

Reflections from WT- Khashari Wilson

- Randy Ray: Welcome to episode 10 of Reflections from WT, the Heart and Soul of the Texas Panhandle. My name is Randy Ray. I'm the director of broadcast engineering on the campus of West Texas A&M and I'm joined today by the 11th president of West Texas A&M University, Dr. Walter Wendler. Good morning.
- Dr. Wendler: Good morning, Randy. It's good to see you. Can't think of a place that I'd rather be than sitting in this studio with you and Khash.
- Randy Ray: Chatting with me, I feel the same way.
- Dr. Wendler: Yes. Yes, sir.
- Randy Ray: Well, let me start out by thanking you for something that happened a couple weeks ago. You awarded the Presidential Order of the Silver Buffalo to an organization that I advise the National Broadcasting Society. On behalf of all of my students and myself, thank you. That's a big honor.
- Dr. Wendler: Well, I appreciate it, Randy. It's because of the good work you do. One of the things that I like about the work that happens over here is it really is a combination of theory and practice. To me, that is the essence of West Texas A&M University. We understand theory. We work hard to give global perspectives to the people in our charge, our students, but hopefully we also teach them how to work. We teach them the vitality of work. I don't care whether they're writers or engineers or nurses, communicators. I don't care what they are, but we try to integrate the theory of the disciplines that they study and encourage them to work hard at them. I just think that's an invaluable characteristic of West Texas A&M University. For me it comes out of the panhandle, but that's a long way of saying you guys are emblematic of, I think, of what's one of the great attributes of West Texas A&M University.
- Randy Ray: Well, thank you. I was going to ask you later on, but I'm going to go ahead and ask you now since you brought that up. I think that one of the strengths of a regional institution, maybe over a bigger institution, a D1 school, is that we get to do more hands-on things. We get to do more things outside of the classroom. I know that I spend a lot of time with my students outside the classroom and I think that's one of the strengths of WT.
- Dr. Wendler: Well, I would agree with you. I think major universities can do it too, but sometimes they get caught up in being a major university. One of the things about regional institutions, and I don't have a lot of experience. This is really the first regional institution I've ever worked at. I've always been at national research universities, basically D1 intuitions. There is something about the regional institutions, they tend to draw more people from the geographic region they serve. I think that's perfectly appropriate. A lot of those students come and they want skills, they want to integrate their work life and their study life. They

want those things to go together. I think we have a very good shot at it here at a regional institution that sometimes a major urban institution or an international university may lose touch with. But, we are serving the people of the Texas Panhandle, and I think their needs and desires and aspirations are basic to a lot of people. You've heard me say this before, if we serve them well, we're going to serve people from a lot of different regions well. Even for metropolitan regions and suburb regions of the nations, because what we're trying to do is serve people where they are. That is critical to an education. We tend to ... Recently especially in the last 30 or 40 years to separate a university education from the place that it's located. It's a very very significant error in judgment to do that. What we need to do is in a sense grow where we're planted, and we're planted right here. These people that we're serving in west Texas by and large, nothing is ever 100%, but by and large they want to learn to work. They already know how to work, but they want to learn to work more specifically. They want to learn to work to be a good teacher, or a good nurse, a good engineer. There's some kind of pragmatism that comes out of the ground up here in the panhandle, so

Randy Ray: You talked about serving our region. Was it a year and a half ago or two years ago that you visited all of the schools in Region 16? When was that? Was that-

Dr. Wendler: It's actually ... We completed it two years ago.

Randy Ray: Two years ago.

Dr. Wendler: I'll tell you the last school we visited was Shamrock, and that was two years ago next week ...

Randy Ray: Two years ago.

Dr. Wendler: We finished it

Randy Ray: Wow, it don't seem that long ago.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah.

Randy Ray: But, you're getting ready to do another push to Region 17 this time.

Dr. Wendler: We are. We're in the process of contacting all of the high schools in Region 17. There are 70, and it stretches fairly far south. It's a longer toss of the stones so to speak. We have to go a greater distance. But, there's a lot of people in smaller communities in that part of Texas who may be overlooked. I would not say anybody intentionally overlooks them, it's just that the massive students are the metropolitan areas like Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex. It's real easy to jump into the Metroplex and step over the small communities between here and the metroplex. But, you've heard me say this, I'll say it again. There are people with important aspirations in these small communities that dot the Texas Panhandle

and the high plains of Texas. There's no question about it. I want to attended to them.

