

Q & A for NHC



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Did the meteorology bug strike when you were young?

I was nine when Hurricane Fran came through central North Carolina. We had not gotten to the weather section in school, so I didn't know anything about hurricanes. I was asleep in my room, but my Dad, who had never been through a hurricane either, was watching as it came through. We had a ton of trees fall down in the yard because of the wind, and the soil being really moist. When the eye of the hurricane reached us, he went outside with a flashlight – thinking the worst was over. The deck steps were slippery so he fell and dropped his flashlight, causing it to go out. He took three steps from the deck while looking for the flashlight and - bang! - a three-foot diameter tree uproots and falls right in front of him. If he had gone out just a few steps farther, he would have been squished!

That would leave an impression!

It did, so I decided that I really wanted to learn about weather (hurricanes in particular) so that I could educate my family and keep them from endangering themselves during storms. When I finally studied the weather unit, it made more sense why the hurricane winds picked back up after the calm of the eye. I'd always been good at science, but my high school environmental science teacher really influenced me when he said that (at the time) no one really understood much about the interaction of the weather and ocean and that I'd have a really interesting job to go to every day. So I chose to go to NC State University for a Meteorology degree then later continued on to Purdue University for a Masters.

So, you're part of the Wolfpack from North Carolina State?

Yes, and I was excited to go there since the local university actually had an emphasis on tropical meteorology, since North Carolina often gets hit by tropical cyclones. I think my NC State banner is getting messed with in my office; it ends up on the floor a lot. I think it may be the work of some (FSU) Seminoles here due to our friendly rivalry to dominate the office.

Female meteorology majors were not that common just a few years ago.

There were more women than men in my undergraduate class at NC State, but it was just the opposite in my graduate class at Purdue University.

Why did you select Purdue?

As an undergrad, I worked for the State Climate Office of North Carolina, so I had the combination of weather, climate and weather modeling experience. My advisor at Purdue recognized my background and he suggested that, considering my modeling experience and interest in hurricanes, I collaborate with some hurricane modelers from the Hurricane Research Division (HRD) looking at Tropical Storm Fay's first landfall in 2008 onto South Florida. The project sounded great and I would get to meet hurricane scientists, so off to Purdue I went. We did a lot of idealized runs, and I got to play God with the land surface by taking out Lake Okeechobee, removing the Atlantic Ocean, removing Florida – all sorts of things to test out the NOAA land surface model and what TS Fay's reaction would be to the changes.

What made you get out into the real world?

I was basically done with all of my classes, and knew I wanted to work for a few years before considering doing a Ph.D. My fiancé (at the time) lived in Maryland, and while I was traveling back and forth, I got a random call from a private commodities trading forecasting group in Bethesda who needed a meteorological applications developer immediately. It was a win-win since I would still be able to finish my thesis while working near my fiancé and family, so I took the job.

As a meteorologist, where would you get the IT specialty?

It's funny, because you kind of pick that up-from doing any NWP modeling study. I ended up doing a lot of data-flow stuff, dealing with high level computing and automating/developing graphics in every position I've had. However, I was pretty much the entire IT department for the Bethesda company, and they preferred having a

meteorologist with these skills versus getting a computer scientist since I could still speak and translate their “Met” lingo.

How did you get to NHC?

I always wanted to do hurricanes and desired a government job with either NOAA or NASA, so I had been looking around for a while. I couldn't believe it when I got the job; the fact that I got a NOAA job AND one at NHC on my first go around was amazing.

What is your job here at NHC?

I am a Meteorologist/Programmer for TSB (Technology and Science Branch) which involves a lot of code development and troubleshooting of NHC's operational products, systems and graphics. Our branch is kind of the “meltdown crew” that everyone runs to when things break down. Currently, I am working on “modernizing” the graphical products from TAFB and for the web to make them look more visually pleasing. I am starting to learn the ins and outs of the Automated Tropical Cyclone Forecast (ATCF) system as one of the new focal points for this system at NHC. In this role I interact a lot with the hurricane specialists since it is the major program they use to make the operational tropical cyclone forecasts, which is a big undertaking. This season I am also supporting the Hurricane Specialist Unit (HSU) during Hurricane Support Meteorologist (HSM) shifts. I'm really glad that NHC has this program since my position really does not do forecasting, but with HSM I can still learn and forecast on the side – otherwise I'd really miss it.

How does it compare to the private sector?

It's a similar job, only the time-scale is different. It's not a competition – everyone gets your products. The private sector would ask to shave seconds off a particular program to have products out before its competitors. It is quality here at NHC.

Now that you're here, what are your aspirations?

Moving up through the ranks at TSB would be nice. Hopefully, I will be here for as long as possible. I'll see what I can do in TSB or maybe move around a bit. But I am still pretty new, and still figuring out what everybody does.

Do you think that a female meteorologist is set to a higher standard than the male counterpart?

You still have to outshine them to get anywhere, that's pretty much what it is. But there are more females now in the field, from what I could tell in my classes. Also there is so much competition in the purely forecasting aspect of meteorology, despite what gender you are. That's why I think you can further your career faster through the technical side of meteorology once you get the skills you need. The technical side is not for everyone but, if you like it as I do, it's fun to surprise people when they learn you're a meteorologist, you can do all of this programming/modeling and you're a female. The weather modeling is what helped me out the most, along with some web development skills.

So I hear that you are married, what do you do with your family in real life?

Yes, we just had our first anniversary in June. He loves that we are both meteorologists and that I can keep up with him when we talk about the weather to other people and when we bounce ideas off of each other. He encouraged me to go for it and apply for the NHC job, knowing that I had wanted to work there forever. He was really excited for me. I try to work out, doing Zumba and Pilates. Since I love to cook, I have to work off those extra calories. My husband and I are big movie buffs, so we catch up on them when we have time for a movie marathon. Otherwise, we go fishing or to exotic car shows on the weekends. My husband is really into cars, so I watch a lot of BBC's "Top Gear" to keep up with him on the models and the lingo. That show is so hilarious that it just sucks you in, even if you are not that into cars.

Send comments to: nhc.public.affairs@noaa.gov