***Transcript for "Ginger Zee, Chief Meteorologist and Chief Climate Correspondent of the Climate Unit at ABC News in New York"***

Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations About Careers in Meteorology and Beyond

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**Kelly Savoie:**

Hello, Clear Skies Ahead listeners. This is Kelly Savoie, and I'm hoping you can take a moment of your time to rate and review our show wherever you listen to podcasts. We have produced over 60 episodes and you can help us reach even more individuals that will benefit from the diverse experiences shared by our guests. Thanks so much for listening, and I hope you enjoy this new episode.

Welcome to the American Meteorological Society's podcast series, Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations about Careers in Meteorology and Beyond. I'm Kelly Savoie and I'm here with Emma Collins, and we'll be your hosts. We're excited to give you the opportunity to step into the shoes of an expert working in weather, water, and climate sciences.

**Emma Collins:**

We're happy to introduce today's guest, Ginger Zee, chief meteorologist and chief climate correspondent of the Climate Unit at ABC News in New York. Welcome, Ginger. Thanks so much for joining us today.

**Ginger Zee:**

I'm so happy to be here. The AMS is always a favorite place to stop through.

**Kelly Savoie:**

Ginger, could you tell us a little bit about what sparked your interest in meteorology and how it influenced your educational path?

**Ginger Zee:**

I'm not that unique. Like most meteorologists, I fell in love with thunderstorms. I know, like wow. But I was not afraid. I'd say I was more enamored. I spent a summer on Lake Michigan, and that was being in the Great Plains and being able to see forever in the long distance.

I was eight years old and I would look across there, and every day was different. Every time we had thunderstorms was different. It was like one time you would get the storm that would come directly to you. Then the next day it looked like the same setup of thunderstorms visually, but then they would go north of us, or we wouldn't get any rain because the rain would've dissipated. I started to realize that that was a puzzle and that was a puzzle that I really wanted to put together.

And so, right after that summer, I remember having that thing click in my brain. Kids get passionate about something and not always do they follow through and do that for the rest of their lives, but my click never clicked back. It had just stayed that way. I wanted so badly to always have the encyclopedia that had...I would run to the thing in third grade and be like, "Nope, this is my section." Anything that said tornado or anything that said thunderstorm or lightning, that was what I wanted to learn most about.

**Kelly Savoie:**

So when you were in high school, did you realize that there was such a thing as a meteorology degree and there was something you could do as a profession? Did you pursue colleges and programs in that area?

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah. See, that's where I guess...I told you the story of how the hobby part, I guess, started, meaning more that I was so passionate and interested and I knew it was a part of me. But I would not have told you growing up that I was going to be a meteorologist because I didn't know any. I didn't know what that was and I didn't know what it looked like and I had never...I just didn't know. I had seen people on TV and I knew I didn't want to do that. I was like, "No, thanks." I'm far too shy. That's the funny part about me being here today. But I didn't realize how many meteorology jobs there were outside of that.

So it wasn't until I saw the movie Twister, which, again, I'm not unique. I was a junior in high school and I saw Helen Hunt standing on that vehicle and bossing people around in the best way because she was leading people into a tornado. I was like, "Oh my God, that can be me."

When we talk about representation mattering, like seeing a woman who maybe I could look like someday, I think I get that because that showed me...And granted not that much of that was happening. Thanks, Hollywood, for being a little fabricated at that time.

And so, I loved that I had a vision of what it could be, so that only when I was 16 did I finally say, "Oh my gosh, I want to be her." Then I went and looked for schools that would let me chase tornadoes. That's how I found Valparaiso University, because they had a storm-chasing team. They were close enough. Once I applied, they even gave me a scholarship. So I got a half ride, which was huge because financially I didn't want to be burdened with debt forever and ever and ever.

It just started to really make sense that this was a place that I could go and this is what I would do with meteorology was, I was planning to go chase storms and work with the university and research. And so, I had that set in my head, and then it probably just solidified even more the next spring in 19, was it...maybe the year after that. Maybe two years. Oh, I was a junior then. I see. So I must have seen Twister when I was younger. It's that '96? Sorry, I'm getting lost in years.

So when I was a junior, though, I think is when we had the derecho of 1998 in West Michigan. That event brought 130 mile-per-hour winds, wrecked towns, injured—

**Kelly Savoie:**

Wow.

**Ginger Zee:**

It was a really big news event for West Michigan, and it was so remarkable in my brain and in my psyche of what weather could do. Instead of just being like, "Whoa, I want to be Helen Hunt in Twister," it's like, "Oh. Oh my gosh, that's bad. Really, really, really, really bad." It really brought that home. It actually wrecked the very theater, Star Theater, that I had seen Twister in. And so, if that's not going to make sure that you are—

**Emma Collins:**

Oh no.

**Ginger Zee:**

I know. I know. If it's not going to tell you you're going to be a meteorologist, I don't know what does. That was probably the first time that I had ever seen the benefit or humanity in telling the story instead of just the science or the puzzle piece, is realizing how it was right next to me. These were people and places that I knew that got impacted. And so, not to say that that's where I thought maybe I could do some sort of broadcasting, but it definitely is the first time I saw the good parts of it to me.

And so, from there, when I studied meteorology, and that's where everything gets real twisted, because I went to college at Valpo, and it felt like such an exact fit, exactly what I wanted. I was being told, "Oh, we can do day chases and we can do this and that."