Dr. Wendler: I've told the story before, but Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander in WWII, they relieved the world of Nazism by storming the beaches at Normandy. He led that attack, and then became president at Columbia University, and then became president of the United States. Eisenhower was from Abilene, Kansas, not Abilene, Texas, Abilene, Kansas, a town of 3,000. He did all that from a small community. His brother also did all right and became the president of Johns Hopkins University. They were simultaneous ...

Randy Ray: From a small town.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah and from a small town.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Well, things are kind of quiet on campus right now. It's summer time. Let's talk a little bit about summer classes. I kind of like the summer around here, don't you?

Dr. Wendler: I do. I'm glad we still offer summer classes. As a matter of fact, one of my goals that we're going to start talking about is to try to get summer enrollments up because we're in west Texas and because we value the relationships between students and faculty and the high touch environment that we live in. There are fewer students now, so faculty can give those few students more attentions, and they will. I know the faculty at West Texas A&M University. By the way, they are as strong and capable and motivated as any group of faculty I've ever worked with. That includes some pretty big time universities. These faculty and staff really are here to challenge, encourage and serve the students of WT. I think in the summer students can get a really good dose of that. There's less distractions.

Randy Ray: I agree with you. Yeah.

Dr. Wendler: You know it's a special time.

Randy Ray: I like teaching in the summer. Classes are long, but we dig in more, and we get to do stuff. One of the things I do is I'll take them out to the radio transmitter that's out near your house, and we'll just go out there and visit that, and I'll talk about that kind of thing.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah.

Randy Ray: It's stuff that I don't normally get to do, so it's fun. Yeah.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. It's hard to get to that radio transmitter now with all the construction going on.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Wendler: It looks like a war zone out there. It's a long boulevard. The roads all to use in West Texas is all tore up. It's really a lot of activity.

Randy Ray: Let's talk about why it's all tore up. It's cause of our new stadium. I'm excited about it. Every time I drive by it, I'm amazed at the progress they're making.

Dr. Wendler: Boy, I am too, and thankful for it because I tell you what, we've got to play football on September 7th. We got to whoop somebody. I forget who it is. I think it's Azusa Pacific, but we've got to whoop them, and we've got to have that stadium ready to do so. So, I'm very excited.

Randy Ray: Are you pushing? Are you pushing them?

Dr. Wendler: Well, what I say is if that things not ready, you all better run for cover. That's when I'm going to start pushing. No, they're working diligently, and everything's on schedule. It's really working very nicely, and I'm very pleased with it. We have great constructors out there. I'm an architect by trade, so I tend to look at these things a little differently. It's like when you walk into a radio studio, you see things I don't see. I'm an architect. When I drive by that thing, I see things that the average person doesn't see. It's well organized. It's moving along the way it should. The people are out there. They're working effectively. They start early in the morning. They start pouring concrete at 3:00 a.m. sometimes. I'm on my way to work at 5:00, or a little after 5:00, but they're working. I think it's gonna be done. I think when it's done, people are going to say, my oh my this is going to change West Texas A&M University.

Randy Ray: I think so too.

Dr. Wendler: It is. It's because we can build a campfire now. Five or six or seven times during the fall semester. It attracts people to come here. We did that over at Kimbrough, and Kimbrough has a tremendous legacy. This is not to denigrate Kimbrough at all. But, the fact the of the matter is now they're going to be on campus, and they're going to park over by my office and walk over to the football stadium. They're going to park by the engineering building and walk over to the football stadium, and the business facilities and walk. They're going to park by Harrington, the College for Fine Arts and Humanities and walk over to the football stadium. So, they're going to be walking all through the campus, and they're going to see the campus and they're going to say ... The first thing they're going to say, "Gosh, this campus is beautiful." The second thing they're going to say is "It's really a pleasure to be here." That's a good feeling that somebody will leave with when they come to a football game.

Randy Ray: I agree with you. I'm excited. I am ready for that first game. We're going to take a break, and when we come back, we're going to talk to a young man that has a very incredible story. We'll be back in just a minute.

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 that 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 strength 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 you experience. Share you heritage. Share your pride.

Randy Ray: Welcome back to Reflections from WT The Heart of Soul of Texas Panhandle. On this segment of the podcast, I'm joined by Khashari Wilson. Khashari is from Maplewood, New Jersey. Khash, how in the world did you end up at West Texas A&M University?

