Interview Title: Q&A with New Western Texas College President, Dr. Laurie Sharp
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Interviewee: Dr. Laurie Sharp, Western Texas College President
Interviewer: Dr. Geron Scates, Western Texas College Mass Communications Professor and KGWB Radio Station Manager
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Dr. Geron Scates (GS): Hello everybody, this is Geron Scates, and you've got it locked right here to 91.1 FM, KGWB, the Great White Buffalo, and the voice of Western Texas College. And we are here with Western Texas College President, Dr. Laurie Sharp. And we are so glad that she's here and been able to safely make it to Snyder as she starts her term as college president.

So first of all, Dr. Sharpe, thank you for being here. We appreciate it. We know that you're just busier than a one-armed paper hater right now.

Dr. Laurie Sharp (LS): I wouldn't miss it for the world. I'm happy to be here.

GS: Yeah, so it's great to see you. So, we're just going to kind of do a little bit of a conversation here, folks, and get to know Dr. Sharp a little bit better. We were talking about titles for this, and so we thought about maybe Sharpies, you know, like the pen. And so, I don't know; it's still in development mode, you know.

I don't know if I've completely sold her on that yet. But so first of all, let's start with Western Texas College, Snyder, Texas. So what attracted you to come here? And if you could just lead us where you need to.

GS: Absolutely. So, I was living in Utah at the time. I was at Utah Valley University. I am not a Utahn, so my husband and I both have Texas roots. He's actually a West Texas boy from Kermit, Texas. And so he fondly remembers coming to Snyder, maybe not so fondly, because his brother is Jim Sharp.

So, he was in the national finals rodeo, but Jason had to pick up cans to raise money for the church. So that was August. It's hot. And so, he was like, "Snyder, Texas. I spent many summers there when Jim got to ride." So, for us, we knew we wanted to be back in Texas. So, when I saw the position posted, it put a seed in my brain. And obviously, the opportunity is amazing at the college. There's a lot of wonderful people. There's a lot of wonderful momentum. And I think it's a great opportunity to come in and help lead the college towards its next chapter.

GS: You know, I know that generally anybody in the job market today - we research, you know, we try to find out what we can find out. We have conversations. Very interesting, by the way, I've got to say about your husband being from Kermit, because I've spent some time in Kermit visiting through non-profit Rotary Clubs and things like that. It's a great area down there. We do this research and, you know, we try to find out what we can find out. What did you find out?

LS: Well, I found out that WTC has a large international student enrollment. I think that is unique. I found out that WTC has 15 sports teams, which is amazing. Not usual at a community

college. And you also have student housing in order to provide students with that holistic experience, which is unusual at a community college to have that.

So, to be back in a space where I could be part of leading both the residential experience, but then the academic experience, and the workforce experience, really set the tone for me as to why I wanted to be here. I did see where there's a lot of opportunities also with the college. WTC, from what I understand, had the market on online instruction, and then COVID happened.

But they're still doing well in that space. There's a lot of dual credit that's being offered in serving school districts. I myself am a former classroom teacher. And so that's a chapter of my life that I am very proud of. I actually maintain my teacher credentials in both Texas and Utah because it's very important to me to still have my toe in that professional space. WTC has a lot of amazing energy behind it. And I think there's an opportunity to elevate that energy, to just put it more on the map as well.

GS: You know, obviously, doing what we do for a living, students, the priority, the customer, why we exist. If I'm a student at Western Texas College, how do I like feel that the thing that you may be envisioned for a difference or it could be an initiative or it could be an idea.

I mean, it could be anything. But if I'm a student here, what could I anticipate with Dr. Sharp as president at Western Texas College?

LS: Well, I'm not sure it would be something too terribly different than what the college already offers. The faculty and the staff here are very student-centered, and that has become obvious to me from my first conversation and through all the conversations that I've been able to have in the month of December. This is a campus that's very committed to the student. They want to do right by the student. They want to do well for the student. And they want the students to have a positive academic growth experience, personally, professionally.

