

# Meet Paul Wiser, the 81-year-old who just graduated from Kennesaw State University

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**KENNESAW** — The booming ovation Paul Wiser received as he crossed the stage in Kennesaw State University’s Convocation Center Wednesday morning shows his commitment is an inspiration to many.

Wiser, 81, graduated magna cum laude with a degree in interdisciplinary studies from KSU’s Radow College of Humanities and Social Sciences Wednesday, nearly 40 years after he first began his education at the university.

He was KSU’s oldest spring 2023 graduate and achieved a 3.72 GPA. Wiser was also one of 60 veterans who graduated this spring, having served in the Army from 1959-1962.

Wiser is considered a non-traditional student, or a student who has been out of high

school at least five years. According to the state university system, there were 2,872 non-traditional students at KSU this spring.

Wiser returned to KSU after initially enrolling in 1985, when it was still Kennesaw College, to study business. He had a long, successful career in the hospitality and financial sectors, serving in numerous banks and credit unions and as a financial planner, but did not complete his college coursework until now.

Once he retired, he decided to finish what he started at KSU and become the first in his family to earn a college degree. More importantly, he wanted the credential to be able to move forward in his efforts to end veteran homelessness.

**‘THIS IS NOT ABOUT ME’**  
Initially intending to study



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business, Wiser shifted his focus to criminal justice, with a minor in leadership.

Wiser prides himself on

wanting to fix things, so it makes sense his senior seminar research project, “Local Community Initiatives

Can End Veteran Homelessness,” came about after

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# GRADUATE

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he identified the problem. “The Atlanta homeless population for veterans is the second largest in the nation,” he said.

He realized the federal government had too much on its plate to tackle veteran homelessness, so Wiser decided to focus on local approaches to address the problem.

“My approach is, we want to start it at the local level, controlled and managed by local people, bring all of the resources that the federal government has — because they’ve got some good ones and some bad ones — but bring it to the local level and create a local, community-driven element that will end veteran homelessness,” Wiser said.

If it proves effective, the approach could be expanded to other homeless communities, he added. Until then, his goal is to continue the work, in collaboration with KSU’s Center for the Advancement of Military and Emergency Services Research, of solving part of America’s homelessness crisis.

For Wiser, his college coursework was personal: For nearly 40 years, he cared for his older brother Ernest, a Korean War veteran who experienced his first schizophrenic episodes while serving in the early 1950s.

Using skills promoted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Wiser helped his brother manage his schizophrenia, and Ernest lived 19 years longer than the normal

life expectancy for those with the disorder.

“This is not about me, because my life has been totally built by other people and what they have experienced,” Wiser said.

Speaking about his project, Wiser said it’s imperfect. “Because I’m not that smart, but I want to help get started, because I don’t know how much time God’s got for me here on Earth, but while I’m here, I’ll give him whatever I’ve got.”

## ‘A SERVANT-LEADER’

For many who did not grow up in the age of smartphones and social media, online coursework may seem daunting.

Wiser, who completed his KSU degree entirely online, tackled the challenge head-on.

Joan Ledbetter, now a professor at the University of Tampa, taught Wiser in the fall of 2021 in a course called “Integrated Approach to Social Justice.”

In the course, students had to complete various projects involving different platforms and computer programs to show the numerous factors that influence social justice issues.

“His work was phenomenal,” Ledbetter said, even after he talked about lacking technical expertise compared with his younger classmates.

His final project for the course, “Families in Crisis: Invisible Injuries on the Homefront,” was a website with various resources and personal reflections on active duty military and veterans challenged by mental illness.

“It was all new to him as an older student, but he did the best job of anybody, and the



Courtesy - Kennesaw State University

Paul Wiser shakes hands with Kennesaw State President Kathy Schwaig during Wednesday’s commencement ceremony.

most thorough, thoughtful, interesting work of all the students,” Ledbetter said. “What professor doesn’t love that?”

Wiser was an asset, Ledbetter said, especially during class discussions, where he shared his life experience.

Wiser, who lives in Canton with his wife, Rosemary, a retired IV therapist at Piedmont Hospital, is the father of two children.

“It’s always helpful to have some mixture in the classroom for experiences, but with him taking it seriously and being such a mature adult, that really helped the rest of the class to rise up,” Ledbetter said. “You know what they say: All ships rising at the same time with the tide, and he was the tide making all the ships rise.”

## A PROFESSOR’S DREAM

Katharine Schaab, coordinator and associate professor of Interdisciplinary

Studies and Wiser’s senior seminar instructor, echoed Ledbetter’s praise.

“Paul I think in so many ways is the exact type of student that professors want to work with,” Schaab said. “He has a passion, he is just so enthusiastic about learning more, about being engaged with not only the topic, but people that it affects.”

Wiser understood his work transcends the classroom and makes an impact in the lives of people, Schaab added.

“He devotes himself to the research, to being in conversation with people and to continuing to improve how he thinks about and writes about and analyzes the issue at hand,” she said.

Wiser was also sensitive to others’ struggles, Ledbetter said, and she experienced that firsthand. When her husband died in September 2021, near the start of the semester, Wiser checked in on her.

“He was extremely kind in reaching out and what he said to me, and giving his condolences,” Ledbetter said. “Just very kind and graceful emails that he sent me as far his care and concern, very giving person.”

Speaking of giving, Wiser was happy to share advice with students who will follow in his footsteps.

“Listen,” Wiser said. “Lis-

ten,” he repeated. “You can learn from everybody. The major thing we’ve got right now in our society is we don’t listen to each other, we talk over each other. But this community right here, Kennesaw State University, they listen — every single student.”

Wiser is one of about 3,500 graduates at KSU this year. The school is the third-largest university in Georgia with over 40,162 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled as of spring 2023, according to the University System of Georgia.



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