

NAIFA Leader John Wheeler, Jr., Featured in InsuranceNewsNet Magazine

By NAIFA/Paul Feldman on 2/8/23 5:08 PM

John Wheeler, senior executive partner of Totus Insurance Agency LLC has an extensive background in the financial services industry that began in 1969. Growing up in a small town, where life insurance could mean the difference between a family keeping and losing their home, he quickly learned that having tough conversations with friends and acquaintances could change their future as well as create a path to success for him.

Those early lessons quickly taught him the important role a financial advisor can play in the lives of others. He's worked to continuously educate himself about the business and share what he knows with others. A lifelong learner, Wheeler is one of only three people in the U.S. who has taught the entire CFP certification program, which he began teaching in 1985.

He's served as an NAIFA national trustee and past president of NAIFA Illinois, has served two terms as president of NAIFA Chicagoland, will be serving on the NAIFA Texas Board beginning in January 2023, and is currently president of Forum 400, an exclusive community that brings together elite insurance producers to openly share practical strategies and fresh ideas. A frequent conference speaker, he has taught at DePaul University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies and has been a frequent lecturer for The Insurance Sales Institute at Purdue University.

Having grown up in a small town in Illinois, Wheeler decided he wanted to go into the insurance business when he discovered that the most successful-looking man in the county seat sold insurance. Well, I guess that's as good as anything, he thought. He's never looked back.

Paul Feldman: You grew up in a small town in Illinois. How did you get into the insurance business?

John Wheeler: I grew up in a town of 54 people, a county population of 8,000 — so it wasn't a booming metropolis by a long shot. My father worked in the oil field. He made \$10,500 in 1972, the last year of his life, when he was killed on the job in an explosion. That's the most money he'd ever made. From the time I was 13 years old, I pretty well bought my own clothes, provided for myself, did every odd job that I could.

We grew up what most people would consider poor. We didn't necessarily know we were poor. There were a lot of families around me that had more than we had, but we still had our pride.

We never received assistance of any type. We just worked. My father taught me a good work ethic.

There was a guy in McLeansboro — the county seat of Hamilton County — which had 2,600 people. He always drove a nice car and dressed nice, and everybody liked him. I asked, “What’s he do?” “Well, he’s in the insurance business,” I was told. I said, “Well, I guess that’s as good as anything.”

So, on my 18th birthday — which was the soonest I could do it — I drove 3 1/2 hours to Springfield, the state capital. I took the insurance exam, which, at that time, was a legal-page-sized essay question test. All of a sudden, I’m in the insurance business.

I had a good friend who had returned from serving in the Navy and had gone to work with a major carrier. The major carrier promoted him into management. After a year, he recruited me, and that’s where my career started.

That’s how I got into the business. What I think is more important, though, is when the business got into me.

I got into the business because I knew I wanted something better out of life. When I started out, I had promised myself that if I was going to make it in the business, I wouldn’t impose on my friends and family. I was going to make it on my own. About six months after I went to work for the major carrier, a good friend of mine was killed in a car accident.

Well, at the wake, his wife is crying on my shoulder and I’m crying on her shoulder. She said, “I wish Jeff had a chance to talk to you about life insurance. He knew we probably needed to buy it, and he wouldn’t have bought it from anybody but you. But he said, ‘John’s new in the business. When he gets settled down, I’m sure he’ll talk to us.’” Well, we never did talk. She and the two kids lost their home, had to move back in with her parents.

It was my fault because I didn’t want to impose on friends and family when, in fact, my friend was relying on me and I didn’t know it. I think that’s one mistake a lot of people make when they first start in the business. Well, after that happened with Jeff, I even had the courage to approach an old girlfriend’s parents. Now, in a small town, that’s real courage. The fellow was 58

years old, and he had never bought life insurance. Didn't believe in it. I went to see him and he said, "Look, I know you're in the insurance business." Because in small towns, there are no secrets. He said, "I don't believe in it. I don't want to talk to you." I told him about my experience with Jeff and what that had made me feel like.

I said, "I care about you and your family. I never want to feel like that again. All I ask is you give me 30 minutes to have a conversation. If at that point you still don't want to do anything, the monkey's off my back." After about 45 minutes, he bought a \$250,000 whole life policy with a waiver premium. In 1969, that was a pretty big sale. That was great from a financial standpoint, and I felt, OK, I provided a service.

