

## **Meet Dick Westergard, President of Shade Tree Meteorology, LLC located in Niskayuna, NY**



In 2004, after a successful 38 year career in government weather services at a total of 11 locations around the world, I retired from government to establish a one person consulting business with a 28 second commute from home to the office. After earning Certified Consulting Meteorologist credentials from the American Meteorological Society, I also became active in the National Council of Industrial Meteorologists, and was recently elected to a two year term as NCIM president beginning in summer 2009.

### **How did you first get interested in weather?**

As a child in the woods of Northern Michigan, I wanted to know how everything worked. By the time I was five, I had disassembled everything from old clocks to push lawnmowers to an old tricycle. At 13, I assembled my first bicycle from parts of discarded bicycles I had collected around the neighborhood. As a high school freshman I joined JETs (Junior Electronics Technicians). We were a club which collected old electronic parts and assembled things with them. By the end of high school, I was (over) confident that I could comprehend the workings of pretty much any human invention. My geography teacher then told the class that statistically at least one person in the room would likely find weather related work. It occurred to me then that weather was something more complex than anything I had ever taken apart, and I wanted to know how it worked. In 1966, when the Air Force offered me weather observer training, I eagerly signed up, and have been learning ever since. I still don't fully know how it works!

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

My first weather job was as an Air Force weather observer. I enlisted in the Air Force to avoid being drafted into the Marines after high school, and when I saw weather observer on the list of available career fields, I checked it as my first choice. Unlike stories I have heard from others, I was given my first choice and after six months of training I was sent to Korea and later to Germany as a weather technician. In those days, weather technicians did what computers do today - plot weather maps and record and transmit weather observations. After seven years in the Air Force, I left for weather technician positions in National Weather Service offices in Florida, Illinois and West Virginia. In 1988, I completed my college degree at Marshall University, in Huntington, WV and went on to be the Meteorologist in Charge of the Duluth, MN office and the first Warning Coordination Meteorologist at the Albany New York office.

### **How would you describe your current job and how is it different from a forecasting job and other jobs you've had?**

Most of the clients of Shade Tree Meteorology, LLC, are attorneys or insurance companies. They are looking for accurate and detailed descriptions of past weather to assist them in understanding what happened, and often to establish culpability of various parties when weather related losses have occurred.

I work alone in a well equipped high tech office, accessing a variety of online databases of weather information. I often use radar and upper air data in addition to surface observations to describe extremely complex weather systems and interactions in plain English, doing my best to make it possible for non meteorologists, from juries to judges to attorneys to insurance adjusters, to understand the intricacies of how the weather works.



**Figure 1. Me in my home office. Forensic work requires a retrospective assessment to help clients understand what happened and often requires access to many sources of data at once.**

time to weather and/or staff emergencies.

From 1983 to 2004, my previous positions all involved managing programs and/or people, which I thoroughly enjoyed. They were high stress, frequently requiring working at odd hours and responding at any

My current job is a solo effort, and I take on only as much work as I can comfortably handle in normal daytime work days. I have always enjoyed travel and networking, and my current position allows me to attend conferences and participate in National dialogues in the meteorological profession. I am also able to make time for vacation travel when my wife, who teaches high school Latin, is free.

### **Is forecasting the weather part of your job anymore?**

While I have occasional clients interested in “boutique” forecasts for special events and weather sensitive outdoor activities, I am unable as a sole practitioner to provide around the clock service, which would be required in order to serve clients needing weather updates and severe weather alerts. Thus forecasting is mostly limited to providing my family with weekend planning forecasts and climatological research for vacation planning.

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



**Figure 2. My client, attorney Jerry D'Amelia, looks on as I sign an Expert witness affidavit to be filed with a motion for dismissal.**

I have had the privilege of mentoring a string of young meteorologists from 1983 through my present involvement in the AMS Private Sector Board mentoring program. I am always pleased to assist young eager minds in finding a career path that will be rewarding to them. More and more interesting careers paths are opening in the private sector, and current

public sector benefit packages are much more portable to and from the private sector. I think young meteorologists should focus on following their own interests in the field, wherever that takes them. Any experience in the field of meteorology will add to your knowledge and experience - the two things that are always key to a better job.