

Reflections from WT with Dr. Chris Thomas

- Randy Ray: You are listening to Reflections from WT. We have done 47 of these things. We've been at it for a while. My name is Randy Ray. I'm the director of broadcast engineering on campus, and I'm joined by my co-host, Dr. Walter Wendler.
- President Wendler: Randy, it's good to be here. It is hard to believe that we've done 47 of these.
- Randy Ray: It's hard to believe. So what is that, three years now? Is it three years?
- President Wendler: Maybe four years.
- Randy Ray: Yeah. Crazy. We've had some good conversations along the way.
- President Wendler: We have.
- Randy Ray: I've enjoyed every one of them and I'm looking forward to today's conversation. We're joined today by Dr. Chris Thomas, who is WT's pretty new Vice President of student affairs. Good morning, Thomas. I'm glad you're here.
- Dr. Chris Thomas: Thank you so much. It's a privilege.
- Randy Ray: Yeah. So for our listeners who don't know, what is a vice president of student affairs? Tell me your typical day, what do you do?
- Dr. Chris Thomas: Oh, man. Well, I get up about 5:30, go through the news. I check the Instagram feed, I'm plugged into all the social media for the campus. I read the police log and go through my emails and plan out the day. For the world of student affairs, things happen between 9:00 PM and 6:00 AM, and so-
- Randy Ray: It's the busiest, I bet. Yeah.
- Dr. Chris Thomas: Right. Even if my phone didn't ring in the middle of the night, it doesn't mean that I'm off duty. That's the first thing I want to do is get a sense of what's going on so we can hit the ground running and get to work serving students.
- President Wendler: By the way, it might be a good idea for Chris to tell us a little bit about himself, where he is from and so on.
- Randy Ray: Yeah. So you're from Orange, Texas?
- Dr. Chris Thomas: I am from Orange, Texas.
- Randy Ray: Where's Orange exactly?

Dr. Chris Thomas: Orange is the last county on the east side of Texas, borders of the Sabine River, and then you cross into Cameron or Calcasieu Parish there on the western side of Louisiana.

Randy Ray: And you spent a lot of time in... You came here from Louisiana.

Dr. Chris Thomas: I did. I went around the world to come back home, and my little girl was three months old when I took the job at McNeese State University in Lake Charles. Right across the river, my family is from there, is still there. My wife's family's from there, and so our plan was to come home so that they could help us with childcare. We did that and I drove the hour each way to work and back, and 17 years later, was still doing it and it worked out really well for us to be home and be with family and to grow up that way.

Randy Ray: And your daughter, she's a junior in high school?

Dr. Chris Thomas: She's a junior at West Plains and so it's been a lot of fun. I came here that first month by myself while she was finishing school and it just wasn't the same. I really missed my wife and daughter, and to get them back here and to show them the Toot'n Totum and to take them to Amarillo and to see some of these sunsets and sunrises and hear the geese fly over, there's some really beautiful things up here.

Randy Ray: I want to talk about what you do here on campus, but let's talk about Camille for just a second more.

Dr. Chris Thomas: Sure, sure.

Randy Ray: Was it an adjustment for her?

Dr. Chris Thomas: Oh, absolutely. We knew that we were going to move when she went to college anyway. It was a family decision. We talked about it, but I knew after spending time with Dr. Wendler and his team up here that this was the right move for me professionally, and I felt like she was going to get a tremendous education here at WT and that was really important to me as I was looking for that next stage of my professional career. When I came up here and I met the team, I knew that they were bringing me up here to be successful. I believed in the vision and so I knew that bringing her here, that she'd have a tremendous experience as well. So that really weighed heavily on our hearts to come up here and make the change.

Randy Ray: Yeah, I brought my family here from Tennessee. I'm amazed still at how quickly we felt like we belonged and this was family.

Dr. Chris Thomas: People were so kind. People reached out to us and reached out to her. She was taking a flower class back in high school with a fantastic art teacher, was good at it. Came to West Plains, they put her in the class and then they got her on the

FFA team for flower arranging, which I didn't know was a thing in FFA but apparently, there's everything in FFA. And they helped her to get a job at a flower shop here in town. People have really embraced us and we're very grateful for it.

Randy Ray: Well, Dr. Wendler, don't you think that's the spirit of West Texas A&M now?

President Wendler: Yeah, I do. I very much do. The people are so friendly and kind, and we're not without issues. Every place has issues, but by and large, it's a very welcoming community. They expect people to be committed to the community. They want to demonstrate that commitment back to people so it's a two-way street. The values of West Texans, again, not perfect to be sure, but very, very strong values. Commitment to hard work, commitment to honesty, commitment to being part of the community and so on and so forth, there's a dozen things I could say about it. But yeah, I do feel that is the West Texas way and we're doing everything we can to make it be the West Texas A&M University way.