I had a professor, John Knox, who is still a professor but he's down at UGA, and he was really...I don't know...The word bully is not correct because it was...But he pushed very hard into telling me that he thought that I would be good at communicating this science, no matter how that was. He thinks I would be very good at it and he thinks it would be a great idea for me to do an internship.

I fought him. I was like, "No, sir. I have no interest." I mean if you see some of my first storm-chasing videos, I'm ducking away from the camera. I'm hiding, like too shy. I don't want to do it. He knew, I think-

**Kelly Savoie:**

I can relate.

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah. But he saw something that I had no idea was in me. Once I do set my mind to something, whether I'm uncomfortable or not, I'm going to go all out. So I said, "Fine. I'm going to do this because you are so hot on this idea. Fine. I'll send out a bunch of resumes. If I get an internship as a freshman, sure."

Of course, I got no calls back. Nobody wants...Not to say they don't want an intern. At this moment, I would take an intern of any age of anything. We just need help. But back then, I don't think that that was really something that would sell you as being a freshman.

I just went about my end of my school year. I was going to bartend at home at the country club that I had worked in. That was the plan. I was about to leave school, and then I got this call. I got an internship in Birmingham, Alabama. This is a West Michigan girl who is in school in Northwest Indiana and suddenly gets this internship in Alabama. I was like, "Whoa, that feels like a big leap," especially because it was so late. I mean it was like the day I was leaving school. But I said, "All right. Dr. Knox said I should try this. Let's go."

I went down there for the summer, and it changed my life. It was with James Spann, who is a king in our industry. Who gets an internship as a freshman with James Spann? Then I came away from that internship-

**Kelly Savoie:**

Wow, you're lucky.

**Ginger Zee:**

Extremely lucky. Extremely lucky. But also I think I didn't know who he was or what that was. I think just the...The yes part of me has gotten me in trouble a lot in my life, but it certainly has worked in a lot of parts of life. I think a lot of other people might've been like, "I don't even want to do this anyway," "No,

I'm not going to Alabama for the summer and trying to live there and trying to be in a place I've never been and have no connections and all of that." But it really did work out. I came away from that summer with a second person, James, telling me that he thinks that I would be good at this. I really started to feel like, well, what if I became James Spann and Helen Hunt's character Jo had a baby, and that is what I became.

**Emma Collins:**

I love the drive and the inspiration that led you to that ultimate decision. You covered a lot of in-school and out-school opportunities that you took, but were there any opportunities in particular that you felt were very beneficial to you securing a job? Is there anything that stood out in your mind as like, "Yes, this is what I think about when I think about that first time I got my first job offer"?

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah. So coincidental is Tom Skilling just announced his retirement. I had an internship with him during my final year, my junior year of college. Looking back, I used to...If this would've been even five years ago, I would've said...I probably wouldn't have mentioned it. I don't mean this in a...It just wasn't the same as my internship I had had with James or with Peter Chan. I didn't have as much opportunity to actually do things. I didn't realize that I had...I didn't feel like I had as much time with Tom himself. It felt like we were in the background and we were observing more than we were a part of it. I mean he's in Chicago and he's Tom Skilling. What were we going to do? I don't know what I thought I was going to do.

But in the last five years, more and more I have realized that his way and the meteorologist that he is sunk into me so deeply that now I find myself doing things that I'd always be like, "Why does he do that?" That man is on the phone from the moment you get in until the moment you leave. He's always on the phone. He's friendly and he's the grandpa everybody wants and he's...But it's because he's procuring information.

Until I became a national meteorologist, which is what he basically made himself...He covers the whole nation instead of just Chicago...I didn't realize how you can't do that yourself. So what he was doing was mining the experts in each of these places so that he could put together this really fascinating puzzle pieces that I always loved, and then make himself an expert.

Over time, those phone calls...and I would always be like, "Man, I don't want to be on the phone for all that time." I will turn around on a day and be like, "Oh," and look at my phone call list. I'm the old lady on my phone all day because that is how I'm getting my best stories. That is how I'm getting my best information.

That's how we learn, is from each other. This isn't “I can do it all and I know it all”. I can't know the whole country, let alone the world, and that's supposed to be my job.

And so, what I learned from Tom Skilling was don't try to do that. Try to learn as much as you can from all of the people who know the best from that specific spot.

And so, I just love that about how I didn't realize how much I was learning at the time, and now I really do. He just announced his retirement, so it's very exciting. I'm very happy for him. He's such a great man as well. So that was a big part. I don't think of how I got my first job, but it definitely stayed with me and changed the way that I do my job, or realize I do.

Then what other experiences? I did have another internship with Peter Chan who had worked at the National Weather Service, but also worked in television. I found that really helpful because he was so science-minded, but he brought that in the best way to TV.

He was also extremely technical in the graphics point of view. He was very picky, in a good way, because a lot of meteorologists don't know art. I felt like Peter knew art. That is a huge part of our job that we don't learn when you go into broadcasting, like how do I know what colors stand out on a...Like graphic design is not what we learn, but that's what we end up doing.

**Kelly Savoie:**

That's a good point.

**Emma Collins:**

I never thought of that.

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah, we become a graphic designer whether you want to or not. You also have to become a fashion model, apparently. All of these things that I did not study but became such an important part of the visual medium of the science I was trying to communicate, those are things and experiences that I wish that I would've had even more of. I wish it was a part of all of our education, because no matter if you end up going into broadcasting, and this is ...

