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Micah Bailey:

Welcome to I AM WT. This is Micah Bailey.

Thomas Rodriguez:

And I'm Thomas Rodriguez.

Micah Bailey:

And today we have a very special guest, Debbie Farnum.

Would you go ahead and introduce yourself?

Debbie Farnum :

I'm Debbie Farnum, and I'm currently honored to be serving as the President of the West Texas A&M Alumni Association. I live in Austin, but I'm a proud Panhandle girl.

Micah Bailey:

Good. We love the Panhandle.

Thomas Rodriguez:

You're the President of the Alumni Association. Do you get to meet a bunch of cool people all the time? Is that just part of the job description?

Debbie Farnum :

Well, I get to see a lot of students. I get to have interaction with professors and some of the administration, which it's a very varied experience, and I get to help promote WT. And I get to go to a lot of WT activities, which is really a nice perk of the job, too.

Micah Bailey:

So you said Panhandle. Where specifically are you from?

Debbie Farnum :

I was actually born in Perryton, and then I moved to Lubbock, and then I moved back to Perryton, and then I moved to Dumas, and then I moved to Amarillo, and then I moved to Florida, and then I moved to Austin.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Hang on. You bounce around the Panhandle in Florida and then back to Texas. Can you tell us why Florida?

Debbie Farnum :

My husband built privatized prisons for a company that was in Florida, and so that's why we moved to Florida. And then he was hired by another company to do business development, and that caused us to move from Florida back to Texas, specifically to Austin.

Thomas Rodriguez:

I see. So a little less Disney World, a little more bricks and bars.

Debbie Farnum :

Yeah. Hey, listen, when you're a Florida resident, you can go to Disney World at a discount. That's a nice little thing to be able to go to Disney World at a discount.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Note to self: When I'm 30, change resident-ship to Florida. Got it.

Debbie Farnum :

Yes, that is correct.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Awesome. So you've attended WT. Can you tell us about your time here?

Debbie Farnum :

There's a roundabout way I got here. I went my freshman year to the University of Texas in Austin, which was during the Vietnam War. It was not a pleasant place to be. It was right after Whitman had shot the people from the UT Tower. I had a very interesting year and I didn't do well with my studies, so my parents invited me to come back home for my sophomore year and to go to WT. I really wasn't happy about it, but once I got here, I absolutely fell in love with WT, and I was so glad that my parents forced me to leave UT and come back. It was the greatest thing that ever happened to me, seriously.

Micah Bailey:

I feel like that's how it always goes, because people are like, what is WT? Who is WT? And then, the second you get here, you realize how beautiful the community is and the people who are here and fall in love with it.

Debbie Farnum :

Yeah. My grandmother had gone here in 1919 and gotten a teaching certificate. My mother had gone to school here in 1944 and '45, and then I came in 1968. So three generations of my family.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Yeah, I always get questions from back home. They're like, "Oh, when are you going to transfer to A&M? WT is just a stepping stone." I'm like, "Not really. I like it here. It's awesome."

Debbie Farnum :

And it's got an excellent faculty and a good reputation and great programs. I think we're on the cutting edge of a lot of different things at WT. So yeah, it was good for me to come back here. It was the place I needed to be.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Something a lot of people fail to realize we're number one in quite a few aspects. Like our media program, for example, I have to shill because that's my thing, but our media program is super great. We have an awesome nursing school. We are number one as far as Ag is concerned. So there's a lot of opportunities here that they don't see at other places. You're not going to get that at A&M. You're not going to get that at the other A&M schools. You're going to get it here.

Debbie Farnum :

So true. So true.

Micah Bailey:

When you were here, what were you involved in?

Debbie Farnum :

Okay. I've always been a joiner. So, first and foremost, I was part of the Student Senate. Then I was on the Student Activities Council, which I don't think you have that anymore, but that was a really big part of my life was the Student Activities Council. And then I was also involved in my sorority, and that was very, very special. I was part of Chi Omega, and that involved being very active on campus.

It was almost a requirement that we be super involved on campus. I think that's what enriched my time at WT was to be involved because when everybody else was going home on the weekends, I wasn't. I stayed because I was doing things and giving back to WT. I loved every minute of it.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Something that I think is a little interesting, because I hear stories about my dad. My dad attended WT before I did, and he was a member of a Greek organization, Kappa Kappa Psi, over in the music program. So it's interesting to hear how these orgs have stood the test of time and still exist now, because I know Omega is still a big thing in WT. It hasn't left. But it's cool to hear that it continues on, like its legacy has carried on and all that.

