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# [Georgia Southern graduate's public service to have greater impact with public health degree](#)

December 15, 2020

Recent Georgia Southern University honor graduate Lauren Afsharian worked in the hospitality industry for years and loved being of service to others, but she wanted to do so in a more impactful way. Afsharian chose the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health on the Armstrong Campus to expand her reach.



*Lauren Afsharian*

“As a non-traditional student, I knew that I needed a degree to accomplish my dreams,” she said. “Majoring in public health checked all of my boxes for wanting to make a positive impact in high-need, underserved communities. I chose Georgia Southern because it is a well-known, reputable school with an accredited public health program.”

Afsharian, who graduated this fall with a Bachelor of Science in Public Health with a focus on health education and promotion, is applying to graduate school at Georgia Southern with hopes to major in elementary education.

“My experiences and degree have shown me how important a quality education can make in a person’s life for their future, and I would love to have the opportunity to create a strong foundation for students during their most crucial years,” Afsharian said. “It is certainly still in line with public health, just from a different angle.”

Afsharian honed her public service skills outside of the classroom by volunteering at the Children’s Hospital at Memorial Health and representing the Jiann-Ping Hsu College College of Public Health at the Savannah Black Heritage Festival. She also worked on research that focused on the effects stress has on the mental health of students.

“These experiences increased my awareness of mental health and also the importance of research so that policies and resources can be improved on campus for those in need,” she said. “Volunteering at the Children’s Hospital was incredibly humbling and gave me an opportunity to make kids smile or bring some comfort to them and their families during a challenging time.”

One person Afsharian said was important to her success at Georgia Southern was her advisor Audra Taylor, in addition to her professors.

“Ms. Taylor knew I wanted to finish my studies as soon as possible, and she helped make that happen by suggesting the courses for me to take and reorganizing my schedule so that I could take as many classes as possible,” Afsharian said. “She was always encouraging and knew my potential and had faith in me which I really appreciated. My professors were not only my professors but at times my mentors cheering me on each step of the way.”

Posted in [Awards and Recognition](#)

Tags: [GSGrad20](#), [Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health](#)

# '65 years old and not done yet,' former marketing professional earns master's in special education to work with children

December 15, 2020



When Darlene Williams began pursuing her master's degree in special education at Georgia Southern University, she had not attended college in more than 37 years.

Following a 30-year career in sales and marketing, Williams decided to chase a new dream.

"I started substitute teaching in October 2013, and one of my first assignments was in a high school special education classroom," she said. "That is all it took. I thought to myself, 'this is where I am supposed to be.'"

After earning a bachelor's in business administration from the University at Buffalo in 1981, Williams initially thought she would one day make the transition from her business career to become a math teacher.

"I never thought I'd teach special education at all," she said. "Divine intervention is all I can say."

By 2015, Williams was teaching in a special education classroom in an elementary school in metro Atlanta. Working with students who have moderate to severe disabilities, Williams wanted to pursue further opportunities to grow as a teacher.

"I never wanted to invest in a master's degree before because I didn't have a reason to," said Williams. "I found my reason. My students were my reason."

The Georgia Southern College of Education offers a fully online advanced teaching program in special education that allowed Williams to continue to work while also enriching her practice and knowledge of students with disabilities.

"It was a challenge at times," she said. "I had to catch up with this new generation. I am tech savvy, but so much as changed since I was last in college."

Williams completed her course work in July and will walk across the stage at Paulson Stadium on the Statesboro Campus on December 17.

"My granddaughter, Ariana, who is currently living in New York, encouraged me to walk at graduation so I decided to do it," said Williams. "Though Ariana cannot attend, I will have the support of my daughter, son, two grandsons, brother and brother-in-law and my sweetie."

"I am 65 years old, and I am not done yet," she added. "If that inspires others to know they can do it, then I am happy to be that inspiration for them."

Williams says the plans for the future are to keep working and possibly pursue a doctorate.

"I don't want to retire," she said. "I may eventually have to move out of the classroom, but I will still work. I want to help students with disabilities get ready for life, and I will put all my energy into doing that the best that I can."

Georgia Southern University, a public Carnegie Doctoral/R2 institution founded in 1906, offers approximately 140 different degree programs serving almost 27,000 students through 10 colleges on three campuses in Statesboro, Savannah, Hinesville and online instruction. A leader in higher education in southeast Georgia, the University provides a diverse student population with expert faculty, world-class scholarship and hands-on learning opportunities. Georgia Southern creates lifelong learners who serve as responsible scholars, leaders and stewards in their communities. Visit [GeorgiaSouthern.edu](https://GeorgiaSouthern.edu).