When I taught...I was an adjunct professor at Valpo and I taught in the communications department, but I taught only meteorology students. I would always tell them, "Please tell your friends who don't even want to go into broadcasting they should take this class," because even if you're making a presentation for the AMS board or whatever, you have to make people understand and see things. So you have to be able to speak and you have to be able to visually get your point across.

Graphic design, that's what our world's about. It's about showcasing things. I think that's one place where science does not do itself enough justice. If we made graphs more easily read, the thing where I have to take something that I see and I understand because I'm a meteorologist, and then I have to make it digestible for a large audience, that should be everybody's plate. That should be on everybody's plate to do, because I do think we would get more across. More people would understand it faster. So I think that's...The more you can do there visually, whether it's yourself, which is the awful part, or with your actual science and how you produce it, that's really helpful.

Then on the broadcasting side, I didn't take one class about broadcasting. I didn't have one Comm class. I didn't know what I was doing. So during my second job, I think I had been beat up enough by realizing how little I knew. I wasn't a performer. It just wasn't a part of me. And so, I decided to take some acting classes and some improv classes, and then some voice classes. I just kept on the side always, trying to take these types of classes that I had never ever felt comfortable doing, but now was almost imperative to my success in my job. I do think that that did start to set me apart.

I did improv and acting at Second City in Chicago while I worked there. That side gig...I was single, I had time to do it, but it was applying myself in a very different place, which is also very good for you, no matter what, just to grow as a person, but it was great for my job because it made me a different type of meteorologist.

**Kelly Savoie:**

Right. I mean it just goes to show how important internships are and outside activities because you can only learn so much from coursework.

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah.

Kelly Savoie:

It sounds like from your internships, the different people that you were working under, they all brought something different to you.

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah. Well, and I use this example all the time, and I don't know if this is an unpopular opinion or not, but I don't know how to be a meteorologist without chasing storms. I don't know how you can actually know how to forecast as well if you haven't been there to smell it and taste it and feel it and see the change and see and feel the impact to people.

So in that way, I do think I have a unique job where I got to do it in college. I chased on a show called Storm Chasers and I've chased since I got to ABC News all types and been in all types of disaster. It's like I got to join Doctors Without Borders and go see all different places and how people treat disaster in different parts of the world. That's the type of science that I get to practice, really, and to practice forecasting, because of course I'm forecasting on the way up to X disaster and of course I'm right there now casting while it's going by.

There is nothing like feeling or seeing...Not feeling because I would not feel it, but seeing 120-mile-per-hour wind. Most people don't get that opportunity. So whether you've seen it on a radar. But even to see how that matches or doesn't match most of the time what's actually happening in a cat 4 in Ian, I think that's so helpful for someone to learn to be a better forecaster.

So I do think that storm chasing is important. I don't think everybody needs to be in the eyewall of a cat 5 like me. Sure, I still thought it was helpful scientifically and story-wise. But I do think that seeing it, seeing the base of a thunderstorm and understanding how that movement looks, feels, and what the inflow feels like and what the grass does when it's moving that way, and smelling the moisture in the air is really important.

Then this is going to take it one step further and something that I didn't expect, but I wish I could have done even earlier in my career. When I got to ABC, they knew me as the storm chaser and I had put tornadoes on TV right away and did all the things I told them I would do. But they said, "She's obviously a little off. So maybe she'll do all of these adventure things that we've been waiting to have someone say yes to." They said, "Would you consider covering the World Cup of Paragliding in Mexico?" and I was like, "Yeah, sure. Okay."

And so, I went, and on that first flight, I understood the atmosphere and thermals better than I ever had. And not a flight even just in an airplane, because aviation meteorology is also incredibly helpful, but I have less interest of doing that than the adventure kind. To feel it and be in it, I went on to do three other stories, one in South America, one in Nepal, and one here in the States with paragliding.

I was seeking those out selfishly because I had never understood my atmosphere better than I did when I was flying in it and flying with birds and seeing how they ride the thermal, and then watching the shadows and being like, "Oh. Oh, and then the cloud made a shadow, and then this happened," like just

on that micro scale. So if I was teaching the ultimate meteorology class, you'd be paragliding, storm chasing, and doing a whole lot less with books.

**Kelly Savoie:**

That would be well worth the money, let me say. So you basically have worked doing on-air broadcasting. So now what was your first job, and then how did you end up where you are now? Is it a long period in different positions or were you at certain jobs for longer, or how did that go?

**Ginger Zee:**

Get comfortable because it is a long road. It's really that once I decided, yes, I want to do this, I came back from that internship with James Spann. As if God had put it in front of me, I had this fortune of seeing this on a board at the meteorology department. It said PBS WYIN auditions for meteorology. And so, I was like, "Oh my gosh. I mean this is served to me." But remember I'm only a sophomore. And so, there's obviously juniors and seniors that are also wanting to go audition for this one spot. I think it ended up being two in the end.

But I went and auditioned and I got it. I got to start broadcasting, a very loose word, as a sophomore in college. And so, for the following two years, both my sophomore and junior, which was my last year, I was on TV once to...No, I think it was like three times a week. I don't even remember exactly what it was.

We used to steal...This is terrible. But I guess because of PBS, you could do whatever you wanted. We would steal the weather channel's graphics, and then Photoshop off their label. It seems really wrong now that we have a lot of legal and standards issues. At ABC, we can't even talk to you because you have a picture until we know that it's okay to talk to you that you have a picture. It's very serious about the legal and standards. So kind of funny, we just ripped people off, but it worked.