I'm not going to say that other universities don't do the same thing, but we have a special opportunity to really reinforce those kinds of things at WT because it's so much part of the culture up here. So I think it's great and I'm glad that Chris and his family feel connected and welcomed in all that. Mary and I felt the same way. I sometimes tell people this is the best job I ever had, and I was not even looking for it really. It just happened. It's in many ways the best place I've ever lived, in spite of the doggone wind and the dust and the smell and all that sort of stuff. That all goes away and what you're left with is the core of the heart of people of the Texas Panhandle, and it's a wonderful place.

Randy Ray: Dr. Thomas, what all does your job entail?

Dr. Chris Thomas: Sure.

Randy Ray: A lot of people don't know what a vice president for student affairs does, so are you pretty much one-on-one with students throughout the day? What do you do?

Dr. Chris Thomas: It's all things Really.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

Dr. Chris Thomas: And so when a student steps out of their car and they're walking to the classroom, that's student affairs, when they're having a cup of coffee in the JBK with their professor, that's student affairs. When they're trying to decide if they want to go see a counselor or if they want to join a rec class, if they're talking about their major with an academic advisor, all these things are student affairs. It's really the total student experience.

Randy Ray: It's everything outside of the classroom anyway.

Dr. Chris Thomas: I would tell parents that when your son or daughter, you finish eating dinner and then you say I love yous and they walk out the door and you hear the garage door close, you didn't quit being their parent and they didn't quit being your son or daughter. So with student affairs, when the bell rings and they walk out of class and they're in the hallway, the college experience learning hasn't stopped, and so that's really the opportunity that we have to come in and be that catalyst and that force multiplier across all things, to retain them, to engage them, to help them get more out of their experience, and to ultimately help them to graduate. That's always the goal.

Randy Ray: Don't you both think we learn as much in college when we're not in the classroom? Just other things, the other experiences. I tell my students, "Go out and do things. Meet people. We give you a lot of opportunities." That's not just about study. That's kind of what you do.

Dr. Chris Thomas: Absolutely, and I'll take it a step further. We have this classic idea of an 18-year-old student that comes to college and they're 18 to 22 and they graduate, but when you talk with non-traditional students, when you talk with a 27-year-old single mom or dad that's coming back to school, they have that same transformative experience. And so college is not just about growing up. It's not just about saying, "Well, hell, they would've changed from 18 to 22 anyway." College is about doing something bigger than yourself. It's about investing, it's about a challenge. It's about casting a vision, and ultimately, our responsibility is to help people change their lives.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

President Wendler: Couldn't agree more. I'd frequently say now, and it's almost my mantra, that our goal here is to develop engaged citizens, because it's engaged citizenship that is the building block for our republican form of government, for a free society. That's what we want to do, and that happens in the classroom, it happens out of the classroom. It happens on the campus, it happens off the campus. It happens at work, it happens when you are involved in recreational activities. But this concept of engaged citizenship for me is absolutely paramount and I think Chris understands and appreciates that, and there's a whole group of staff in student affairs and frankly in academic affairs and around the campus, I think, that buy into that.

I'm an architect. We're doing something much more than produce more architects, if there was an architecture program here. When I was at A&M and at Southern Illinois and at LSU, we produced architects, but more importantly, we produced engaged citizens, people that are going to be productive members of society. Get them to think freely for themselves, become responsible, accept personal responsibility and so on and so forth. It's so very important.

Randy Ray: Yeah, I agree with you. We're going to take a break and when we come back, I want to talk about something that you're both very passionate about and that's regional institutions. We'll be back in 60 seconds.

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Randy Ray: Welcome back to episode number 47, Reflections from WT. I'm talking to Dr. Wendler and Dr. Chris Thomas, who is our vice president for student affairs. You've been here since December, right?

Dr. Chris Thomas: December 1st.

Randy Ray: Yeah. So you've got settled in? You feeling good now, in the groove?

Dr. Chris Thomas: I'm getting there. Yeah, I'm getting there.

Randy Ray: Well, we were talking before the podcast about the importance of regional institutions, and I know you both are passionate about that. Why?

Dr. Chris Thomas: Regional institutions have a responsibility for their quadrant in the state. Wherever that is across the United States, it's that connection back to the people in the region, to the industry, to the citizens that makes them so transformative, and they serve places that sometimes could be forgotten.

