

The AMS Board for Early Career Professionals wants to highlight members of the weather, water and climate enterprise who exemplify the AMS Mission just a few years into their career. Our “Perspectives from Early Career Professionals” segment aims to highlight early career achievements in multiple sectors of meteorology.

This segment features Rebecca Moulton, a Meteorologist with FEMA Region IV (Atlanta, GA). Rebecca is the Regional Team Lead for the Hurricane Liaison Team and is also working with their planning team to lead the re-write of the Catastrophic Hurricane Annex to the Region IV All Hazards Plan.

BECP: How important were internships in boosting your career at the beginning?

RM: I wouldn't be where I am without internships. In graduate school, I had the opportunity to participate as a volunteer at the NWS Atlanta, and that provided my first exposure to the NWS operations as well as data for my thesis. After that experience, I wanted to get more experience and contacted The Weather Channel to apply for their student internship with their global forecast center. Even though it wasn't a formal part of my graduate program, I completed that experience over the summer between semesters. Little did I know it would lead to my first job out of graduate school, lasting professional relationships and mentors, and lay the foundation for my future career interest in hurricanes and emergency management as I was there for Hurricane Charley.

BECP: What is something unique you've been able to accomplish/experience so far in your career?

RM: I graduated with a bachelor of science in communication *before* I earned my MS in Atmospheric Science. This was completely unheard of before the emphasis of integrating social science, communication and decision support with meteorology. Initially, especially in grad school, I felt like such a fish out of water, and constantly felt as if I was judged more harshly for having “soft skills”. Since I completed grad school and entered the professional world I have never regretted my experience and background in both disciplines. Especially working with Emergency Managers for the past 15+ years, the ability to connect and communicate to various audiences and have the scientific knowledge has been such a benefit professionally, not to mention keeps my job constantly challenging as we always are learning and improving on both fronts.

BECP: To reach this point in your career, what role have mentors and advisors played?

RM: I have only participated in a few formal mentoring programs, to limited success (and honestly not that much fun for either of us). I think that's probably because until recently, I was hard to match up with a mentor who knew anything about my field – although that is now changing. I am always inspired by so many of my colleagues and leaders in meteorology and many other fields. It hasn't always taken the form of a sit-down informational interview, or asking for a job, or a career development discussion. Sometimes it's observing how a senior leader consistently reacts and responds under pressure, or reflecting on how my colleagues communicate in a briefing, or building relationships and getting to know others in the field. In fact, there are so many who have influenced my career and personal life, they may not know it!

BECP: Who do you seek out for advice and why? To whom do you routinely provide advice, if anyone?

RM: Over the past 10+ years with FEMA I've had the opportunity to speak with many students and recent graduates, probably in the ballpark of 1000 or so. Of that number, I can think of maybe 100 who actually followed up with me via email. (NOTE: This is too low! Students, you should always follow up!) But only maybe 10 or really took the time to talk, were persistent in following up in person when possible, clearly demonstrated real interest and knowledge of what I do. That is actually the way to build a relationship and network, over time and a series of interactions with each other! I think I've had fewer than a handful of students who I've been lucky enough to hire, or work with professionally for FEMA. I learned just as much from them as they may have from me.

My advice: professional meteorologists and emergency managers are usually very busy. You have to be persistent if you really want to meet someone, but don't be afraid to reach out and follow up! If you really are interested in a particular niche of meteorology, demonstrate that by gaining experience in that area. For example, if you're interested in emergency management, participate in internships, volunteer opportunities, take training courses, participate in committees, etc. Do your research and reading about the field so you can ask questions you are actually interested in gaining the answers to! It is incredibly impressive when a student can show they are interested and familiar with the field and done their homework AND patient & persistent to follow up.

BECP: Whom do you admire in our profession? Why do you feel that way?

RM: Dr. Eve Grunfest has been one of my biggest mentors. She was the FIRST influential leader who made me believe my multidisciplinary background wasn't something to hide (because I wasn't "science enough") but was an accomplishment, and is valuable to our field. She was a pioneer in integrating social science before it was a buzz word, and visionary for the WAS*IS program which was a platform for so many leaders in our field. She has ALWAYS demanded that I think big, aim high, and keep focused on the mission that matters. Our field doesn't have enough female leadership at the highest levels of management, and Eve has always inspired me to keep working harder to contribute leadership and mentor early career women who will be the next generation of senior leaders.

BECP: How do you feel the field has changed in the last 5-10 years, and what's the direction do you feel it's heading? (This can be as broad or as specific as you want).

RM: 10 years ago, I can remember faxing information with emergency managers, and many smaller agencies didn't have email. That made meteorologist's job not just to forecast, but push out the information. NOW, there is NO shortage of finding information. It's everywhere! Social media, TV, websites, apps, YouTube, etc. and we communicate so much graphically as a result – because a picture is worth 1000 words. Or in this case, the 30 seconds of attention you may get. This has really changed my role to one of advisor and analyst. My job is frequently to sift through the deluge of information and help identify the top 2-3 pieces of information that someone may need to make a critical decision. That means I have to have strong relationships in place, have earned the trust of my partners, and understand in advance what will change their outcome and get right to that point. Now, updates in between forecast cycles and seem like an eternity and often don't match up with the time when people may need the latest and greatest.

I think there is A LOT of opportunity for meteorologists not just in emergency management, but many other fields. You may have to let go of strict scientific discussion and analysis, and let others do the pen to paper (or mouse click to model run) and focus on a different aspect of what the value of

understanding where to get the best information for their needs is, how to understand it for their field, and build partnerships between agencies for the greatest success.

BECP: What advice would you give to an early career professional starting in this field? (meteorology or emergency management)

RM: Meteorology is a relatively small field – everyone seems to know everyone. The relationships you build in school, just starting out, and in internships could last a long time! Emergency management is even smaller. Focus on building partnerships between the disciplines instead of a competitive mindset, because collaboration and partnerships between the two is what always pays off when you need it most, during a high impact event or disaster. You never know when you may have a question in a particular area of expertise, so having the relationship ahead of time can really benefit you down the road.

The other advice I have, is be a person with a life outside of meteorology. Cultivate an interest in something else. It could be anything! Your career is certainly important. But there are other things in life that are much more important. Meteorologists have a tremendously hard time with this. (Guilty!) Emergency Managers can be just as bad because disasters don't take a vacation, and we're often tied to our lines of communication 24 x 7. But we know this is hard on ourselves, contributes to burnout, and it's good to have a perspective outside your job. Take time to travel, learn a hobby, invest in relationships, and step away from weather every once in a while. It's good for the soul... and also pays dividends for your career but don't do it for that reason!

