

Meet Bruce Thomas, Chief Meteorologist and National Spokesperson for Midland Radio Corporation in Kansas City, MO



My career has gone through many interesting stages, from nearly 20 years as a television meteorologist to my new career in consumer electronics, where I use weather and climate knowledge as a marketing meteorologist for Midland Radio Corporation. Midland is America's #1 manufacturer of All Hazards Public Alert NOAA Weather Radios. It is always good to have a "plan B" in broadcasting!!!

How did you first get interested in weather?

Weather has always been a fascination for me. It's a controlling part of our lives here on planet Earth; the effect it has on people, places and things has made my weather education and employment an integral part of who I am. My earliest memories of weather were as a child in Mississippi taking cover from a severe thunderstorm while boating with my family on an area reservoir. I was also personally involved in historic, life-changing events like hurricanes Camille, Charlie and Katrina. The massive destruction that can be caused by nature's atmospheric forces can have a lasting effect on one's destiny.



Figure 1. September 2005, Hurricane Katrina Aftermath - Sitting on the porch of what's left of my childhood home in Biloxi, MS.

How did you find your first job, and what was it like?

While studying Geosciences at Mississippi State University, I interned at the local CBS television station in Columbus, MS with a retired U.S.A.F. senior weather forecaster, chief meteorologist Bryan Owings. He allowed me to work at the "weather wall" where I recorded myself doing practice weather broadcasts. I also stayed busy updating the weather phone lines. This was a life changing experience for an eighteen-year-old college student and it helped me get my first weather job.

The first dollar I ever made in the weather industry was as a broadcaster of overnight and weekend weather information on NOAA Weather Radio at the National Weather Service office in Jackson, MS. This was during holiday breaks from college at Mississippi State University in 1982. The hours were from 11 PM to 7 AM and the pay was \$3.35 per hour and I guess you could do very little damage to the listener of "weather radio" while they were sleeping. This minor position would lead me to my next, bigger job doing weekend weather at the local ABC TV station for \$15 dollars

a night. But the NOAA weather radio experience would become extremely important in my career decades later.

The weekend TV job went away due to my thick southern accent and I was told by the news director that I truly should look at other options in employment outside of broadcasting. Crushed, and twenty years old, I packed my bags and headed to an acting school for one year to work on my “stage presence” for television. After that, I trekked “out west” to Colorado to lose my southern accent for good!!! To pay for school in Colorado I worked at summer camps as a cook and ranch hand, drove ski shuttle buses from Denver and interned at KUSA TV9 with Leon “Stormy” Rottman, one of Colorado’s favorite television personalities and another retired U.S.A.F. meteorologist. “Stormy” was a weather icon, since passed away. His passion for working to get the forecast right every day is something that I will never forget.

I graduated with a B.S. in Meteorology and a double major in speech communications from Metropolitan State College in Denver in 1986, then spent one year as a high school teacher and “ski bum” for the Lowell Whiteman School in Steamboat Springs, CO. Having spent the majority of my youth in Mississippi, it was an eye-opening experience to forecast snow...and lots of it! I even did a little TV work for the local ski TV station in Steamboat, KSBS TV24, as their “skiing weatherman”. They couldn’t fire me because I worked for FREE, but this experience lead me to my first paid chief meteorologist position in College Station, TX with KBTX TV3. While there I took a few graduate classes at Texas A&M University and waited for my “big break” in broadcasting. Oh, by the way, they called me the “damn Yankee weatherman” my first few months there, because I had completely lost my southern accent. That’s not a good thing “Deep in the Heart of Texas”.

My television broadcasting career continued to blossom with an advancement to the Central Texas NBC station in Waco and fill-in work at the NBC station in Dallas/Fort Worth where I was mentored by one of the first television meteorologists in America, “The World’s Greatest Weatherman”, Harold Taft. Another retired U.S.A.F. meteorologist, Harold taught me more about weather forecasting in the last six months of his life than I had learned in my entire college experience. (He was fighting pancreatic cancer that would soon take him and end his nearly fifty years of weather forecasting.) Harold taught me that a seasoned weather forecaster learns how to “trust their gut” and some days that’s better than all the forecasting models in the world.

If you are able to follow the educational theme of my career, you’ll see why internships were a huge part of my learning experiences, and why instituting mentorship programs for students is so very important in developing the next generation of meteorologists. While working for ten years in the central Texas television market and six years in Kansas City with KCTV5, mentoring students was a major part of *my* learning experience, too!



Figure 2. May-2003, Keith Cavey, my student intern and I on the set of KCTV-5; Keith is now a TV Meteorologist in Waco, Texas

How would you describe your current job and how is it different from your forecasting job?

Working to promote weather safety by encouraging every home and business in America to use NOAA Weather Radio is an important task. It requires partnering with local and national media outlets to get the message out. Instead of broadcasting my message on a single TV station, today I'm working on a much "bigger stage" with the same themed message in mind: inform the public about weather hazards and the best way of being prepared for these events.

In the past, this same message was an important part of my television duties, but it was delivered to a smaller audience. In 1991 while working on a severe weather awareness campaign in Central



Texas, I took a NOAA Weather Radio on television during the evening newscast, performed an alert test, and told viewers to purchase a receiver for their own severe weather preparedness and personal safety. Unbeknownst to me, this effort was being viewed by the Waco NWS office meteorologist in charge (MIC). He was so impressed; he wrote a nomination for a United States Department of Commerce NOAA/NWS Meritorious Service Award and presented it to our station for outstanding community service.

Figure 3. January 2008, Consumer Electronics' Show (CES) Las Vegas, Nevada with Sunny the NOAA Spokesbot

In the early years of NOAA Weather Radio most television station management viewed free weather information over the government radio frequencies as competition to commercial news broadcasting. I am glad to say that these barriers to public safety and education have since been broken down, and the use of the internet now has allowed public access to highly detailed personal weather information and forecasts. None of this could be imagined at the beginning of my weather career over twenty five years ago.

Is forecasting weather part of your job anymore?

Not as much as when I was on television. Following trends in severe weather climatology has become the largest part of what I do for Midland Radio Corporation, and I do start most days looking at the Storm Prediction Center's website. I need to be aware of the day's severe weather potential, but I also direct some of my attention to more tranquil climes. Marketing NOAA Weather Radio receivers is a challenging proposition in areas where weather is perceived to be non-life-threatening.



Figure 4. January 2008-CES, In front of a poster of our newest weather radio

What would you say to those interested in working in the private sector?

Internships will help you define what you are passionate about in the weather-related fields. Then, don't stop driving toward your chosen goal in life, no matter what someone else tells you. Remember the kid with the southern accent!!!