Back then, I was still Ginger Zuidgeest, which was tough for the poor older man who was the anchor. He said, "Meteorologist Ginger Zuidgeest." It was such a mouthful. So that was my first inkling something was wrong there.

I got done and I had now two years on TV, three internships, and I applied for every job under the sun. I sent out a hundred VHS tapes back then. That's how we would send these giant packages with our picture and all this stuff, and I really got no calls back. I'm not exaggerating, not one call.

**Kelly Savoie:**

Aw.

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah, it was really upsetting, because I felt really emboldened. I felt really good. I had had some of the big titans of our industry tell me they thought I'd do really well. It was like—

**Kelly Savoie:**

Right, and good experience.

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah. Who else was coming out with two years on TV and three internships? I'd like to meet them, these people getting jobs. So I think it was the first real realization that this business isn't any business, isn't about just your skill. It is about persistence, resilience, and timing and the right fit at the right time.

And so, what I did was I decided to apply for...And I told my old internships, which I had interned at that Fox station in Grand Rapids. I told the news director I was so disappointed. I was like, "Do you have any whatever type of work?" and he's like, "You know what? Let me call some people." So he talks to his friend, and then they were like, "How about we have you do radio?" I was like, "Okay, great."

And so, I got to start at WLAV, which is actually a huge classic rock radio station. This is where the people you know makes a difference. I got to work on their morning drive show with these two guys who had been there forever and were so beloved. And here comes Minnie Mouse-sounding 19...I just turned 21-year-old me.

Those poor guys gave me such a great...And they were so kind and so welcoming. I think about it now, and they had to be...My age now, they were wonderful. They gave me a really great introduction to broadcasting, what broadcasting actually is. They were not only just fantastic at their job, they had so much personality. All the stuff I had not developed at all yet. They made me tell a weather story without pictures and within a minute. That skill was so transferable everywhere I went after. So in a way it was supposed to happen.

So then I kept...As I was doing that job...And bartending, mostly. I worked at the country club. I was ordering liquor for them. I was like half manager. I was doing as many jobs as I could at once to just pay off college and try to do my thing, which wouldn't happen for another decade, by the way.

Then I went and kept sending VHS tapes whenever I didn't feel totally down on myself, and I got...Finally, a year later, I got a job in Flint, Michigan. And so, that's where I started as my true first paid on-air meteorology job.

And so, I worked at WEYI and did the weekend nights, and then three days a week reporting. Learned very quickly that I should have probably studied that as well. Had no idea what they were ever talking about. I would go to the morning news meeting and be like, "Oh my God," like zero idea.

What I would tell and what I would tell anybody listening now, ask questions. You're brand new. You are allowed to ask questions. I was so afraid of looking stupid or not knowing what I was talking about that I think I made it way harder on myself...Well, I know I made it way harder on myself, and I wasn't as good as I could have been. If I would've just done the Tom Skilling thing and asked a bunch of experts. Ask a bunch of people around you, "What would you do? What was your path like? What did you do?" It's really important to do that and to...I think it wasn't even ego yet. It was just like I was afraid.

And so, I always tell people, "Please ask me a million questions." I will not think that that makes you any less of a person. In fact, it makes you better because you're actually saying, "I..." And everybody loves talking about themselves. Look at me go right now. I'd be happy to help.

So from there, then I went to Grand Rapids at WOOD-TV, which was the station I did grow up watching essentially. And so, that was really cool to work with the meteorologist Terri DeBoer, who just retired as well. Then from there, I got a job in Chicago at WMAQ. Then from MAQ, I started moonlighting for MSNBC in Early Today.

That's when I really got that taste of that national feel. I thought I had done the show Storm Chasers while I was there and I really liked getting back in the field. I thought, "I've got to do that." I can't just be in a studio anymore.

And so, when I went and just had an informal meeting at ABC, the president of ABC was like, "What are we doing wrong?" and I was like, "Oh, I like this question." That's a good thing to ask someone.

**Kelly Savoie:**

Yeah.

**Ginger Zee:**

I was like...Yeah. I said, "You're damage chasing and you haven't come up with the times." I was like, "I've been chasing tornadoes now for a decade. I could bring you..." Before, which is our responsibility, because our science has gotten so good, we know when there will be a deadly outbreak. I should be there before, I should be there during to show you the tornado, and then I should then be there after as well.

I believe that was one of the answers that helped get me the job. And so, he hired me for the weekends there on Good Morning America. Then within two years, which is now just about a decade ago, I took over as the chief meteorologist. So told you it was long.

**Kelly Savoie:**

What a fantastic journey, though. That's great.

**Emma Collins:**

That was a fun ride. So now you're a double chief, chief meteorologist and chief climate correspondent. Can you walk us through a typical day on the job?

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah, that's what my whole goal was, to not have a typical day. That was the hard part, was as much as I love being a meteorologist and I love forecasting, I love being in it. And so, when I would go through those stretches...Because I was in Chicago for five years. There'd be 7 to 10 days in June where we would just have a big high pressure system. I would be like, "I'm dying inside. I can't do this. This is not for me." So I think typical, I can't and won't ever be able to do that again.

But if you go on a Monday morning and I'm not traveling to a disaster, but next Monday morning I'll be at Disney World doing the show. There is no typical day. So let's take Tuesday morning. Then I usually get up at 3:45 or 4:00, and then I get into the station. I usually have forecasted the night before unless something pretty big is happening.