Debbie Farnum :

It does, and I've maintained a lot of friendships and a lot of relationships through the years. I'm still very involved with the chapter here. Always have been. I hope I always will be.

Micah Bailey:

What was campus and campus life back in the 60s?

Debbie Farnum :

Okay, when I came to WT in the 60s, I will tell you right now, the campus didn't look like it looks like today. This campus was, I guess the best word is brown. It wasn't cared for like it is now. It just was windblown and a little stark and the trees were all sort of bent over, and it's totally different now. It really looks like somebody cares. The campus is beautiful and cared for and lovely. I've talked to people who've come back from the 60s and 70s and gone, "What happened? Oh my gosh, it looks so different."

It was during the Vietnam War. People were being drafted all the time. It was just a really odd and strange time to be on campus, but it was still fun. It was still a lot of fun. There were things to do. Like I said, I didn't go home on the weekends. I was too busy. I had lots of things going on. It was a very different time than it is now, and campus looked very, very different than it looks now. It looks homey and lived in and inviting, and that's what I think has been one of the biggest changes.

Micah Bailey:

Do you have any favorite memories?

Debbie Farnum :

Well, one of my favorite memories is I met my husband here. He had already graduated and had come back on leave in between military assignments. He was an ROTC, distinguished military graduate of West Texas. When he went into the service, he was told that he would be stationed stateside. Well, it was during Vietnam. Well, they lied, and so he got reassigned to Vietnam.

He happened to be back here at WT. I was a junior at the time, and he had graduated. And I met him in what then was the SUB, which is no longer the SUB, the Student Union Building. We met briefly and then he was gone. And then about three months later, he called me, and he said, "I'm going to be in town. My little brother in the fraternity was killed in Vietnam, and I'm going to come back for his funeral. Would you mind going out with me?" Because he said, "You were really nice to me that day in the Student Union Building." We spent the day together, and the next day he went back and went to Vietnam. We wrote letters during that year. And the day before I graduated from WT, I got a letter from him, and he asked me to marry him.

Micah Bailey:

That is just the sweetest story ever.

Debbie Farnum :

And I said, "Yes." We'd had one date, and I said, "Yes." I bought my wedding dress and four weeks later we got married, and we were married almost 50 years.

Micah Bailey:

I love that.

Debbie Farnum :

That's my big WT story with my husband.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Well, that might step over our favorite question that we like to ask later, but that's okay. It's a good story to tell. It's an awesome story to tell.

So you talked a little bit about your time with the Student Senate. Can you tell us about anything, what that was like?

Debbie Farnum :

I felt like it was a really important time to be involved in student politics. There were things that we did that made a difference on campus. I was elected as a senator. I believe at that time we were selected just in general. I don't think we represented any group or anything like that. It was just a general election.

I loved being involved because we knew what was going on with the administration, with the faculty. I've just felt so connected to everything at the university. I felt like we were really making a difference because we made some student decisions and things like that, but it really just connected me to all facets of WT, and I think that's why I liked it a lot.

Thomas Rodriguez:

It's nice to hear about Student Senate things because I know that nowadays, it's not really a concern for a lot of people. I know most of the friends that I have in the department were like, "Oh, there's elections going on? We didn't even know about that." So it's nice to hear that it does actually accomplish something.

Debbie Farnum :

Yeah. And it taught me a lot about how to operate within a group where you actually make a difference, and you learn how to do governmental things and how to conduct business and how to conduct meetings, which was something that I did not know. And that was very beneficial for me later on in life because I knew about how to conduct a proper meeting because I learned that in the Senate.

Micah Bailey:

Do you think that's kind of what we have or what we call student body now? So we have our student body president, vice president, secretary, et cetera. Is that kind of what y'all were doing?

Debbie Farnum :

Yes, yes. We had a student body president, yes. Very much so, yeah.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Do you think those skills are helping you out even now as President of the WT Alumni Association Board?

Debbie Farnum :

Absolutely. Absolutely. I think anything you do early on in life will really carry through. I think that those skills that you gain in college is something that you can build on for the rest of your life.

I really do think it's made a difference for me in being able to be involved in other organizations where we do conduct meetings, because I had to learn Robert's Rules of Order in the Student Senate and that's carried over. You can conduct a much more efficient meeting if you know the rules of how to conduct that meeting. You can stay focused. You don't get off-topic. And I think it's been beneficial for me throughout my life.