Khashari Wilson: So, I had problems growing up, and one thing led to another ... Family problems I had to I guess find a new way out. So, I guess me and my aunt had talked about looking to different types of schools, like boarding schools in a way. Options were military school, Milton and Hershey, Pennsylvania, which I was really excited about cause there's a lot of chocolate factories in that town. Then there was an all boys school. Did I say that? All boy school in Virginia, Milton Hershey military school, and then Boys Ranch came on our radar. I was like, well let's look into Texas. I've never been to Texas. I wanted to kind of leave the east coast area. We was on a Skype call with my case worker, and the next thing I know, I want to say about within the next week, I was already on a plane to Texas.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Tell us a little bit about growing up in New Jersey.

Khashari Wilson: Growing up in New Jersey, it was rough. Mainly because growing up my mom I went through I want to say I went through something I wouldn't want any other child to go through. It involved neglect, abuse. Just a lot of physical beatings, emotional beatings, and I just got really really tired of it. After a while, I didn't know what to do with my life. I wasn't sure if it was something I did or ... Understand as a child, children do dumb stuff, but the way parents handle it ... The way my mom handled it, it was a bit overboard. So, growing up, after a while I ended up leaving my mom and going into CPS, Child Protective Services. Then from there, my aunt found me in the system. She had fought for me, fought for custody. She took me back in. But, even though she took me back in, I still struggled with things like lying, stealing, I kept things from her. Mainly because I felt like when I was with my mom, I feel like I was in more survival mode. So, I felt like that's the things I had to do in order to survive. My aunt would never understand why I would do these things. She never understood why I would keep lying and stealing from her. I didn't understand it either, but I just knew it was something a habit I had, a habit I picked up when I was younger. I did all right in school, but I didn't do good enough. The breaking point

for me when I ended up going to Texas was I had an F in English. I remember this really really well. I had an F in English, but I didn't fail any of my other classes. So, the school said, "You can still wrestle. You can still do sports." But, when I went home, my aunt was like, "Why are you still doing sports? You have an F in this class." I was like, "Well, because the school said I'm okay." Then she had decided to take me out herself. This was around district, and I was really upset. I was so mad. I was ranked number one going into district. I was like ... As a sophomore on varsity, ranked number one in the district, this is rare. She pulled me out, and I got really upset, but at the end of the day it was my aunt. She was my guardian, I wasn't going to argue with her over it. I guess, it was just a lot of build up, and we got to arguing about it. I wanted to get back into it before I missed the whole tournament. She said no, and then we got into a fight. One thing led to another, and it was more verbal, a verbal fight. Then, she was recently ... Around that time she was diagnosed with Lyme disease, so the way ... Her lifestyle it had to change. So, she worked more, but she was always tired. She couldn't handle me. She couldn't always watch me. So, she felt that it was better for me to get help from another place and not her always worrying about me, what I'm doing, and stressing her out all the time. Which, I applaud her for that. I'm grateful that she sent me to Texas and everything.

Randy Ray:

Yeah. Yeah. Khash, one thing about your story that really impressed me is how much you believe in forgiveness. Some of those hard things that you went through, you were able to let that go. Talk a little bit about forgiveness

Khashari Wilson:

Well, I definitely say forgiveness changed my life because when I came into Texas Boys Ranch, I can honestly say that I hated my mom. I hated my life. It was just something that I didn't fully understand. I didn't understand my faith at the time cause I didn't grow up in church. When my pastor, Mike Wilham talked about ... He did a sermon over forgiveness, and it was one of the scriptures ... No, not scriptures. It was one of the stories where the prostitute had come to Jesus and she started washing his feet. Everyone in town was like, why are you touching Jesus? You're not worth it. We don't like you basically. Just shaming her. Then Jesus was like that's not what we do. Jesus helped her up and forgave her, and blessed her. Right there, I started thinking about it, and then my chaplain started explaining more about it after chapel. It was funny because that Thanksgiving, my mom was supposed to come to join us for Thanksgiving, and I was like, "I don't want my mom during Thanksgiving. I don't like her. I don't know why you invited her." I talked to my aunt about this. I was like, "I don't know why you invited her. I don't want her here." She said, "Okay. That's fine. We don't have to invite her. We're not going to do it again." I thought about it at night. The next day, I was like, "Okay, you can invite her, but only for a certain period of time. I don't want her here all day." So, we talked about it. She came over, we talked, and it was a long talk. Then I told her I forgave her, and that we can just move on with our lives, and not worry about the past and stuff like that. Then from there, that's when I felt like there was a load lifted off my shoulders because I understood just to be able to forgive and not hold anything against anyone, to hate anymore.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

Khashari Wilson: So-

Randy Ray: That's huge. That's huge.

Khashari Wilson: Yeah.

Randy Ray: Khash, after Boys Ranch, you had different opportunities at different universities, and you decided to come to WT. How had WT changed your life?