Well, six months later, he's out on the tractor one day and he has a heart attack, but he didn't die. That gave me the chance to see how a waiver premium worked. He was eventually able to get back to work. About two years later, he ended up having another heart attack. This time, he wasn't as fortunate. At the wake, Ruby, his wife, was crying on my shoulder. I'm crying on her shoulder. She said, "If it hadn't been for you, we'd have lost the farm."

That's when the business got into me. When I found my purpose, that's when things got meaningful.

Feldman: That's a powerful story. You're a constant learner and also a constant teacher. You've taught the CFP program and you're one of three teachers in the country who has taught the entire program, correct?

Wheeler: Yes, that's what I've been told. I'm one of three people in the U.S. crazy enough to teach the entire program. And that was baptism by fire. Because when you're standing in front of a group of other people from a very diverse background — I mean, I'd have CPAs, attorneys, trust officers, real estate people, insurance people, securities people, people trying to change careers — you have to learn how to explain things in different ways so that they are able to internalize the information.

The CFP education is not just a matter of memorization and regurgitating that information. It's a matter of application. I think most people would say that it's one of the more grueling exams there is. I've even had attorneys and CPAs say it was the worst exam they ever took.

When you get to the point when you think you know it all, that's when you're in trouble because life is continually changing. The industry continues to change. As the old adage goes: Even if you're on the right track, if you just stand there you'll get run over. The same thing applies to learning.

When I started in the business, I didn't know anything. So I decided, "OK, I'm going to commit an hour to an hour and a half per day to improving my knowledge and my skills." I've done that for 53 years.

Learning is a continual process. I can't stress that enough.

Feldman: You work primarily with high-wealth clients. What are the major differences between high-wealth and other clients?

Wheeler: The only difference, in my opinion, between a high net worth client and someone who barely has two nickels to rub together is that the problems of high net worth individuals are magnified.

Whether we're dealing with high net worth individuals or anybody else, I start based on three questions. First, what's important to you? What are your goals and your desires, your dreams? Tell me what really matters to you. I'll drill down as deep as you will go, continuing to ask questions to get a depth of understanding about what makes you tick and what's important to you.

Second, I'll ask you what are the things that could jeopardize reaching those goals and objectives? Now, I know the answer to that. But if you tell me, that's altogether different from me telling you. God gave us two eyes, two ears and one mouth, and when we're dealing with clients or prospects, we ought to use them in that proportion. Let's say you can't work for a period of time, for example. Or you're on the wrong side of a lawsuit. You get divorced. You've lost your job. If I ask more questions and make fewer statements, we'll typically have better communication.

The third question I ask — when it's appropriate, and most of the time it is in one way or another — is how do you want to be remembered? If it's a family situation, do you want to be remembered as a mother or father who loved your family so much that you wanted to be sure

they're taken care of? Or do you want to be the mother or father who had good intentions but never got around to taking care of business?

Or if you're a business owner and you told me that you want your business to continue and to be passed on, do you want to be known as that business owner who made sure everything was in sync for the continuation of that business or for the value to be preserved for the family? Or do you want to be the business owner who just never quite got around to taking care of your legacy?

Any conversation, whether it's with someone who has a \$10,000 net worth or \$100 million net worth, is around those three questions.

Feldman: What is a piece of advice you offer through your courses that your students find most interesting or shocking? A real lightbulb-changer for them?

Wheeler: The better I can get to know a client and their situation, the more I'm there for them. I want people to feel comfortable about their retirement. Well, what is going to make them feel comfortable? Some people, if they didn't have \$50,000 a week, would feel like they're doing without. Others, if they had \$50,000 a year, they'd think they're all set. Again, it's a matter of understanding perspective.

Not everybody can get on a roller coaster after eating tacos and have the same experience. Sometimes they don't have the stomach for the ride. It's all about the questions we ask and how we really get into what's important. I don't consider myself a salesperson. I just help people make educated decisions.

I tell clients every day, "Look, I don't have to live with the results of your decisions — you do." They have to be committed to those results because they have to live with them.

Feldman: Given the way this economy's been going, how have your recommendations changed over the past couple of years?