Of course, I'm not forecasting detail, that the whole country. I'm taking that place where I know that we're going to do our top story, which actually today was a little tougher because there were two storms that I would've tossed around. Then I'd work with the other meteorologists that I work with and we debate on what we think the nation needs to know most about, what we're responsible to say, what images we're going to use to help tell that story, and then I go through the show.

I do promos starting at 6:15, so I'll be live at 6:15. Then done with the shows. I do GMA3 at 9:30 in the morning, and then usually, depending on days, I'll go uptown or have meetings. A lot of times I do shoots for...We have so many platforms. I do climate shoots for ABC News Live or other places. I do a show with KTRK now with Travis Herzog, and on Tuesdays...Like every day has something different.

But if you look at the last four or five months of my life, I think five now, five months, I have only been home for the full week twice in five months. So I've traveled every other week because there are so many disasters and there are so many climate stories to tell. So last week, I was in Louisiana talking about the saltwater wedge. The week before, I think it was in Boston, telling a climate change education story, because that's become such a big issue. I can't remember. I mean that's the thing is it goes really quickly, but ...

**Kelly Savoie:**

I was going to ask how often you have to travel, and you'd answer that. So quite often. But you like that, though, right?

**Ginger Zee:**

I do. I do. It's become more difficult as the kids have gotten older, because they're more aware. They have more things going on. When they were young, it was actually pretty easy because as long as I knew they were loved, cared for, clean, happy...And my husband's the absolute best partner. He really is super dad. Then we've got help...Not family, but we have even had to fly family in for certain trips that I've taken and such. We have the privilege of being able to do that. It was easier.

Now they have a lot of questions and they're like, "How many days are you going to be gone? Wait, what are you doing?" It is a good reminder of the prioritization of the story I'm telling and the time I'm away better be worth it. That's usually...But the last five months, every week has met that. That's what's wild is that it has actually met that standard, I think. If it doesn't, I'm not going to do it.

I always try to communicate to them, like, "But you are my priority. If this feels like too much, you tell mommy and I will not..." And my husband, was it two weeks ago, he's like, "Do I get to say that?" I said, "Yes, you're allowed to, too."

**Kelly Savoie:**

So you mentioned that you love doing this field work and being out and about. I'm assuming that's what you like most about your job. Is there anything else that you really enjoy about working at ABC?

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah. I didn't finish the typical day, because I often do World News Tonight. So it'll be a split shift where I...And I do that...I do those shows. I do those anchored moments in my life every day. So without that, that would be hard. I do enjoy that.

But to be able to weave in the part where I get to talk to the people who are impacted by this, that's the necessity to me. And so, to go back to...I always say I've watched...It's not just my career growing from place to place, but watching the evolution of my why. That's the part I really have hung my hat on knowing that it is always going to keep evolving. I went into this business because I loved science and I loved the puzzle.

I can give you a perfect example. I was headed down to cover a storm. The year was 2005. All I could think about was I can't wait to see what a 20-foot surge looks like. It was Hurricane Katrina. I am a nerd with zero experience going down to cover what is still the worst disaster, natural disaster, I think, our country has gone through, certainly in tropical weather.

And so, within 30 seconds of getting to Gulfport, where 150 people died in that town alone with said 20-foot surge, I realized very fast this is not about science. Holy cow. This is about people. Then I start meeting the people, then I start hugging the people. I saw a dog die in front of me.

**Kelly Savoie:**

Aw.

**Ginger Zee:**

Then I see the reality of what water did, yeah. It was like the first time I had seen dead bodies. It was the first time I had seen anything. And it was Katrina. It was like boot camp 1001.

I learned how to tell stories with humanity as the first element, not the science, which is really hard for meteorologists a lot of times because they don't get that experience. They're often doing it away. So now I was in and staying in.

And so, I thought that was such a turn of my why. I went from passion for science to compassion first, and then including the passion. So that's how my why changed there.

Then I think it evolved and evolved little bits, but the other big turn came in Hurricane Michael. In most of the storms that I have covered, the question is always like, "Well, why...," especially in things like hurricanes, like, "Well, why did you stay?" That's usually the question we have to ask, and a lot of times the answer is, "Well, last time I got looted and I didn't want that to happen this time," or, "Last time it didn't happen for us and it happened down a county south of us. So I didn't want to do that."

This time was the first time every person I met said, "I don't have a vehicle," "I don't speak English." What was some of the others? It was like...Oh, just the access. "We don't have family anywhere near, and we're both in wheelchairs." Like absolute stunning, shining light of privilege versus not privileged for these types of things.

And so, my why changed to saying why can't I be a connector of...And here I was, knew where to survive in a cat 5, knew how to do that, and how are we not doing the rescue before the rescue for people who don't have everything else we all have? So I think that became a part of the storytelling at least and the understanding of the lens of the story I tell.

Then it keeps going. Every time I turn around, I'm like, "Oh, my why's changing again. Why does this matter and who does it matter to? How much can I actually help people make a change so that it's for the better?"

**Kelly Savoie:**

I think a lot of people don't realize that, because you hear all the time, people are like, "Well, why are people staying down there? Why aren't they evacuating?" because they just don't understand some of the things that you just mentioned. It's like eye-opening.

**Ginger Zee:**

Oh, and even think about now with climate refugees. So I was able to go to the Maldives. Not the Maldives that everybody else sees on Instagram, but the one where 300 of their islands are seeing such significant sea level rise. Once they had their coral bleaching event about six years ago now, they have had incredible flooding and their groundwater is gone. And so, once you don't have water, you don't have life.