Thomas Rodriguez:

That's something I've picked up on. Being involved with the comm department and everything the past three years, doing radio and doing speech classes and all that have made me a much better speaker than I felt I was before I came in here, and those are skills that are going to carry on even after when I'm writing stories for scripts and things like that. I think that the skills that you get in college, they carry on for the rest of your life, and I think some people don't really realize that, and it's important that they do.

Debbie Farnum :

It's a foundation. It's a foundation to build upon for the rest of your life. It's important to take those skills, and throughout the rest of your life, you'll just build and build and build and build on them.

Micah Bailey:

So for those who might be nervous to get involved or are scared they're not going to be qualified for those positions, how would you give them advice or help them to go towards getting involved so they have that foundation?

Debbie Farnum :

I think a lot of people are afraid to get involved because they don't want to look like they're not smart enough or have the skills or whatever. I think the best thing to do is get involved and watch and listen. It may be that it takes you a while to assimilate yourself into that organization.

My advice would be listen and watch and see what other people do, and eventually, I think you'll begin to overcome the anxiety or being scared about, "Oh, my voice doesn't count," or, "I can't say anything because I don't know anything." You do know something, and you'll be able to eventually contribute because we all have something to contribute.

Micah Bailey:

That's beautiful. It's so true. We're all a piece of the puzzle.

Debbie Farnum :

Exactly.

Micah Bailey:

Could you tell us a little bit about what it means to you to give back to WT?

Debbie Farnum :

As I said, I've always been a joiner, but I always felt like it was very important that if you're going to be a member of society, I don't care if it's your church, your community, your school or whatever, that I think we all have an obligation to give back. We receive so much from those entities that we belong to and from the communities that we live in that if you don't give back... It's like paying dues. It's like your rent to be here. If you're going to be on this earth, there's some rent that needs to be paid back, some dues that need to be paid back.

I just feel like being involved in whatever you choose, some people are involved in their churches, some people are involved in job-related organizations, whatever it is, I think you need to do that, otherwise you're just taking up space. You need to give back because that's the way personally I grow, but you may help somebody else in that process as well. Being a mentor to someone younger or less experienced, I think, gives you value and gives them hope, and I just think that's very, very important.

Thomas Rodriguez:

How do you think those experiences have impacted your life?

Debbie Farnum :

Oh, immensely. I think, for one thing, I've been able to pass a lot of that onto my own children. My children were involved in 4-H, and the experiences they had in 4-H definitely impacted them as an adult.

Again, it's a foundation that you build on. I think everything that I did at WT and then what I did as a young mother and what I did in my midlife, all of that has led up to where I am today. I feel like I'm more confident, but I also feel like I can still give back. Even at my age, I can still give back. Because if we don't give back, then what have we done? Nothing. We've just occupied space. I want to do more than just occupy space.

Micah Bailey:

I've never heard it that way. So kind of almost stealing from the communities that's developed you if you aren't going to do the same thing for those who are younger generations.

Debbie Farnum :

It's like taking the oxygen but not giving anything back. You need to give back because if you don't, you're not going to leave the world a better place. You're just going to leave it the same.

Micah Bailey:

Right.

Thomas Rodriguez:

So true. We want to talk about how you made a recent impact here at WT.

We're going to be right back with more from our guest, Debbie Farnum, in just a few minutes. Don't go away.

Speaker 4:

Donors to West Texas A&M University give more than their material support. They devote time, expertise, and commitment. WT would not be what it is today without individuals dedicated to our forward progress.

Micah Bailey:

Welcome back to I AM WT. We are here in the podcast studio with Micah Bailey.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Thomas Rodriguez.

Micah Bailey:

And Debbie Farnum.

You recently made a legacy gift from your state that will benefit the Terry B. Rogers College of Education and Social Science at WT. Could you tell us a little bit about that and why it's important to you?

Debbie Farnum :

My husband passed away three years ago, and prior to his passing, we had discussed whether we would leave some kind of gift to WT, but we didn't really decide what or how or whatever. Because I was involved with the WT 125 program, I looked at that and I thought, "You know, I think now is the time I need to do that."

So I discussed it with my children, full well knowing I was still going to do it whether they said yes or no, because I just felt so strongly about it. I just felt like, again, if WT had made that big of an impression and was such a part of my life, that I felt like in honor of my husband and also just for us to give back to the university that we both love so much that I felt like it was the right thing to do.

