

Q & A for NHC



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Your resume tells me you have been around the block a few times.

Well, I am an old man!

Then you must have been bitten by the weather bug a long time ago.

Yes, I have to admit that I have enjoyed the tropical weather since I was a little kid. I grew up in the Caribbean on the island of Cuba, where I got tropical storms, I got big waves and rain every day. I loved it.

Is there one event that pulled the trigger, or was it a series of things?

I think it was a whole series of events, but I do remember clearly Hurricane Donna (1960) when it was moving along the north coast of Cuba, and the winds. I was a very young kid then, and it really got me into weather.

Obviously your youth was in Cuba, but what was your schooling?

A little bit of my schooling took place in Cuba, but most of my formal education, my Masters and PhD, was here in the United States.

Did you actually work in Cuba as a meteorologist?

Yes, I did. I worked for a few years at the Cuban Met Service. I got a lot of experience looking at the weather and talking with a lot of the old timers there. They had a lot of experience. And that was pretty good. However, the good education, the math, the dynamics, I got it in the United States.

What was the reason you came to the U.S.?

That is an easy answer for any Cuban. They all want to come here like everybody else. But a lot of my relatives were in the United States, and it was time for me to move on. I went to the U.S. Office of Interest Section in Havana; I got my visa, came here legally, and went to school at the University of Miami.

The National Hurricane Center was very close by.

The first thing I did, before I even went to the University of Miami, was visit the Hurricane Center. Neil Frank was the director at the time, and Paul Hebert was the deputy director. They immediately gave me a letter for me to visit the Center anytime I wanted and to work for them if I wanted to translate the advisories into Spanish.

That was a good opportunity.

I did that, and then the opportunity came to enter the University of Miami. Things continued to get better for me because now I was getting the education. Neil Frank continued to hire me. Bill Gray hired me to collect the data he is now using to base his seasonal forecast. Vernon Dvorak, who was developing the upgrade to the new Dvorak technique, wanted me to help him collect the satellite pictures from the basement. At the same time he was working, he was teaching me. For me, it was a fascinating experience to be able to talk with all of these forecasters. And then you had Gil Clark, Bob Case, Hal Gerrish, they all liked me and trained me. When the position was open, I got it.

What position was that?

I was a meteorologist with the TAFB unit for a few years. I was in heaven, I loved to work there. In fact, Max Mayfield and I worked a lot of shifts together. Then after two years, they made me a senior hurricane specialist.

How long before you had your first big event?

When I was in TAFB, we had Hurricane Gilbert (1988). The senior hurricane specialist back then needed help, and I was always eager to do so, whatever was needed. It was a big storm for me. I was able to do a lot of TV interviews in Spanish. There were many storms since then, but I do remember my first advisory, it was Hurricane Jerry (1989) in the Gulf of Mexico. I was supposed to have some training, but they told me you had to do it! Of course I did it, and Gil Clark supervised me.

It's very obvious that you enjoy what you do.

I am very lucky to be able to do what I want to do, and I do not want to do anything else. Especially when I know I am helping the community and saving lives. Not only in the

United States, but as you know, the Hurricane Center has international responsibilities. We coordinate the watches and warnings with all of the Caribbean countries. For me, coming from the Caribbean, it's an extra happiness that I am able to help all of the people in the region.

You're heavily involved with the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in that aspect, right?

I am like the focal point here, and I do the paperwork for every project involving the WMO. But all of the specialists coordinate with them and we are all prepared to talk with them.

We've had an infusion of new blood in the hurricane specialist unit during the past few years. Do you see in them a little bit of what you went through?

Oh yes. Some of them are really excited just like me. They think they know how to forecast and come in very "pompous". But everyone will learn, or have already learned, that it's not that simple. When I finished fresh from school, I thought I was going to solve all of the problems, be able to predict intensity, be able to do everything. But as soon as you put your name on that forecast, you become very humble. And that's good. I am glad people are coming with a lot of enthusiasm, and they bring new ideas and new techniques.

With all of your time and experience, do you consider yourself a teacher and mentor?

Well, if they want to listen to me, I am glad to talk with them. But sometimes the new generation does not want to listen to the old man, and that's their loss. But most of the new kids are really wonderful. They listen, and put up with my old rules that sometime work.

What is the most fun part of your job?

For me, it is to come to work every day and look at the first visible satellite picture, because that's the first idea of what's going on in the tropics. The other fancy things are all important, but for me the first visible picture of the day is amazing.

What is the worst part of your job?

Supervisors! But I guess we all have them one way or another and the way society is structured. But I get along well with them.

Even though you would probably love being here 24.7, what do you do to relax?

I go to the beach; I love to swim. As I said, I grew up on the beach. But I also have a hobby, one of the things I like the most, and that is to go to the ballet. I am lucky enough to know most of the best dancers in the world. Life had been good to me, and I got to know them. And I guess it's because I am interested in ballet and they love hurricanes. So that's a good combination. It's a lot of fun.

How much longer do you see yourself doing all of this?

There have been times when I have been tempted. Not because I have problems here or anything like that, but because there have been some opportunities. For example, some TV stations have made offers. One wanted me to be the “Max Mayfield” of Spanish TV. I was tempted to compete with Max; it would be fun because Max is a good friend of mine. But I still love this job too much and I don’t think I am ready to leave it.

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