And so, they're true soon-to-be climate refugees, and to be able to meet all of those people and to see the little girl's eyes, a five-year-old, who regularly once a month has to help her family lift up everything that's inside their house...That they've lived it. They've lived down this plot of land for centuries, their family. Just now they're flooding once a month, and so much so that they've got to go and they don't have any groundwater.

To be able to talk to her and to be able to then share her story and be able to connect the change and the rapid change with people through her eyes, little Sarah, that's the story. That's why I do what I do.

It's just so much bigger. In my position, nobody needs me telling them the high temperature in Omaha when they live in Charlotte. Nobody cares. They can look anywhere and find that. So I saw that coming a long time ago, and my job is much bigger to do.

Local is still very critical, incredibly, and always will be important. But on a national scale, that climate story is the story. It's in every story.

**Emma Collins:**

I can imagine running into these stories sometimes...Or not even running into, but experiencing them and having that challenging, "This is humanity. I have to engage with this now," being so important. What are some of the other bigger challenges that you faced during your career?

**Ginger Zee:**

Oh gosh. The part that now...Like you always wish you could go back and say something to yourself back then, and people will often ask, "What would you say to yourself?" Because most of those times, what I would want to go back when I felt really challenged.

I think the first one is, especially in broadcasting, but I think all of life actually, but especially in broadcasting, it is very hard to separate yourself from...And ego, not in a bad way. We all have ego because that's how we're made as a human, to know that you are a product in a way. We are the thing that they're selling. And so, it's very hard in the beginning ...

Well, actually every job. Every job I've had someone within my industry...I'm not talking about trolls online or any of that. I'm talking about bosses and news directors say that I did not look as good as they'd like me to, or my hair wasn't right, my makeup sucks, or my outfit was terrible, or whatever. Those things are so...They feel so personal when you're there, and they feel like a challenge.

I do know that women get it far more than men do. That's life, whether that's...And in broadcasting, it's even amplified even more. So, yes, we get it from the internet, but I'm talking about the ones that really count, the ones that are your bosses.

And so, I wish I could help the industry change that way, because one thing I think that's not done is whether you studied meteorology or you studied journalism, you still didn't study fashion. You didn't study what your boss a year later is going to tell you what a look book should look like for news, or what they think it should look like, or that they think that everybody should look the same, or this is what professional is.

That part, I wish I could go and help myself and tell myself like some of these people are just...They get this old school idea or whatever it is, and it's not you, they do this to everybody, and have a little bit more of that fortitude. So I wish in those challenges, just that I wouldn't have allowed it to penetrate so deeply into my identity, because I did, and I think that's very easy to do for a young person because you don't know any different.

Again, I've worked with my therapist now for 12 years on this. How do you separate those two things? I like to think of it like Beyonce. I don't think I'm Beyonce, because that's a whole another psyche issue if I think that. But where you really have to have...You have to have two separate ideas. You are you. That is your job, yes, but if you don't separate those early and you think that you're wrapped into that, that's trouble. You have to have a whole you that is the actual you. Otherwise, all of those things that are trying to rip you apart, and when you lose your job because a company changes or whatever, your identity is wrapped too much in your career, which your career is you, which is why television makes it, I think, even harder.

I think it'll be hard for all these influencers when things shift, and they've never done anything like this. Their identity is them in a box doing X thing. They are the anchors and reporters of now. I think there might be a harsh reality when we switch to the next thing that we all like. It'll be like, "Argh."

So I wish in those challenges, I could go back and just talk to myself. I try my best. My way of making this better is I try to mentor as much as I can. I've got young people who call me crying, saying that this happened and this person said this about them and this. I'm like, "All right. Let me use my sage...The part of me that has actually taken a lot of this in and worked really hard and paid a lot in therapy and I'm going to help you." So that would be one challenge was just finding my identity independent from my job.

Then the other big challenge goes to the mental health of knowing that I deserved it. That's another thing, that people talk a lot about imposter syndrome now and they talk a lot about, like...I don't know why we got ourselves to this place, why we think we don't deserve things, but that is fundamentally a problem and that is something that was and has been a challenge.

Part of it...Again, I don't want to keep going back to the gender, but I do think...I mean I don't...Did you watch Barbie? I mean when she goes from the Barbie Land to the real world, it's like I know I live there, but I didn't realize I lived there. It was such a big...Fantastically done, to open my own eyes. I'm like the person who knows all that, and then to be able to show men as well around the world that this is what it feels like. I thought that that challenge is something that is seen in every single industry.

My best friend's an OBGYN. We're in our 40s now. She's practiced for a long time, and still half the time when she walks into the delivery room, mostly the dad or the grandpa or whatever will ask, "When's the doctor coming?" Still. I don't know if I have great hope that it's going to happen super fast, because women have been doctors for a long time, a lot longer than they have. In my position, I'm the first woman who has been in this position. I'm the first chief meteorologist as a woman at a network.

So it's like they haven't visually seen it. It takes people a long time and it takes society a long time to shift. We really have to have something like a Me Too movement, which doesn't need to happen for this except that I think it does, to change how we see the world and how we see women in science. I think that part is changing, but it's glacial. So real slow. That's where we need some warming.

**Kelly Savoie:**

Yeah. It must be difficult in broadcasting because I've never worked in broadcasting, and most of the jobs I've had, you can't comment on someone's appearance, or their clothing, or what they look like. It's illegal. You know what I mean?

