

Q & A for NHC



Jack Beven

Senior Hurricane Specialist

National Hurricane Center

*By Dennis Feltgen
Public Affairs Officer
NOAA Communications & External Affairs
National Hurricane Center*

When did you first catch the weather bug?

I caught it back in elementary school. I was always interested in natural sciences, reading books on weather, earthquakes, volcanoes, etc. Science runs in my family. My father and grandfather are an MD; my uncle was a veterinarian, and another grandfather was a civil engineer. My brother is an electrical engineer, and my brother-in-law is an actual rocket scientist.

So, you had no excuse to get anything less than an “A” in science. You must have been taking your own weather readings, too.

Oh, I had my own rain gauge and weather station. Back in the '70s, I got one of those fancy weather stations complete with a whirling anemometer. I was definitely the weather geek of the neighborhood.

You stayed focused on weather through high school?

I was pretty focused on being the science guy. I had a very good physics and earth sciences teacher, Brother Gordian Udinski. He is one of the big reasons I am where I am today, he really helped stoke this interest. But it really wasn't until college at Louisiana State University when I decided on weather and working at the hurricane center. I went on to do my graduate work at Florida State University.

What was the focus of your graduate work?

My Master's degree was on satellite data and remote sensing, and that has come in handy in my work here at the hurricane center. 80 percent of what we do here is remote sensing. And its handy with all of the future satellite projects I am working on, including the next generation GOES satellites, the GOES-R program. The Ph.D. work was in tropical meteorology and hurricanes. My dissertation was on the motion of hurricanes and how external forces can affect that. It took me about six years to get the Ph.D.

Why so long?

Part of it was having spent the summer of 1990 in the western Pacific with the big field project called the Tropical Cyclone Motion (TCM-90) Experiment, which attracted the biggest and brightest of the old and new generations of tropical meteorologists. But mostly it was because I was interning at the National Hurricane Center during that time, going back and forth between Tallahassee and Miami. I'd spend several months in Miami, and then go back to FSU to work on my schoolwork a bit more. Some of the projects I was working for my internship required gathering additional data for an atmospheric chemistry project and using the hurricane center computers. Hurricane Andrew came along and smashed up all of the satellite dishes, so some things when on hiatus for a while.

How did you get hired here?

One of the terms of the internship was, upon successful completion, I could step into a job here at the NHC. That's not how the program works today, but it did back then. When I finished my Ph.D., I stepped into an analyst position in TAFB (Tropical Analysis and Forecast Branch), doing the map analysis and the tropical weather discussions. I moved up to the Marine and Aviation forecast position, back when we were still doing aviation forecasting, and also spent several years doing satellite forecasting using the Dvorak technique. And in January of 1999, I became a hurricane specialist.

There was still some of the old guard when you became a specialist.

There were six hurricane specialists, and some of them were that old guard. I had gotten to work with some of them during my internship as well: Miles Lawrence, Gil Clark, Bob Case, Hal Gerrish, Max Mayfield, and others.

That had to be quite an experience.

It was an incredible experience, watching these guys at work, working with them, learning from them, just getting to interact with them.

What is the one thing you learned from these gentlemen?

The single biggest take-away is to sit down and analyze. Don't trust what a computer is telling you. Sit down and look at the data on a hand plot, and look at the satellite picture. Then you can get a better idea of what the computer models are telling you and if they are on the right track. I must say, with the improvements made in computers, it is getting harder to improve on their forecasts.

You are now in the same position as your mentors were 15 to 20 years ago. What do you see in this next generation of hurricane forecasters?

I see a little bit less emphasis on the synoptic side of meteorology; the ability to sit down and analyze maps, analyze data and such. We've got some very good people who have a very diverse set of backgrounds, which is definitely a plus. They are not the old school synopticians, so I do try to mentor them in some of the aspects of the field I feel they may not have had with same level of training and education that I did. I was always a synoptician, and not everybody we have hired shares that same interest.

Is that surprising?

No it's not. It's a result of the change in emphasis in education over the years. As computers have gotten better, there is a tendency to have computers do more of the analysis. I still have enough distrust of the computer analyses whereby I still like to sit down and look at things for myself.

What is the best part of your job?

It's being able to just sit back and watch the weather at work. This applies best to a storm that's out in the middle of nowhere, not bothering anyone except shipping interests. You can watch nature at work, try to get some idea of what it is doing and why. If you can't figure out why, you've got a question to throw to the research community. The second best part of the job is being able to save lives, protecting property, the ability to warn people to get out of harm's way.

And we've come a long way with that.

Yes, just in the time I have been here, the warnings services have gotten significantly better. Some things have not changed though. We still have people who will not get out of harm's way for one reason or another, will not leave when told to do so as a hurricane is coming.

Do you find that frustrating?

Yes I do, actually. It was true when I started here in 1988 and it is just as true now. It is hard to explain why that occurs. NOAA is now looking into the sociological aspect of the warning process, trying to figure out why people respond or don't respond.

What is the least favorite part of the job?

It's the bureaucracy, administration and red tape, without question. It's one of the reasons for the time-being that I think I have gone up the ladder as far as I'm going to go. All of the jobs above the position of hurricane specialist start getting away from the meteorology and more into the administration. That is a not-for-me deal there.

When you leave after you shift, are you able to turn it off?

Sometimes I am able to do that, but it depends on the circumstances. For instance, if it's in the middle of football season, it's easy...just turn on a game. But if the storm is heading for us here in South Florida, or heading for family and friends along the Gulf coast, it becomes more stressful for me and is much harder to turn it off.

Your faith is very important to you.

It is. I am Catholic, and serve as a reader and Eucharistic Minister at my Catholic parish here in Miami. I think God has helped steer me into the position I am in now where I can do the most good for Him and everyone else around here. It's not always a smooth road though.

You participate in a number of the workshops here and across the country. Do you enjoy teaching?

It's interesting. Back when I caught this bug back in elementary school, I would end up in front of the class, telling them about natural science, which impressed the teachers quite a bit, although their trying to get me to shut up was a problem. Teaching is part of the job, and there is a side of me that really likes doing it. For better or for worse, I am able to take something complex and explain it to people. There are those who think I could have been a University professor but, after my academic experiences, I doubt I could come up with some fair exams.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

Probably doing pretty much the same job I am doing now. If there is some change in administrative and bureaucratic overheads at the higher level posts, maybe I will move myself up the ladder a little bit. But right now, I have the right position for myself.

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