He was not an education major, but he did get a teaching certificate when he graduated, and then I got my master's in education here as well as my bachelor's. And I was like, "No, I taught all these years in the Panhandle, I want to give back to the College of Education. And that's what I decided to do. That would be my gift and his gift for the years that we spent here.

Thomas Rodriguez:

How do you think that gift is going to affect those students?

Debbie Farnum :

Well, I know that right now, teaching is a profession that is struggling to find people to teach, and I hope that this in some small way can help encourage a student, who otherwise might not be able to go to

school, to have the monetary support to be able to become a teacher. We're just losing teachers, and that just makes me so sad because we need qualified, educated teachers in all of our schools, and maybe this will help.

Micah Bailey:

Yup. So, on the education side of things, I've noticed that teachers really aren't paid that well, and they do so much work, and I mean they're literally growing up the students in their classrooms. Do you think there should be a change in that area of pay?

Debbie Farnum :

There's always been a need to pay teachers more. That's been universal always. Teachers spend more time with children than parents spend with their children, by far, and what they teach is what forms those children as they grow up. So yes, money is important. I mean, when you compare that to professional athletes or to people in business who get these exorbitant salaries and things, they don't touch lives like teachers do. I definitely think they should be paid more, but the reward sometimes is not in the pay; it's what happens in the heart.

Micah Bailey:

That's beautiful. Maybe that's something you need to speak to those teachers; "Hey, you have no idea the impact it's going to make on your life."

Debbie Farnum :

Yeah. It made an impact on my life. I have a granddaughter who wants to be a teacher, and I was telling her stories this last weekend, and she was like, "I had no idea this is what happened in your classrooms." And I was like, "Yeah, this is the real-life stories that you won't find in a college classroom. This is what comes in a real classroom in a school." And she was like, "Oh, wow." She said, "I can't wait to be a teacher." So, I got one coming up to be a teacher.

Thomas Rodriguez:

As the son of two teachers, both my mom and dad teach in the fine arts, I can speak on their experiences that definitely, you do change people's lives. I know my mom is still in contact with a lot of students that she has seen graduate 15, 10 years ago and seeing them in their professional lives now, their real jobs and all of that, you can definitely see it.

My dad, he still talks with all of his students. I even had one of his old students teach me in my high school years, and I talked to her about her experiences with my dad. And yeah, she still remembers that because it doesn't go away. That's part of their life.

Debbie Farnum :

Those are memories and things that you keep close to your heart. You really do. I still have some students that I see. That's just what's so special about it. And I know that in other professions things happen, but in teaching, you see a young mind change, you see them grow, you see them change and become more positive or become more dedicated to their education, and that says volumes about what the profession does.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Part of the time it's thankless work, but part of the time it's not. It's important stuff that they do. You're shaping the minds of the next generation. And I can speak from their experience, I think they're doing a pretty good job of it.

Debbie Farnum :

Yes.

Micah Bailey:

Where and what subjects did you teach?

Debbie Farnum :

Oh gosh, I hope you have a while. When I taught in Dumas, I taught sophomore and junior American history. I also taught 4th grade. Let's see, what did I teach? I taught reading and English in 4th grade, and then I moved to junior high, and I taught 7th grade Texas history and 8th grade American history. Then I began to teach 6th, 7th, and 8th grade gifted and talented, which was wow. Staying ahead of those kids was a job. And then I moved to 7th and 8th grade life management skills, and that ended up being the most wonderful thing I could ever teach. I really, really loved that.

So I taught a lot of different things and loved them all, but I think my favorite was life management skills in 7th and 8th grade.

Micah Bailey:

Wow, you've done it all.

Debbie Farnum :

Well, not quite, but a lot.

Thomas Rodriguez:

You'll get there.

Sounds like you had a successful teaching career, regardless. Going back to your legacy gift, why should others do something similar?

Debbie Farnum :

Again, I firmly believe that if you're going to be a part of something, you should give back to it. Don't be a taker and only a taker. Be a giver as well. Because those gifts you may not see immediately the return on that gift, you may be dead and gone before the return on that gift ever surfaces, but there will be a return on that gift whether you see it or not. I firmly believe that, again, if we occupy the space, we should pay the rent, and I'm happy to do it, and I'm glad I did.

Micah Bailey:

Do you have a piece of advice that you would give to students who are finishing college out right now?

Debbie Farnum :

Finishing college is a great milestone, but it's only the beginning. It's the first step in the rest of your life.