**Ginger Zee:**

It is illegal. It's discrimination.

**Kelly Savoie:**

Right.

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah. When you tell one person that they can't wear short sleeves because of the way their arms look and you don't make short sleeves barred for the entire staff, that's called discrimination. But it happens every single day in almost every newsroom all over America, and it's gross.

**Kelly Savoie:**

And so, now going back to all the natural disasters that you've covered, and you mentioned some in particular, is there one really memorable one? Was it Katrina or was it something else?

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah. I mean I hope that Katrina...Both because of where I was in my career but also because of what it is, I hope that that never gets topped because of what it felt like and what I understood later. It's like maybe that was good that I went and covered it without the complexity of knowing the world a little better and knowing the politics of what was happening, because that was such a big part of it.

I was also covering it in Gulfport where it truly was the disaster part. It was the weather. It wasn't the policy and racial injustice and everything else that ended up happening elsewhere, and has in almost every storm that we've ever had and it happens in every climate story. There is always injustice in all of them. Environmental injustice is in every story as well.

So I think Katrina, I hope, never is a repeat that way, except, I will say too, even in Michael, different parts of the country respond differently. There are different rules, and politics always matters.

So when I was in Hurricane Michael, it's a cat 5. It hits at like noon-ish, 1:00. I don't remember exactly when it made landfall, but it was five years ago this week. At 7:00 PM, the sun is setting and it's comfortable enough that we can go outdoors. Now we're not going to go wandering around because we know about live wires and we don't want to be the one caught. So we go back and go to bed. We can't broadcast anyway because we don't have any service. And all night is silent. No one is coming to rescue.

The hurricane's long gone. That thing was fast, if you remember. It was like a buzzsaw. It was long gone and safe. I knew, because now I've done this for so long, that what was happening was there was a miscommunication between officials here and officials there. I'm thinking, if somebody is still alive but injured, if somebody's in here somewhere, they're not getting any help. There was two volunteer guys. I still keep in touch with them, Christian, that was going through and they were helping people. But other than that, I didn't see a national guard. I didn't see an official vehicle until 9:00 AM the next day. That's late. That's really long. So I always wonder maybe that's also a part of how I can help figure it out.

Another one, we were in Alabama after tornadoes. You want to get police and fire pissed off at you, you show up before them, because I've chased for a long time. That happens. It happened in that storm. They were like...Because they don't want you in there. But I know Double Dutch. I know how to get exactly where we need to be and hopefully be quite safe by doing it. They were like, "Did they get the couple out of this house?" I was like, "Yeah, they just came." They were so upset that we were there. Nobody else was able to come in. All the other media was out.

That's the type of thing. It's like our science is so good. Why is it not that they have us? Why can't we work together to make this response even better? I hope that that's something that I can help in the future.

But to answer, Katrina stands out. Sandy stands out just because of the scope and region. Michael, Ian. Ian was wild and it was so recent. But everything does. They all have their own little fingerprint and they all have that piece of my memory that they're like...A lot of people can't...I can't remember a lot about life, but I can remember the storms and I can remember the place and the people I met in the storms.

**Emma Collins:**

You've done so much with your career. It's been an incredible journey. You've even touched on how when things don't necessarily go the way that you would hope it, they seem to work out. They seem...Like this is where you needed to be. Is there anything in your career journey that you wish would've gone differently or you had done differently?

**Ginger Zee:**

Most importantly, I would just change how I reacted, because you can't control how your life goes. But I wish I could go back and remind myself, because all I remember for the first 10 years is crying a lot about how bad I was on my show or how bad of a weathercast I had. I don't ever remember what happened or why it was so bad. It obviously wasn't. My reaction to that was so overblown and overdone and it didn't change what my next show was going to be. It didn't change...All it was was a waste of energy and time of beating myself up. So I would go back and just change my response to everything, and I would learn a little bit more.

One other thing, this probably applies to all careers but especially in broadcasting, I think because the identity and ego thing is wrapped up in your career, when things happen, they're not always pointed at you. People aren't coming for you. Like very, very small percent of time. They're out there. There are some nasty people. Believe me, I've run into them. They're there. But the majority of the time, when I think somebody did something because of me or to me, it's like, no, it's actually worse. It was because they didn't think about me. That thoughtlessness gets misinterpreted as pointed, malicious something. I wish I could go back and be like, "That girl's not thinking about you. She's so stuck in her own silo like we all are and just worried about her own job."

Still to this day, that's how everybody runs around. We're all worried about our own selves. We're not thinking about making somebody else...That's sick if that's what you're doing with your time, and they're out there. But a majority of people are just trying to do the best by themselves. Then when they do look outward, and if somebody does really think of you, like, holy cow, thank you. The gratitude I have for those folks who have done that for me would also be even more amplified and magnified, like thank you, thank you, thank you, because that's hard to do. It's hard for me to do even.

**Kelly Savoie:**

Now that you've gone through different positions and internships and have this real-world experience, what advice do you have for students and early career professionals looking for positions and careers in meteorology?

**Ginger Zee:**

Do as many...Like that real feel, whether it's storm chasing or being in the space that you would work in. The yes part of life is the part of being open to it. Once you know it's not a fit, be better than me and say no, because I was like yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, so much so that it flooded after a while.

