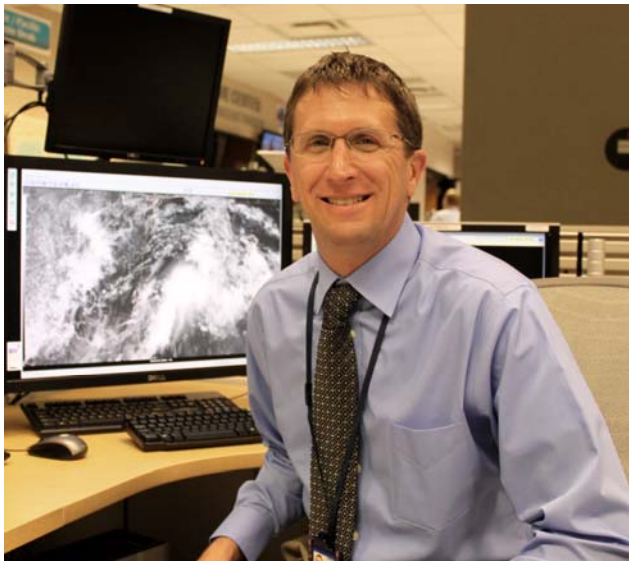


Q & A for NHC



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I feel as if I should play a few bars from John Sebastian’s “Welcome Back” song.

I loved “Welcome Back Kotter”! It is good to be back home, not just home in South Florida where I grew up, but to be back home here at the National Hurricane Center with people that I love working with when I worked here previously for eight years. I have a tremendous amount of pride that they have accepted me back as their Director.

What has surprised you most?

I love what you guys have done with the place, it is snazzy! There are lots of renovations that not only make it look nicer, but it’s more functional in operations. The forecasters are even more proud of their operational environment. The front office area has been redone and looks great. Most of all, there is the perfect combination of people who have been here a long time with tremendous experience, and some fresh energetic faces.

You come in as a known face to some and unknown to others. How do you work with that?

I enjoy meeting new people and helping younger folks develop their careers, finding what makes them tick and how that matches with what we need done here. Also, matching up the experienced folks with the less experienced ones to make sure we have institutional memory in the years to come, and passing along that knowledge to the newer people. The fresh faces are bringing a lot of good ideas to the table.

Your predecessor said that those who become a meteorologist have a defective weather gene. Would you be one of them?

Oh, I had it bad! As a child, I was afraid of every hurricane, every tornado. I was afraid of weather. It's that fear that got me interested because – much like you want to be able to fix your car instead of taking it to a mechanic – I really wanted to be able to forecast hurricanes so that I would find out what makes them tick, where they're going, and get out of their way. And to be able to help people with it is a career option from which I never deviated.

You're a Chicagoan that came to South Florida.

My roots are deep in Chicagoland and in the Midwest. We moved to South Florida when I was three years old, and went to elementary school here. But my junior and senior high schools were in Houston, Texas. I decided to go back to the Midwest for college and got my undergraduate degree in Atmospheric Science from Purdue. That was enough winter weather for me! I had to go south, and went to Florida State for my Masters and Doctorate in Meteorology. Doing the math, I have spent three-quarters of my life in the tropics, loving and hating hurricanes.

What was your first experience with a hurricane?

1979. Hurricane David was approaching South Florida. We were huddled in an interior room because there was the potential to be directly impacted. We made the terrible mistake of taping up our windows, and all I remember is scraping tape off the windows for weeks after that. There's probably still tape marks on those windows. We were fortunate that the hurricane did not directly impact us in a significant way, but it opened my eyes and gave me the bug to forecast hurricanes. The hurricanes tended to follow me around after that. In 1983, I was in Houston for Alicia, and in 1995 I was in the Panhandle for Opal. And of course, a lot of the folks here blame me for the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons.

Was it a childhood dream to be Director of the National Hurricane Center?

I was starting junior high school about the time of Hurricane David, and I watched the Director of the Hurricane Center (Dr. Neil Frank) brief on television about it. From that moment on, I wanted that job. It's amazing when you look back. A lot of kids growing up want to be a football player, and there are hundreds of those jobs. There's only one "Director of the National Hurricane Center" job, and to actually fulfill that dream is beyond words.

