

Ernst Kiesling

During his time at Texas Tech University, Kiesling helped develop important research groups and led the National Storm Shelter Association.

The Texas Tech University community is mourning the death of Ernst “Ernie” W. Kiesling. Kiesling came to Texas Tech in 1969 as the chairman of the civil engineering department and retired in 2018 as professor emeritus, but his contributions to the safety and well-being of others expand far beyond Lubbock.



During his 50-plus-year career, Kiesling helped create the Institute for Disaster Research (IDR) in response to the EF-5 tornado that hit Lubbock in 1970. The IDR later became the Wind Science Engineering Research Center and is now known as the National Wind Institute (NWI).

Kiesling, however, was most famously known as the “Father of the Safe Room.” After a tornado tore through Burnet, Texas in 1972, Kiesling went to assess the damage. He noticed a small pantry was still standing despite the rest of the house being destroyed. This observation gave Kiesling an idea to utilize above-ground shelters to protect people from wind-related damage during a tornado. He helped create the Debris Impact Facility, which is part of the NWI, to see how wood debris impacted against

varying surfaces and materials like brick, concrete and metal.

After a tornado significantly damaged Oklahoma City in May 1999, a new industry for storm shelters emerged. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) published a booklet on safe room standards, but low-quality designs were being manufactured regardless, and people were dying as a result.

However, in February 2000, Kiesling invited several companies that had their shelters tested after the Oklahoma City incident to a meeting to address quality issues in the storm shelter industry. By 2001, he established the National Storm Shelter Association (NSSA), with its headquarters based in Lubbock. He served as the executive director of the NSSA from May 2001 until he retired in 2018.

Kiesling will not only be remembered fondly as the “Father of the Safe Room,” but also as a co-worker, mentor and friend.

“My association with Ernie dates back to his arrival at Texas Tech in 1969,” said Kishor Mehta, a Horn Professor of civil engineering in the Edward E. Whitacre Jr. College of Engineering. “I found him to be supportive in all my work at Texas Tech. I can't say enough about his mentorship and friendship over the many years. His recognition as the 'Father of the Safe Room' is very fitting for his passion of saving lives in tornadoes.”

John Schroeder, the senior director of the NWI and a professor of atmospheric science in the Department of Geosciences, remembers Kiesling as a supportive mentor and friend.

“Dr. K was dedicated to the development of the above-ground storm shelter, and he fostered the maturation of that entire industry through his efforts,” Schroeder said. “On a personal level, I knew Dr. K outside of his professional life, and he was kind, humble and cared about others. He served as a mentor to me over the years and supported me both professionally and personally. I will miss him greatly, as will the broader wind engineering community.”

To honor him, the NSSA created the Kiesling Award in 2014. The award is given annually to an individual, company, association or entity that has made significant contributions to the storm shelter industry. Kiesling was the initial recipient.

During his tenure at Texas Tech, Kiesling had many accomplishments. Click the links below to read more about Kiesling and his work:



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[Storm Shelter Standard—Structural Provisions](#) (from Structure magazine)

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