Then when you're there, don't be afraid of asking questions. You will not look stupid. Ask as many questions. I now ask more questions than I ever have in my whole life. I will ask everybody, like, "Who should I talk to about that? Who's the person?" I have no worry that I should know something that I don't. I don't think I know anything. If you go into it like that, it's a whole lot easier to learn a lot if you don't think you have to know.

Then I'd say the other thing is just be really gracious with yourself and with others, because that's the other part is everyone's going to disappoint you. They just are. You're going to be pretty regularly...It's work. It's called work. This isn't called...Even though we love it and the passion is there for meteorology, at the end of the day, every day isn't rainbows. That's how our weather works and that's how our lives and our careers work. They can't be. That would be a really scary trajectory for our atmosphere or for our lives if it was just constantly up.

And so, knowing to be with...And this is how both through therapy but meditation that I've worked so hard on making that analogy of storms and troughs and ridges work in life, is that if you can sit in that for a little bit, just like I like to sit in the trough of a mid-latitude cyclone, I sure do, but let that part of life also just let it be where it is because the ridge is coming. You have to ride it a little bit and let that ride.

You can help steer and stay safe in different things. But, gosh, allowing life to happen would've been smarter than trying to put my standpoint, put my big pole in and saying, "I'm not going to let the jet stream move this." That's impossible. So that would've been a change I would make and would tell other students.

Then that grace just bleeds into so many other things, and then giving that back. This is so cliche, but it's true, like the mentoring. I learned so much from my mentees that in the end I realized it's selfish, too. I'm still doing the Tom Skilling thing. I'm like, "So what'd you learn? How do I do this TikTok thing? How do I do that?" There's benefit on that whole circle around.

One...I'll just leave the idea, because this analogy came after I wrote too many books that I'm like, "I can't write another book." But I've been in this unique position where I get to be the first person that sees people and humanity, I guess, at its lowest.

And the way that we treat disaster as humans is fascinating. This would be a book I would probably want to write because it actually is crazy, that the concert of that and mental health, it doesn't matter if it's a wildfire, tornado, hurricane, flood, it doesn't matter what it is, humans act exactly the same. They go through grief exactly the same when it's nature. It's the wildest thing. They grieve really quickly and they go through the cycles fast.

Then they usually...Because it's very visual. You can't run away from it. Your house is gone, but so is your neighbor's. That's when you start to help each other, because what else are you going to do? Which I wish we could apply to every other part of our life. I wish we could go through and allow our traumas, our mishaps, our challenges at work, let them be visual or say them so that people know that they're happening so that you can get that help, and then the community can come together, because if we wrote it like that ...

And the one place where I think still even have work to do in disaster recovery is everybody helps a lot and they're very aware and everybody's good to go for a couple months, and then it's like people forget. That maintenance of care does need to keep happening, too.

And so, to bring that whole disaster analogy is like, yes, no, the ridge is coming, but that you're still going to feel the drama of the trough, and that's okay too. But you're going to need support. We all need a team. Set that up no matter who you are. But mostly, especially at the beginning, treat it like a disaster and allow people to know so that you can process it.

People process disaster from nature so easy, and they're so gracious. They're like, "Yeah. Well, it was a tornado." I'm like, "You can still be mad. You can still..." So, anyway, I've had such a unique job being able to watch that and learn from it, so I hope other people could feel that faster.

**Emma Collins:**

Well, Ginger, we're so grateful for everything you've told us about your career. However, before you go, we always ask our guests one last fun question. So what is your favorite hobby?

**Ginger Zee:**

I have a lot of hobbies that I like, except that most of my hobbies are just doing whatever my kids want right now. It's so funny we have that. But if it were my choice and it was like Mother's Day, I would want to hike. I think hiking is that...It's the other part where, just like storm chasing, you get to experience it. Going higher in elevation and being able to touch and see nature, and forest bathe and really feel and see things you don't always see, I love that. I wish we all had more opportunity to do it because I think it would slow the world down. Also would give us a great workout at the same time.

**Emma Collins:**

Good payoff. Yeah.

**Kelly Savoie:**

Yeah, I agree. I just went hiking last weekend and it's...Especially when you have a long hike that has an incredible view at the end, and you just feel like you're on top of the world.

**Ginger Zee:**

Yes.

**Kelly Savoie:**

Yeah. It's the best.

**Ginger Zee:**

Yeah. Tell my husband. He's not a hiker.

**Kelly Savoie:**

Well, thanks so much for joining us, Ginger, and sharing your work experiences with us.

**Ginger Zee:**

Thank you. Hope everybody does well. That's the other thing I should just say is meteorology is such an exciting place to be because I feel like the science never stops growing. We've watched how science has been dismantled in medicine in the last few years. But I do think that more than ever right now is the

time to be able to not only be a great scientist and learn the science of meteorology, but be able to communicate it effectively and to be able to, just like life, say what we know and what we don't know and be okay with that, because, just like I tell all the students, saying what you don't know and asking questions is the way that you gain trust and respect from people. I think that's something in science we can do more and more of.

**Emma Collins:**

Oh, I love that. Well, that's our show for today. Please join us next time, rain or shine.

**Kelly Savoie:**

Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations About Careers in Meteorology and Beyond is a podcast by the American Meteorological Society. Our show is edited by Johnny Ley. Technical direction is provided by Peter Killelea. Our theme music is composed and performed by Steve Savoie, and the show is hosted by Emma Collins and Kelly Savoie. You can learn more about the show online at www.ametsoc.org/clearskies. You can contact us at skypodcast@ametsoc.org. If you have any feedback or would like to become a future guest.