I would say stay connected to the people you've met and that you've made friends with in college. I still have friends from college. I have more friends from college than I do from high school. I think that your college experiences, again, lay that foundation for the rest of your life. Those people probably helped you

through some very formative years. I think being connected back to your university is a very important thing to do.

Make good choices. I always tell my grandchildren this, "Make good choices, because if you don't make good choices, the consequences are great." But don't be afraid to step out and try something. You will fail, because if you don't fail, then you've done something wrong. But failure helps us learn what to do right the next time. If you're always successful, you'll never really learn anything. Don't be afraid to fail, and you will, but build on it.

Micah Bailey:

Wow.

Thomas Rodriguez:

That's actually a piece of advice I get from Randy a lot. His whole deal with us as students, he says, "Now is your time to mess up so you can do it right the next time." And I couldn't agree more. Speaking from personal experience, I have definitely screwed up in his classes before. I've figured out what I did wrong and I do better now. That's how it is. Because if you're afraid to fail, then you don't do anything, and that's just the fact of the matter.

Debbie Farnum :

Well, you're so afraid that you won't take the next step, and you have to take the next step. It's just one step after the other. And yeah, you're going to stumble, you're going to fall, but that doesn't mean you're done. It just means, "Oh, I messed up. I won't do that again. I'm going to try a different way." That's the way life is.

Thomas Rodriguez:

The motto, "It's not over; it's time to try again."

Debbie Farnum :

Absolutely.

Micah Bailey:

And that's key is trying again. I see people fail all the time, and then they get scared like, "Okay, I can't do it. I'm going to quit." But you're right, you got to keep going. You got to try it again.

Thomas Rodriguez:

You were talking about advice you'd give to students. What about students specifically going into education? What advice would you give them?

Debbie Farnum :

Oh, goodness. Things are different now, I think to some degree, than they were before, because I think there are certain mandates that have been placed on the schools by our legislature that have greatly impacted the way teachers teach. I mean, there's so much testing now and things that when I originally went into teaching, those were not there.

I just think that you need to remember as a teacher that you're teaching a subject, a subject that you love usually, but your students may not love it, but you have to teach it with the same intensity and love as if they did love it.

And remember that they're students, they're not adults. Oftentimes, when I was teaching 7th and 8th grade, I had to remember, these are still children who are becoming adults, and you have to know your audience. You have to know what they're capable of doing and learning. I think that's been universal from the very beginning is, you have to understand your audience. No matter what you're in, you have to understand your audience.

Sometimes it's difficult dealing with parents, dealing with faculty, dealing with administration is also something you have to remember because there's a lot of fingers in the pie. I think it's hard for teachers now because there's a lot of demands, a lot of things that are pulling on them to be a good teacher. Just remember you're teaching, you're molding lives, and that's the most important thing.

Thomas Rodriguez:

I think it's time for the big question.

Micah Bailey:

I think so.

Debbie Farnum :

Oh, no. I'm scared.

Thomas Rodriguez:

It's our favorite question that we ask everybody who comes on the podcast, and we're going to ask you as well. What does WT mean to you?

Debbie Farnum :

Oh gosh, that's a deep question. WT has been a part of my life and a part of my family's life for over a hundred years. WT helped shape me as a person. It brought me my husband. It helped me lay the groundwork for my profession. WT's just been a part of my life forever, and I can't imagine not being here.

Some of my friends in Austin keep asking me, "Why do you keep going back up there? Why do you keep going to Amarillo from Austin?" And I said, "Because that's where my roots are." My roots are here. I can't get away from my roots, so that's why I come back. WT is where I'm rooted.

Micah Bailey:

That is beautiful. Wow. I think that's my favorite answer so far.

Thomas Rodriguez:

That one's been pretty good.

Micah Bailey:

Maybe I shouldn't say that, but.

Thomas Rodriguez:

You're going to make the other ones upset. They're going to listen to our podcast, and be like, "Dang it. I wish I would have looked up the question ahead of time. I could have had something written down. Ugh."

Debbie Farnum :

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And I didn't. I swear I didn't have anything written out.

Thomas Rodriguez:

That was straight from the heart, that's what we call that one.

Micah Bailey:

Yeah.

Thomas Rodriguez:

Thank you all so much for listening to this episode of the I Am WT podcast. Thank you to Debbie for being a fantastic guest on our podcast.

Debbie Farnum :

Thank you for having me.

Thomas Rodriguez:

If you want to listen to the rest of our podcast episodes, you can find it at wtamu.edu/podcasts. Thank you y'all for listening. We'll catch y'all next time.