Wheeler: Well, I think the key thing is you have to have a process. A process may be adjusted, but it doesn't really change. Again, I go back to my three questions. Now, the solutions may vary to some degree. I may have champagne taste and a beer pocketbook.

The key thing is doing something to either work toward or help you achieve what's important. I haven't seen that change in 53 years. There are a lot more products and services available today than there were 53 years ago. When I started, you had a rate book that you could put in your pocket because there weren't many products. Today there's a litany of products, and the biggest challenge sometimes is confusion because of that — because you have apples and oranges ... and watermelons.

If you look at term insurance, it's great as long as you die on time. All term insurance is actuarially priced to lapse before you die. Again, can it be a Band-Aid? Absolutely. Because here again, you want to be sure that there's enough death benefit in place to take care of what's imperative today. But it isn't going to be a long-term solution.

A lot of people say, "Well, when I build enough wealth, I no longer need insurance." My response to that would be: At what point are you wealthy enough that you would intentionally overpay for anything? Did you see yourself walking up to the Mercedes dealer and saying, "I want to pay full sticker plus 40% just because I can."? They laugh and say, "Well, no." I'll say, "Well, that's what you're telling me."

The high net worth individual's biggest problem normally is liquidity. If you have to sell something at the wrong time, that can be catastrophic. We know the market goes up and the market goes down. We know interest rates go up and interest rates go down. If you want surety and certainty, that's where proper planning comes in.

The biggest challenge in retirement is health. We talk about how long-term care, if needed in retirement, can be more catastrophic than any market volatility we've ever seen. People don't worry about that as much when they're young as they do when they get closer to retirement. When they're younger, it's usually more about providing replacement of income for my family if something happens to me, perhaps, or to cover debts. Hopefully by the time we get closer to retirement, covering debts isn't as big an issue and I've got assets to provide. But at that point, I have to be able to preserve them.

We talk about accumulation of assets, preservation of assets and then finally distribution of assets. That's when we get into the more advanced tax issues. If I know what matters to you and what's important to you, then we can have those follow-up conversations to get to that point. As the great philosopher Yogi Berra said, "If you don't know where you're going, how can you be sure you're not already there?"

Feldman: Is life insurance playing a more prominent role in retirement strategies given the current economic circumstances?

Wheeler: Yes, in many situations. When you get into tax issues, properly structured permanent insurance can provide a volatility buffer or can provide tax-free income. The only other thing that truly is tax-free is Roth, but there's a limitation on how much you can put in Roth. The more tax-free income you can have, the more flexibility you have from a planning perspective. Life insurance can provide that. By the same token, life insurance can replace part of what I spent while I was alive in my retirement years, so that helps provide a legacy or security for my surviving family.

Feldman: How about annuities? Is this a good time to buy annuities, with interest rates going up?

Wheeler: An annuity, used properly, can do something nothing else can: provide an income that you can't outlive. If you're talking about having it for income purposes, an annuity, in my opinion, should be a part of the planning process because it provides a base. An annuity, when you think about it, is not a lot different from a pension. Fewer and fewer people today have pensions.

In the pre-retirement years, it can be something to look at, certainly. For a younger individual, I would want an annuity that perhaps would change either with some type of cost-of-living adjustment or some type of potential growth. What are you trying to achieve? It's another tool in the toolbox.

Feldman: Any final thoughts that you want to impart to our readers?

Wheeler: First, it's important to get involved in your community. I was one of the founders of DuPage County's Habitat for Humanity because I believed in helping people help themselves. I was one of the founders of the Carol Stream Chamber of Commerce. People will get to know you, and they get to know that they can trust you and that your word is good. My father said, "Your word is your bond, and there's never a right way to do a wrong thing."

Second, you have to continue to hone your craft. You always have to be trying to improve. The definition of luck is when preparation meets opportunity. If you put in the time, you'll always be prepared.

Finally, I think you have to decide whether this is just a job or a career. If it's a job, you're looking at it purely as a paycheck. If it's a career, you're looking at it with more of a purpose.

I think, overall, our industry provides one of the greatest services to humanity that there is, outside of possibly medicine or the clergy. Because when I go to a wake, I'm carrying a check while everybody else is giving sympathy and prayers. I've never known a widow or a widower yet who sent back money to the insurance company because they got too much.