

# Q & A for NHC



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## **You have to be the hardest working person at NHC today.**

The Hurricane Center has many talented and hardworking people. We're loyal and that dedication often leads to long hours. I've been surrounded through the years by very, very bright people and have learned I need to work hard and long to keep up and make my contribution.

## **Where does that dedication come from?**

It's a combination of being a type A personality and being focused on work directed toward our mission of helping people be safe. We're professionals with a variety of specializations who share concerns for the well-being of the people who use our products and services. For many of us our work represents more than a job; it's a career of public service... our version of the Peace Corps or military service. This is our way of contributing to the nation, and to international communities as well.

## **It had to begin with an interest in meteorology at a young age.**

Like many of us here who gravitated toward meteorology, I have a story about how this interest was recognized. I was born in Los Angeles. My parents tell me that, when I was the age of three, they found me with my elbows propped up on the window sill

watching a stormy day outside. I guess I was learning at an early age that “It never rains in Southern California, it pours, man it pours”. That fascinated me. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was destined for a career in meteorology. I got lucky in that I had enough math and science skills to get through the tough coursework in college.

### **Where?**

I attended three different schools. I went to community college in California and then transferred to the University of Washington where I finished a Bachelors Degree and Masters Degree in Atmospheric Sciences, and then completed Ph.D. work at Texas Tech University. I spent 28 straight years in school, in part because, as on the job, I needed to put in extra time to keep up with the Joneses, Einsteins, and others who had more natural ability.

### **How did you get here?**

My arrival at the hurricane center had some twists and turns, and maybe a bit of serendipity, too. When I was a junior at the University of Washington, one of the professors in the atmospheric sciences department invited me to work with him and others on a research grant to analyze storms in the eastern tropical Atlantic Ocean that were observed during the GATE project. I jumped at the opportunity. That was the event that pointed me toward tropical meteorology, without which I don’t know which area of the field I would have entered.

### **What’s the serendipitous part?**

I got to know this professor quite well and he would up being my thesis advisor. We learned that his invitation to work with him was a mistake. He had intended to invite the top student in the class to work on the project. He got me confused with that student him and invited me instead. But it worked out well, at least for me!

### **Any other turn of events?**

While I was finishing my Ph.D. work in Texas, I came to South Florida and gave a talk as part of an interview with the Hurricane Research Division. My seminar must not have been considered anything special as HRD did not offer me a position. But, again, I had a little luck. Bob Sheets was then working at NHC and had intended to go to my seminar. While he didn’t make it to the talk, yet he offered to me a position at the hurricane center. So, I guess I should be grateful that he didn’t attend my seminar.

### **What did you get hired to do?**

I came in as part of a post-doc program with the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research (UCAR). It was a one year position, with a second year renewal option. Midway through the first year, one of the staff members here retired. Thinking back now, more good luck. I had been here long enough that the NHC leaders had learned enough about me to offer me the position, but not long enough where I had already committed to go somewhere else. So I went from being a post-doc into the Techniques Development and Application Unit, which is now part of our Technology and Science Branch (TSB). That was the second of seven or eight positions I have held here.

### **Is there a position in the building that you have not worked?**

There are very few. I started as a post-doc, I worked in the Techniques Development and Application Unit for three years, then I was in a split position for two years with the hurricane specialists during the hurricane season, and an operational position during the offseason in what is now the Tropical Analysis and Forecast Branch (TAFB). Then I held what is now the senior hurricane specialist position for seven years. Following that,

I was the warning coordination meteorologist for about a month before heading back to the TSB for two years as its chief.

**I have to believe you enjoy providing the technical guidance to the center.**

Yes, there were several positives and challenges that drew me to the TSB position. One that qualified as both was that it was my first management position here. Having worked in that branch before, I was still familiar with the work that went on there.

**You had positions in all three branches of NHC.**

Yes, TAFB, TSB and the Hurricane Specialist Unit. It was then off to the front office when I was selected as the Deputy Director of NHC in 2000. Max Mayfield was the Director at that time.

**You've been acting director several times.**

One of the primary responsibilities of deputy director is to serve as backup for the director. The director has a difficult job in many ways. One of those components is that he or she is the leader and face of the outreach program, which puts them on the road for several months during each offseason, about one third of the year. When the director is away, the deputy director remains here, and we hold to that in almost all circumstances. So that means that about a third of the time for the past ten years I have been the acting director. There was also an occasion in 2007 where we had a vacancy in the director position and I was acting director for seven months.

**Would you ever want to have the job permanently?**

The responsibilities are immense and, to date, the circumstances have not been right for me to be the director full time. But I will consider it the next time the opportunity arises. For such a critical position, one which has such important responsibilities, great visibility, many challenges and the long periods of travel, everything has to be aligned right within your professional and personal life to make the commitment that is required to do the job well.

**You mentioned the personal commitment. Family is very important to you.**

Thank you. Yes, it is. I am very proud of my wife and children. My wife has an important position as the president and CEO of a South Florida credit union...and of our home...where I am also deputy director. My daughter is in high school and my son is in junior high. Proper parenting requires a lot of attention, so that's a major part of my life. I've seen the kinds of challenges the previous directors have faced and those include being away from the family for extended periods of time. Even while in town, there are many pressures and draws that can take up the director's time outside of normal business hours. There are a lot of media demands and, as head of the organization, you are always on call here, too. There are also the interests and needs of the hierarchy at headquarters whereby you could be called to Washington DC or other places, or need to be otherwise responsive very quickly.

**NHC has a very good relationship with the media. In this 24/7 news cycle, is there anything that concerns you about it?**

For decades, the media has been a very close partner of the National Hurricane Center. We rely heavily on the media to help get the word out. While we have made significant advances in our forecast abilities and how we communicate about storms in education and outreach, we are still not nearly as effective as we need to be. The case of Hurricane Katrina provides a good but sad example of this.

**In what way?**

Over the final two to three days before landfall on the Gulf coast, the forecasts from the National Hurricane Center and the local weather forecast offices were excellent, not only in terms of accuracy but also in terms of highlighting the enormity of the threat--what was warned to be a potentially catastrophic storm. Yet the message was not completely effective. We lost more than a thousand people in Katrina. While a large number of those deaths occurred in association with levee problems in New Orleans that were not expected, several hundred lives were lost in Mississippi due to the storm surge along the coast--where we would have thought the message was clear and timely. It's disheartening because while we did our best, there were still so many lives lost. It tells me we have not yet found the optimal way of communicating the risk.

**Is social media a possibility?**

It is certainly an option, but we need to know more about what is required to get an effective public response to the threat of a hurricane. There are sociological and science factors involved. It's hard to accurately forecast what the weather will do. It's harder to accurately forecast what people will do. We need to keep working to learn more about both processes.

**How do you turn it all off when you leave here?**

It is difficult to turn it off completely, in part because we are a 24 by 7 hour operation with important responsibilities. Of course, as was evident by the time I was three years old, some of what we do here comes naturally to me and provides me enjoyment. With the weather, you get round-the-clock opportunities for job and personal satisfaction.

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