So I think with my leadership, it's just continuing to move the college forward to make sure the student is at the center of our decision making, and that we're providing the student with what the next step is in their life. Whether it's going into the workforce, going on to the university or continuing on their education here.

GS: You know, you have said something that I really, it really struck me and I thought that it really would provide us a lot of insight to who you are. And I really like this. You talked about it, was on a LinkedIn post. And it was talking about, you know, getting here, new chapter, next step of your life's journey. And I remember you said something like, and I may misquote here, so you're going to need to correct me, but it was sort of like, I'm not coming necessarily with the answers hat in hand, but I'm coming to learn, listen, and then move forward. Is that close?

LS: You've captured that well, absolutely. I've been engaged in a listening tour since I got here. And I was fortunate to meet with many staff before the holiday break. I've already got things scheduled for faculty, and for staff, and for students after the break. And I'm actually still meeting with people in the community and with school districts right now. So I'm just trying to really meet with all internal and external stakeholders to better understand Western Texas College, Snyder, Scurry County, the school districts that we serve, because all of that information is going to come together to help the college develop a strategic vision with goals and objectives, so we really can be strategic in how we move the college forward.

GS: And you've been having those conversations. Is there anything that has, like, popped up that you're comfortable with sharing? Something that, well, maybe we need to see in the future, if we could head in this direction or that direction, or expand something that we're doing. Have you formulated any ideas, or has it really been too soon?

LS: Probably too soon to have specific ideas, but themes are certainly emerging. People have an interest in ensuring our programs are still relevant and serving students and the workforce. So, we definitely will likely do a program audit to make sure WTC is offering the right portfolio of programs. Other things that have come up are things about maybe enhancing the aesthetic of the campus or looking at ways that we can connect more closely with the community.

So, these will all likely lead to goals and objectives that become a little bit more granular and day-to-day. It'll help inform how we allocate resources. But right now, I think just allowing all of that information to come in and continue to let those themes emerge is going to be helpful as we, meaning internal and external stakeholders, look at it, and we develop that together.

We have to have that as a shared and a collective responsibility because we are a community college.

GS: You mentioned about community. You just mentioned community. You talked about engagement. Do you kind of have an idea at this point? I know you've already been to the Big Country Christmas Dance. I already know that, with your family. But as far as community engagement, do you sort of have a vision like, I think this is some of the things we may, how we may interact with the community.

LS: Absolutely. Well, I think we just need to engage with the community and interact. A couple of people have shared with me that they didn't know a college was here when they first moved here. And that really spoke to me that sometimes we get so focused on what we're doing on a day-to-day, we forget to lift our head up. And to kind of use an expression that's often used in parenthood, we forget to stop and smell the roses, right? We're so busy growing them and cultivating them and taking care of them, we forget to lift our head up and make sure others understand the work that we're doing or the reason why we do certain things. And so I think it's important we make that bridge stronger with the community.

If you've met me, maybe you've figured out I'm a bit of an extrovert. So, I like meeting people. I like being a part of where I am. There is a little bit of personal interest in me moving to Snyder in this area. I'm looking to be in a community where people know you, and where people care about you. And I want to be able to also see how can the college be part of that.

So I'm just putting this out there. Maybe there could be a mural with some Western Texas College feel to it out in the community. I think that the Development Center has done a phenomenal job with enhancing the aesthetic.

GS: Well, those are incredible. I have to concur with you there. They're wonderful.

LS: Well, the one with the sunflowers made my Christmas card this year - that went out to our friends and family. So I think that Barbara Leatherwood and the Chamber have done amazing work in promoting it. The events that are happening on the Square, I want WTC to be a part of it. So I would love to see flags of the college downtown. I'd love to see the dude in the windows. So that way there's this pride that we have this college in our town. Maybe some billboards on 84 and other entrances into the community, but even outside of the local area. That way we're

drawing people, not just to come to the college as a student, that would be great, but come to our games, watch our athletes. They're amazing. They're from all over the world, literally.

When we have other programming that's happening, we want to be sure that we're serving and engaging.

