

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 highlights Dr. Erika Duran, a Research Associate in the Earth System Science Center at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. She recently made the transition to UAH from the broadcast sector.

BECP: Where do you currently work and what path did you take to get to the position you are currently in today?

ED: I am currently a research associate at the University of Alabama in Huntsville, and a federal contractor for the NASA Short-term Prediction and Research Transition (SPoRT) Center at NASA Marshall. Prior to this position, I worked as an on-camera meteorologist for The Weather Channel in Atlanta, GA, and completed the Ph.D. program at the University of Washington in Seattle, WA.

BECP: What is it like to be an early career professional and have changed from the broadcast sector into government contracting?

ED: It's awesome. I am so grateful to have had two very different opportunities focusing on different aspects of the field of atmospheric science and meteorology. There is much I have learned from both the research side and the broadcast side, and it has given me a broader perspective of the challenges we face, and how different people relate to the weather. This has changed my focus in a lot of ways, and helped me to refine my own interests.

BECP: How important were internships early on to get to where you are today?

ED: Internships were vital in my experience both in applying for graduate school and for my professional career. They allowed the opportunity to learn outside of the textbook/computer and to actually experience what working in the field would be like. There really is no substitute for gaining experience. I was very fortunate to receive an opportunity to intern with The Weather Channel during my Ph.D. program, and even more fortunate to receive an offer of employment later after completion of my Ph.D. and the internships. This was a bit of a unique circumstance that ultimately played a major role in my development and career.

BECP: What was the most difficult part of the job search process for you?

ED: The most difficult part for me was facing the uncertainty that comes along with looking for jobs and keeping that anxiety in check, while also balancing the effort required to do the job search. It can feel overwhelming and exhausting, especially if you have other commitments that demand your energy and time.

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

ED: I've been able to live in a few different places and to see different parts of the country through my passion for atmospheric sciences. I love that travel is something I've been able to experience.

BECP: Is there anything you would have done differently in college knowing what you know now about your job?

ED: I think I would have worried less about not having undergraduate experience in meteorology. I was a physics major in college, and remember often feeling overwhelmed and being preoccupied to the extent that it detracted from my studies and my college experience. Now, knowing how useful a background in physics has been throughout my career, I would hopefully have relaxed more and been more present.

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

ED: Mentors and advisors have played an essential role in both my career and in my personal development. Their encouragement AND their criticism have been invaluable up to this point, and I

certainly wouldn't have the skills I needed or have had the courage to pursue this career path without them.

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

ED: I admire all of those in our profession whose passion for meteorology drives them to work hard and to succeed, sometimes even despite extremely difficult circumstances. It's an amazing thing to be surrounded by people who are willing to put in a tremendous amount of effort towards something just because they love it, and often because they are driven by a desire towards a greater good.

BECP: What advice would you give to an early career professional starting in this field?

ED: Be willing to work hard and to accept challenges, both personal and professional. Working through obstacles and failures has been incredibly instructive for me up to this point, so I would say not to fear struggle and failure. Also, have an open mind about opportunities, and reflect on your disappointments: just because things don't turn out exactly the way you planned doesn't mean they weren't good or successful.

BECP: Do you have any helpful tips for someone going through the job search right now?

ED: Be open to applying to a position, even if it isn't your "ideal job" right away. Sometimes, you are in a much better position to decide what is really best for you once you have tried something first. Also, be sure to consider other employee benefits like health insurance, flexible scheduling, and the work environment, as well as the salary.

BECP: Do you have any tips or advice to give to young professionals when it comes to applying and interview for a job?

ED: Be confident! Don't be afraid to own your skills and be proud of what you have accomplished. Practice talking about those things before you go on an interview, too.

BECP: What recommendations would you give young professionals to avoid becoming overwhelmed or burnt out?

ED: It's a process, but learn to recognize the signs in yourself and then listen to them. For me, it was learning that saying "no" is actually an OK thing to say (even if I had to say it to myself) and that walking away from work was necessary. I would recommend really investing the time to find those things that bring you joy and make you feel refreshed and then do them. Learn to value your physical and mental well-being, in addition to your job. I made myself step away from work for at least 24 consecutive hours each week while finishing my Ph.D., and I found I was much more creative and successful when I returned. I understand this may not happen for everyone every day, but when you build your life in a way that's balanced, I think you'll find you will be both happier and more successful.

BECP: What are some challenges you have experienced as an early career professional?

ED: Finding balance and maintaining it while also working hard has been the biggest challenge. For me, learning that pursuing my career requires me (and has required me) to make many personal sacrifices has also been difficult. For example, I have had to move away and to be away from my family and friends at times where I really didn't want to, but knew I had to. That doesn't get easy. Learning to have confidence and to keep moving forward, too, in the face of criticism is always a challenge.

BECP: What do you want to be doing in 5 years? Why?

ED: Hopefully, continuing to have good experiences, and finding new challenges! Making time for myself and for my family regularly, also, would also be ideal. I am still very passionate about weather, storms, and education, so anything that keeps me there would be great.

