



Darrell Rodenbaugh, ba '86, poses with his wife, Lisa Rodenbaugh, at a North Texas Performing Arts event.

*Photo submitted*

# Staging a Comeback

Washburn lessons help Rodenbaugh turn youth theater into nation's largest

*By Angela Lutz*

When Darrell Rodenbaugh started volunteering with North Texas Performing Arts 10 years ago, the then-20-year-old children's theater organization was in serious financial trouble and appeared months away from closing. Rodenbaugh, ba '86, had a personal connection to the organization – his two children, now both in college, were heavily involved in the theater, and he'd seen the positive ways it impacted their lives.

His daughter, for instance, struggled with reading but accepted the opportunity when it came time to learn

her lines, and getting onstage helped his son overcome his shyness. Rodenbaugh watched the same theater magic happen with countless other kids who gained self-assurance and learned the value of teamwork by participating in a production, whether onstage or offstage.

"After a show, these kids walk a little taller," Rodenbaugh said. "They talk with a little more confidence. They're putting down their cell phones for a few hours and they're focusing on learning

important life skills. I've seen firsthand the profound impact on a child to have their voices heard onstage."

Because of Rodenbaugh's deep belief in the value of children's theater, he joined the North Texas Performing Arts board of directors then served as acting executive director when the organization was flagging 10 years ago. In this role, which he accepted on a pro-bono basis, Rodenbaugh organized fundraisers, introduced new programs, renegotiated leases and ultimately managed to get the organization back on the road to financial health. He was elected board president for each of the next eight years.

And what a difference a decade makes: Today, North Texas Performing Arts is the largest youth theater organization in the country, with a 30,000-square-foot Willow Bend Center of the Arts dedicated to Rodenbaugh that houses rehearsal rooms, audition centers, costume and set-build shops and the aptly named Rodenbaugh Theater. The organization hosts more than 1,000 performances each year, and last year, more than 6,000 kids participated. Due to the incredible growth of North Texas Performing Arts under his leadership, Rodenbaugh assumed the role of CEO in October 2018, still on a pro-bono basis.

"Darrell's marketing and facilitative leadership skills are remarkable," said Sara Egelston Akers, North Texas Performing Arts founder and executive director. "My favorite part of working with Darrell is brainstorming ideas and new programs, which will provide a better education for North Texas youth. I will always be grateful

for his leadership and gifts of time, treasure and talent."

The theater employs the performing arts to teach kids vital life skills. While Rodenbaugh wasn't involved in theater at Washburn, he learned valuable lessons as a student. It was his role with Alpha Delta that Rodenbaugh credits with giving him the marketing skills he needed to be successful in his career, and in his work with student government he first learned to deal with broadly differing perspectives. Prior to his involvement with North Texas Performing Arts, Rodenbaugh worked in sales and general management in the tech industry, including high-profile companies like IBM, Oracle, Yahoo and MacAfee. He also bought and sold his own security company.

"Washburn has really been the platform for the rest of my life," Rodenbaugh said. "Most of my success in life came as a result of my experiences there. Looking back now, I know I made a lot of mistakes, but it was that experience that put me on the path for anything good I have done."

After 25 years working long hours and traveling the world for his career, Rodenbaugh stepped away from the tech industry to focus on his family – and that's when he also became reconnected with his roots at Washburn, where his mother, sister and brother also earned their degrees.

"Darrell has stayed connected to Washburn in various important ways since he graduated," said Tim Durst, ba '84, Rodenbaugh's former fraternity brother, who currently serves on the Alpha Delta board and is chair of the Washburn University Alumni Association and Foundation board of trustees. "He has been deeply involved with Alpha Delta, mentoring students in the chapter, reforming and revitalizing our rush program, spearheading the chapter's 100th anniversary celebration and supporting the house in numerous other ways."

Rodenbaugh, a Washburn University Alumni Association and Foundation trustee, returns to campus often for Alpha Delta and trustee duties, which lets him reflect on Washburn's growth and change over the years – but also the ways it has stayed the same.

"The campus has such a fresh, new and exciting look," Rodenbaugh said. "But the fraternity that I was in over 30 years ago is very much the same as it was back then. It's a striking contrast – seeing what's new and wonderful on campus amidst the appeal of the historic and traditional." 



North Texas Performing Arts was struggling when Darrell Rodenbaugh became CEO on a pro bono basis. It's now the nation's largest youth theatre. He cut more than three miles of steel as volunteers built the risers in their new building. *Photo submitted*