Yet, you can't do the job all by yourself.

This is one job in a center that has a lot of people that do a lot of different things. And, we have so many partners outside of this building. The hurricane enterprise is done by a lot of people; I am just playing one role.

How does your family feel about the position?

My family in South Florida is very happy to see me come back home. But I have family in a lot of different states, so I still have to make some plane rides to go visit everyone. I can assure you that my wife has made it very clear to me that we are not moving again. All the moving around since we have been married has gotten out of control. Now that we are back home in South Florida and at the Hurricane Center, I hope to stay here for a long time, stay in the same house for a long time, let my son stay in the same school district for a long time, and just settle in and enjoy the ride, hoping that we can keep everybody safe from hurricanes that come our way or that of anybody else.

Your two years at The Weather Channel adds to your ability to get the message out.

I learned a lot at The Weather Channel. I had been on television before, representing the National Hurricane Center and Central Pacific Hurricane Center, been interviewed a lot, and covered live events on behalf of NOAA. But it's a very different world to actually do television, to be part of the production and do it every day. They gave me tremendous coaching and training, and just by doing it over and over, you learn to become better. I gained a complete respect for the whole idea of engaging the audience. You don't want someone who is giving hurricane information to just show up on TV a day or two before a hurricane makes landfall. You need to be someone that people get to know and trust, show them that you're human and a real person just like them. Engaging the public is a year-round activity. When the hurricane is on our doorstep and I talk, hopefully people will have gotten to know me a little bit and will trust what I have to say.

What will keep you up at night?

A couple of things: the safety of my family, the safety of the employees here at the Hurricane Center, and whether we have given all of the information we can to empower the emergency managers that rely on us to make life-saving decisions for evacuation and other preparedness actions. I'll be reviewing my list every day to make sure I've done everything I can to make all of that happen. Again, not doing it alone, making sure I've empowered other people to do what they need to do to keep people safe. I'm just one part of the process.

The job requires extensive travel. Are you and your family prepared for it?

We talked about it long and hard, for years in fact, knowing this was a potential career option for me someday. That day has come, and we are doing everything we can to limit the negative effects all of the travel might have on the family. I will take advantage of every technological piece of equipment available to keep in touch with my family. But it is an acceptable sacrifice in our view because I want to set an example for my son. If you have a passion for something and find something you're good at, you do it, especially if it is a job that involves service and helping other people. There are plenty of people at the Hurricane Center that are willing and able to do some of the things that

the Director does. I am not going to be here forever, so I have to give them the opportunity to do those things, including some of the outreach and travel obligations.

Going back to your previous years here, and now with this position, are you able to turn it off when you walk out of the building?

Yes, I have found a way over the years to focus on the here and now. That means when I walk in the door at home, I am a husband and a dad only. If there is some significant hurricane event or work issue that has to be dealt with while I am at home, I will excuse myself and go to another room to deal with it. But we all have to cool it once in a while and gain perspective. I am not going to be effective in this job working 20 hours a day and sleeping four hours a night.

What do you do to relax?

Cooking is a cathartic therapy for me. Some of the things I cook are good. We have some favorite recipes at home that my wife really likes when I make, and I've passed some of those along to her. We enjoy spending time in the water, whether it's the pool or at the beach. That is my brain eraser – to go into the ocean or into the pool, to clear my mind, play with my son, and enjoy the nice warm weather here.

What is the one thing you would like to do here?

I would like to be able to look back ten years from now at 2012 and say “Wow, look how far we've come and how much people understand all of the hazards that a hurricane poses”. Not just the wind, but the water-related hazards – the inland flooding from the heavy rains, and especially the storm surge hazard. Storm surge is the main reason people are ordered to evacuate from the coastal areas. It's the one weather-related hazard that can kill the most people, and we don't even have a specific warning for it – a specific storm surge warning. We have a hurricane warning, but the hurricane-force-winds often do not occur at the same places or same times as the storm surge. Hopefully, we can work toward a new warning in the not-so-distant future that will better help get the message out about storm surge.

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