GS: Yeah, it's really amazing, folks, when you go to some of the athletic events and we're seeing some of the very best athletes in the entire country. We have young men and women in our classes out here from other countries that when they return, some of them athletically represent their country in the Olympics.

LS: That's amazing.

GS: And that just, that blows me away.

LS: That's amazing. One of the staff members sent me a clip through Facebook and said, you weren't here, but it's worth the watch. You'll love it. And it was from the spring 2025 track relay competition.

GS: Yes.

LS: And she was right. It was amazing to watch that among these other institutions that probably are the well-known ones on the, you know, top ten, you know, tip of the tongue type of institutions. And here's Western Texas College, and we're right there at the top of the pack. And kudos to our coaches. I know that the coaches invest a lot of time, energy, care, and concern for our students, and huge kudos for the student athletes, because that is a lot to juggle when you come to study. You're practicing, you're competing, and oftentimes, they're the busiest people on campus. So huge kudos to the programs.

GS: You're not new in higher education, but as the new president here at Western Texas College, obviously there's faculty and staff here, including yours truly.

LS: Correct.

GS: And so what, what do we anticipate? What do you think we anticipate? I mean, you, you know, you were at Utah, so there's, there's interaction there, you know, that took place in, in that institution.

LS: Absolutely.

GS: And like I said, you've been in education a long time. So how do you, how do you see that?

LS: I hope that people see me as a partner. That's my goal. And I know that shared governance is, you know, it's a concept, but really to me, it's more about a collective responsibility. Everyone is here for the students. That's what brings us here. That's why we do this work. That's why we go into the business of education. And I really want faculty and staff to see me as their partner. I want to know their insights. I want to gain their perspective. I want to draw on their expertise because we're smarter as a we, than we are as a me.

And I'm a smart person, but I'm a heck of a lot smarter when I surround myself with people that know their craft, and they know their space. And I think that we can have better and more impactful decisions that engage our students, that engage our community, and that just put Western Texas College on the map.

GS: Well, we do also want to make sure it just popped in my mind when you were telling the story about your husband having to pick up cans. So, if you're listening, unless you're involved in an Adopt-a-Highway program, we won't make you pick up cans around campus, okay? You'll be all right.

LS: But to kind of put a plug for the Christmas event at the Museum, the Christmas trees, the Snyder Recycles? They had a beautiful Christmas tree that was decorated with recyclable materials. So maybe picking up the cans can be to good use too.

GS: There you go. Another Christmas tree. I understand. I understand. And I like that innovative look at it.

So, anything else that you want us to know about you that you can think of?

LS: I just want to have fun. It is fun when you get up every day, and you love what you do; there is a joy to that that it's hard for maybe some people to identify with. And for those that get up and teach, and for those that get up and do their part on the campus, and for those that have loved ones that do that, you have to know we've got that spark in our eye. And that's me. I love what I do. And I'm 100% committed, probably 150% committed to the work.

And I just want people to know I love people and I'm open. So my door is always open if they want to come say hi, if they want to introduce themselves, if they want to share something on their mind, that's what I'm here for, is to really gather those ideas and help work with the leadership team, with the faculty and the staff, the board of trustees, and to really make that shape what Western Texas College is. So, I'm going to have fun. We're going to have fun together.

GS: All right, folks. Well, now you've had an opportunity to hear from the new Western Texas College President, Dr. Lori Sharp, and she is a bundle of energy, I can tell you that. And we're looking forward to working with her and just continuing to do what we do well here. But I also know from Dr. Sharp's leadership and things she has said, that really it's just continuing to even do it better and keeping students the focus. And the community, we certainly invite you all out to the campus, and don't be a stranger. So, all right. So, Dr. Sharp, thank you so much.

LS: Thank you, Dr. Scates. Appreciate everything that you do, and I'll be back.

GS: All right. Very good. All right. So again, we appreciate you listening, and we hope you enjoyed it just as much as we enjoyed bringing it to you. And remember, for some of the most unique programming, public news, and some of the greatest music that's ever been written and aired, you can catch it right here at 911 FM, KGWB, the Great White Buffalo, and the voice of Western Texas College.