President Wendler: Good words. And regional institutions like WT are in many ways the workhorses of higher education. They produce more than half of the people that graduate from college come from regional institutions. And the fact that we touch the smaller communities, I'm very proud of WT's commitment to the rural communities, this constellation of communities that make up the Panhandle and the South plains, and we are unapologetically driven by regional forces. We go out and meet people in the schools, we know the county leaders, we know the civic leaders. Not all of them on a first name basis, but we're committed to that and we want them to help shape the university. We're not here to straighten somebody out. We're here to understand the culture and values of this region, it's the very best part of those, and help sustain those and allow those things to help transform students, our students, to become engaged citizens.

So I couldn't agree more with what Chris said. That is right on the bead. It's on the spot for what a regional institution should do, and we're doing it with pride, without apology. We don't want to be like anywhere else. We want to be where WT is, and the fact of the matter is I know a little bit about geometry and there's no other place like it. We say that in a way that's... We talk about the people and the place and all that, but there is no other place like it in the universe. We're the only place that occupies this latitude and longitude, and we need to recognize that and say strength to our differences. It makes us good.

Randy Ray: I'm a product of two different regional institutions. The reason I am passionate and why I love working here is because I think we can form better relationships with students, I think we can be more hands-on with things. Like we were talking earlier, in my program, we have students coming in as freshmen and we're putting a brand new camera in their hands, sending them out, and we're in studios. They don't get that opportunity a lot of times in the bigger schools. So I think, my opinion, students leave here with a really, in my program and what we do, a really great education because they've been able to do it and not just talk.

President Wendler: Right. And I get the benefit of working with Amberley every day. That's somebody that is a product of this program and really a stunning example of what the program can do, and I just think it's powerful. Very powerful.

Dr. Chris Thomas: Transformative.

President Wendler: Yeah, transformative.

Randy Ray: I agree with you. I have said this a hundred times, WT is a life-changing place, and it changed mine.

President Wendler: Another thing too, Randy, and you're not going to say this about yourself but it's about the engaged faculty. I don't care how good the leadership is, however well I do the job or Chris does a job, or however poorly actually that either one of us might do the job. The fact of the matter is the faculty are there face-to-face with the students every day, even if it's virtually, but they're the people that guide and lead and work with students and make the institution click. And to the extent that the faculty are doing that, that they're engaged and directly involved with student life and student aspiration and all that, the university is going to be good. It's going to do what it needs to do. The research accomplishments, scholarly work, all that, very important, but if that doesn't get transported from the individual faculty members to individual students, it's all for naught.

Randy Ray: A lot of it is about relationships. That's why you guys push us to get to know their names, get to know them, and I think that's important too.

President Wendler: Yeah.

Randy Ray: So, all right. Dr. Thomas, I had something picked out, but since Dr. Wendler was making fun of my hair earlier this morning-

Dr. Chris Thomas: I was going to ask you.

Randy Ray: Excellent. I'm going to ask you guys, tell me the most embarrassing hairdo you've ever had.

Dr. Chris Thomas: Oh, man. You're talking to... When I was about 26, my dad sat in the recliner by the fireplace. I went to him and I sat at his feet and I said, "Dad, I'm sorry." And he said, "What?" I said, "I'm sorry." I said, "You were right. I do look stupid when I turn my hat around backwards. My haircuts are terrible and you were right, you were right." I had a big poofy hair, I had a shaved up head. About every way that you could do it, truly embraced my youth.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Yeah. I can remember, my dad, every time I got a haircut, every time, he would say, "I thought you were going to get a haircut."

Dr. Chris Thomas: I paid money for that?

Randy Ray: Yeah. Yeah.

President Wendler: Did you pay for it? Yeah. Yeah.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Dr. Wendler, tell us about yours.

President Wendler: Well, similar. I used to have fairly long hair, it was down on my shoulders.

Randy Ray: Nice.

President Wendler: But my most embarrassing hair... Did you say hair do or haircut?

Randy Ray: Either one.

President Wendler: Well, whatever. It's probably the one I've got now because people tease me about it all the time, and I had a friend from Palestine, Texas, just north of Resume Speed in East Texas. He asked me one day, he said, "Do you take that thing off and put it on the bed when you have to say goodnight?" But anyway, hair, I get a lot of hair jokes. We all do, I guess.

Randy Ray: Yeah.

President Wendler: That's how we started this morning with Randy's-

Dr. Chris Thomas: That's right.

President Wendler: ... poofy hairdo.

Dr. Chris Thomas: That's all right.

Randy Ray: It's time for a haircut.

Randy Ray: All right. On that note, we will ask you to join us again next time for episode number 48. Thank you for joining us for Reflections from WT, the heart and soul of the Texas Panhandle.

