader.

Randy Ray: And who did you hear that from?

Amberly Hildebrandt: From you, in my KWTS practicum.

Randy Ray: Yeah, okay.

Amberly Hildebrandt: I cheered my freshman year, and then I was done. I'm like, "I'm over this. I've outgrown it. I need to move on," and so then I started joining organizations on campus, and I met all different people. I never wanted to go back to that high school me.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I grew up in Pampa, and I can remember, I didn't know what I was going to do when I was a senior in college. Didn't even think about going to college. When I was a senior in high school. Didn't think about going to college, so I thought, "Well, I guess I'll just go to college." People started talking about, "Where are you going to go?" "Well, I know that I don't want to go to WT. It's too close to home." Anyway, I waited around too long, ended up having to go to WT, and boy, it was the perfect fit for me. And it didn't feel local. Once I got here, I'm on my own. It felt completely separate from Pampa. This was a good fit for me. Would you agree it was for you, too?

Amberly Hildebrandt: I agree. I mean, you come here, and you know that people you graduated with are coming here, but I rarely ever saw them, especially if they're not in your major. You end up meeting so many different people with so many different backgrounds, and you just immerse yourself with new friends.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I tell people that I feel like WT is just an oasis in the Texas Panhandle. It's a place to come and feel comfortable, but still, it's nice to be a little bit close to home when you need to be.

Amberly Hildebrandt: And I think one thing that makes a big difference here is you're not just a number. Your professors know your name, they know who you are. You go with them for four years, and I'll never forget Dr. Hansen telling me the first time she saw me on TV. I'm like, "Oh." Like, you do watch, and you do realize, "Hey, that's my student." You know?

Randy Ray: Yeah. What's your favorite thing about WT?

Amberly Hildebrandt: I would say the family atmosphere, honestly. It doesn't matter who you see, they're going to say hi to you in the hallway. That happens to me now, and that's what I miss with all of this going on is I don't see the students walking around campus, I don't get to stop and say hi, I don't see students studying in the hallway or literally running to their 8:00 AM when I'm walking to work.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Dr. Wendler, I want to ask you, what is it like having a former student, a young lady that's from the area, work for you? How's that working out?

Dr. Wendler: Well, I don't know if this is a function of Amberly being a WT graduate or not, I'd like to think some of it is, but she is a very resourceful and hardworking, and I never ask her a question that she doesn't find the answer to. It's been remarkable for me, and some of that is this sort of West Texas grit. Somebody asks you to do something, you do your best and try to get it done. You don't wiggle around and say ... We've got people, not many, thankfully, but we have people on campus that wiggle around and try to get out of doing this or doing that or the other thing, but Amberly digs in. I think she learned that here in the mass comm program, I think she brought it with her from New Mexico, and it continued to grow and breathe when she was at Randall High, and she brought it in here as a student, and now, she's bringing it into the workplace. It doesn't get too much better than that, actually. You've heard the expression "local boy makes good"?

Randy Ray: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Wendler: Local girl makes good. It's a tremendous, just tremendous set of knowledge and insight and energy are all, without question, they're impeccable. It's a joy to work with her every day. Some of that's WT. Some of its people like you, and I'm not blowing smoke at you guys because you're both sitting here. It's the result of being here. I said last week, "If you're from here and thinking about school," basically the same thing you said, "don't dismiss it. You'll miss it," and there is something very good about being right here in terms of cost, in terms of positive familiarity. I'm not talking about living in a box. I'm from New York, and I've seen more people in New York live in boxes. I knew people that never went off Manhattan, for goodness sakes. Never owned a car. They'd rent a car once a year to drive up to Vermont, and that was their vacation. It's fine, but don't act like you've seen the world. You've seen Manhattan, which is a very busy, energetic chunk of the world, but it's like going to Nashville, like you did. You see part of the music world, but that ain't all of it.

Anyway, all this to say it's great having Amberly. I think businesses and entrepreneurs and industry here in the Texas Panhandle could use a whole bunch of people just like Amberly, and it would make our business environment up here even stronger.

Randy Ray: I agree with you. I need to ask you two, with COVID-19 going on, there's not a lot of people on campus. Is it weird over in Old Main?

Amberly Hildebrandt: It's bizarre, actually. I kind of freaked out walking. I'm like, "Where is everyone?" Like, "What day is it?"

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. It is weird. It's different.

Randy Ray: All right. Amberly, every one of our podcast, I throw Dr. Wendler and our guest what I call a curveball, when I ask you a kind of weird question. This one's not too tough, though, but I'm interested. With all of our at-home time, one of the

things that my wife and I, we've been doing a lot of binging on TV. What have you guys been binging? What have you been watching on TV?

Amberly Hildebrandt: This is an easy question for me, because I'm obsessed with All American right now.

Randy Ray: I don't even know what that is.

Amberly Hildebrandt: It's on the CW, but Netflix has the first two seasons on it. This football player from like, Crenshaw in California, he gets the opportunity to go to Beverly High. That's a very different dynamic high school, and he's the football star. There's a lot of trials and tribulations in it, but I really like it.

Randy Ray: All American.

Amberly Hildebrandt: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler.

Dr. Wendler: That sounds a little more interesting than what I'm doing. I don't know if it's appropriate to name a commercial station here, but we spend a lot of time watching Hallmark. Hallmark movies [crosstalk 00:21:51]

Randy Ray: I'm really disappointed in you.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah, I know. I know.

Randy Ray: I'm going to have to take your man card away from you.

Dr. Wendler: Anyway, in some ways, I like it because it makes me feel smart. I know what's going to happen at the end of every movie.

Randy Ray: Well, that's true.

Dr. Wendler: That's the nice part. It's very predictable.

Randy Ray: Yeah. That's true.

Dr. Wendler: I think, "Man, I'm really smart." My wife told me the other day, Mary said, "You know, you could have written these movies," because I always tell her what's going to happen next. I said, "I've seen so many of them, I feel like I have written them." But anyway, it is funny. It's funny. I do, I watch a little bit of TV almost every night. I work all day. I'm working just as hard at home. In some ways harder, actually.

Randy Ray: Yeah, I understand that.

Dr. Wendler: Because I feel like I don't want to ... We were talking earlier, "What's going to happen after this?", and your very positive view is people can come back very anxious to be at work and glad to be at work and energized. My concern is they may get used to a different pace when they're working at home, and they may not be as energetic. We'll see who's right. I know in the end, these are west Texans up here. They're going to get the job done.

Randy Ray: They have a good work ethic.

Dr. Wendler: Yep, they do.

Randy Ray: Boy, I'm missing the students. I'm ready to get back in the groove, and I'm praying it's not going to be long. I don't think it'll be. I think we just stay the course; the end will be here before you know it.

Dr. Wendler: I think so. In a year from now, we'll hardly remember it. Well, we'll remember it, but-

Randy Ray: I agree with you, but I do think there are some changes in society that we're going to learn from this, and hopefully, it'll be positive. Well, thank you all for joining us for Reflections from WT, the heart and soul of the Texas Panhandle. We're looking forward to talking to you again next time. See you then.