Khashari Wilson: I have so much to talk about at WT. I remember when I first came to WT, the first thing I wanted to get involved in was peer leading. Peer leading, if people don't know what it is it's an orientation leader. We work with incoming freshman when they first come to WT, welcome them, welcome their family, show them what WT is about, what we have to offer, what to expect from them, what they expect from WT. My peer leader was Emma, Emma Ickoff Ickoff ... I can't ... I hope she don't hate me for mispronouncing her last name. But, she was my peer leader, and just seeing that bond those peer leaders had and just how they loved their job working with each other. I remember after Buff Branding the first that Monday coming in, I went to the Office of Student Engagement Leadership, and I was like, "How do I sign up to be a peer leader?" They said, "Well, applications aren't out until November." I was like, "Okay. Well, I'll be the first one to submit an application." To this day, I always try to say I was the first one, but they say no, you weren't the first one to submit an application. I said, "But, I was there. I submitted my application." It's changed my life. I'll have to say my very first memory when I knew that I was home was when the admission counselor I had tracked me down to make sure I had everything I needed to come into WT. I remember I was at orientation and I never seen someone so consistent in my life. Calls, emails, when I got there, she had met me at the front doors, like hey, you still need this. I said, "All right. I'll get it to you at some point today." I didn't get it to her at some point today, and then she tracked me down during some random session. I was like, gosh this woman is just consistent. That right there showed just how much staff and faculty care about students to make sure they have everything they need to be successful and ready to go. I'll definitely say the turning point in my career at WT was being a peer leader cause my first year I was so immature. Fresh out of high school, always late to meetings, always ask questions that was already explained in the first place. I was this immature freshman, and I didn't feel like I was welcomed back because oh this kid just jokes around all the time. He just does what he wants, asks the dumbest questions and do all these things. I didn't feel like it was good for me to go back. I will definitely say Amanda Lawson had took a chance with me. She welcomed me back. She's like, "All right. We're excited to have you back next year. Here's what's going to happen next year. Here's the plan for next year. We're going to change things up." I was like, "Well, why are you talking to me about it? It's going to be my second year. I'm still learning things." She was like, "Well, you're going to be a veteran. You're going to have new people coming in, and they're going to look up to you." As

the years went on, she promoted me from just a regular peer leader to peer leader consultant, which is basically a supervisor over the peer leaders, and make sure everything goes well behind the scenes. That right there has grown my leadership and her just putting me in that position where I had to step up and adapt, it wasn't for her. It wasn't like, "Oh, he's immature. We're just going to kick him to the side." She saw potential, and she put me in positions where I had to adapt and learn leadership and expand on my growth.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Sometimes we just need people to believe in us, don't we?

Khashari Wilson: Yeah.

Randy Ray: Khash, I can say as a faculty member here at WT, someone that teaches, and Dr. Wendler will I'm sure, agree with me, people like you is the reason why we do what we do. We appreciate people like you. It's an amazing story, and man I respect you a lot. It's traditional for me to always throw Dr. Wendler and our guest a curve ball. So, this one is going to be kind of weird. I know you both have grown to love the Texas Panhandle, but you both came from kind of the same area. What's the weirdest thing about panhandle culture that you discovered when you came here?

Dr. Wendler: No, I want to defer to Kash. You go first.

Khashari Wilson: I have this weird thing. I hate the term fixin.

Randy Ray: Fixin?

Khashari Wilson: Fixin. It bothers me so much. I'm fixin to do this. I'm fixin to do that. Growing up, it was like, I'm going to fix the radiator. I'm going to fix the electricity. But now it's like I'm fixin to-

Randy Ray: To do something.

Khashari Wilson: Do something.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

Khashari Wilson: That bothers me so much.

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, what about you? What was the weirdest thing you discovered when you moved here?

Dr. Wendler: Some of it is language, but the fixin doesn't bother me too much. We just used one earlier, and I said it was West Texas all tore up. But anyway, it's not so much weird. There is a commitment here to not rushing to judgment on people, but rather allowing those people to perform and to work and to do things and engage and withholding judgment until that process is complete. Again, it's not

100% of the time, but there seems to be this cultural ... It's almost a cultural imperative that says let's see what this person can do rather than oh, here they come, I know what they're all about. It's a work thing I think. I don't know if it's weird or not, but it seems pervasive and it's one of the great appeals to me of the Texas Panhandle.

Randy Ray:

Well, that is going to about wrap it up. Khash, we are fixin to be done. So, thank you for joining us for Reflections from WT The Heart and Soul of Texas Panhandle. Please join us again next time. We'll see you then.