

Q & A for NHC



**Mark DeMaria,
Ph.D.**

**Branch Chief
Technology & Science Branch**

National Hurricane Center

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

You are probably one of those that have the weather gene.

Yes, I do have that. It was triggered pretty early on.

So what happened?

My family moved from New York to Miami in the early '60s. We had Hurricane Cleo in '64, followed by Hurricane Betsy in '65 and Hurricane Inez in '66. Three years in a row! So, that got me interested in hurricanes.

That means you went to Florida State.

My first two years were at Miami-Dade Junior College, then I transferred to FSU for my undergraduate degree. My first day of classes there were cancelled due to Hurricane Eloise ('75). It did not pass right over us, but was close enough to be included in the warning.

You have an early connection to Miami while in school though.

I had worked a couple of summers as an undergraduate in an intern project for the NOAA Florida Area Cumulus Experiment (FACE). This cloud-seeding group was co-located at the University of Miami where the National Hurricane Center (NHC) was located as well as the predecessor to the Hurricane Research Division (HRD). So, I got to see some of the NHC hurricane forecasters and some of the HRD people. I knew at that time that I wanted to go to grad school and do research. I decided on Colorado State.

Were you a protégé of Dr. Bill Gray?

No, I ended up working for Wayne Shubert. Once I got to grad school, I realized I was more interested in theoretical work and modeling rather than the more descriptive stuff that Bill Gray was doing at the time. I discovered I had talents on more of the mathematical side. I obtained both a Masters and Ph.D. degree there. Then I went on NCAR (National Center for Atmospheric Research) for a year and half of post-doc studies in theory and modeling.

Did you ever consider teaching?

After that post-doc work, I actually went to North Carolina State and joined its faculty for two years in its Marine, Earth and Atmospheric Department. But it was too big of a transition for me at the time. I went from basically having all of my time free at NCAR in its advanced study program to having a huge teaching load with two courses every semester - and most of them were new. Most of your tenure and future is based on the research program that you develop, so it was bad combination for me with all of the teaching I had to do.

When was your first glimmer to work at the National Hurricane Center?

I still had pretty close ties to the HRD group and still had a lot of family in the Miami area, too. I spoke with a few people at HRD who told me about a federal position that was opening up in their lab. I immediately applied for it and moved back to Miami. And that started my transition away from the theory and modeling to more of the observational and eventually to the applied side. We got involved informally in some of the early application development for HRD and NHC. (NHC Director) Bob Sheets had set up a visitor exchange program between HRD and NHC to encourage the researchers to coordinate with the forecasters. And when NHC moved to its new building in 1995, I took the job as the branch chief of its Technical Support Branch.

But after all of that, you left. Why?

It was more for personal reasons - living in Miami and my family trying to adapt to it. I wanted to keep my hand in things, so I got a position with NESDIS in Fort Collins,

Colorado. I would still be able to do some of the applied work, working heavily with the Weather Service and hurricanes.

But now, you are back!

That's right. I am kind of near the end of my career, and I always had an eye to move back to operations. My kids have grown and moved out, so I have the flexibility to come back to South Florida. The opportunity and timing came up and I took it.

Coming back, what is your greatest challenge?

Getting back up to speed on the operations. I did have the chance to do a six week detail at NHC this past summer, so that makes it a lot easier. It's not very often you get the chance to try on a job for size before you actually accept it. I was able to find out what the issues are, learning the new people and getting reacquainted with the older ones.

Budget concerns have to be challenge.

Managing all of the things that have to be managed and kept up with for NHC to keep producing its product with the size of the staff it has, it's going to be a challenge. But I believe there is a good set of people there and I think we can do it.

What's the first thing you are going to do on the job?

I'm going to meet with the staff, try to get organized, make sure they are communicating with each other, and work with the front office to establish the priorities.

What about personally?

Find a place to live!

Can you turn it off at the end of the day?

No, I am one of those people that is always looking at things, even on nights and weekends. I am curious about what is going on, especially when you're doing experimental forecasting. As a researcher, you always want to look and see how you did. And it's even truer when you do it for real.

Where do you see yourself five to ten years down the road?

I've got at least a five year span left in my NOAA career. I view that as the amount of time I hope to work with the support branch, help with some of the big transitions that are looming in the future. That includes leading them into the AWIPS II era and get them into more of a sustainability so that we get back to supporting science rather than just supporting infrastructure.

You sound like a hands-on guy.

Yeah, definitely. I still do some programming myself and am taking Python courses to learn the next generation scripting, so yes, I have never let that go.

Send comments to: nhc.publicaffairs@noaa.gov