

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

This spotlight features Melissa Griffin, Assistant State Climatologist for South Carolina, STEM Outreach Educator, and CoCoRaHS mascot. Check out the interview below for fantastic insight into Melissa’s career as a climatologist.

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

MG: I work for the Land, Water and Conservation Division of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and serve as the Assistant State Climatologist for South Carolina.

I started working for the Florida Climate Center, housed within the Center for Ocean-Atmospheric Predictions Studies (COAPS) at Florida State University (FSU), two weeks after receiving my BS in meteorology. Over the fifteen years I was there, I worked my way up from a Service Climatologist to take on the role of Assistant State Climatologist of Florida. Working for at COAPS gave me a chance to grow, and within my position, I was able to conduct applied climate research projects that focused on climate variability and prediction across the Southeast. Beyond working for both the Florida Climate Center and currently the South Carolina Climatology Office, I have worked as a quality assurance analyst for the Kentucky Mesonet and as a STEM curriculum developer for a private weather company.

My career path has not been the straight path that I planned out for myself when I started college two decades ago. It has been more of a roller-coaster ride of ups and downs and quick turns that I never saw coming - it has made it an exciting adventure.

BECP: How important were internships early on to get to where you are today? To reach this point in your career, what role have mentors and advisors played?

MG: I believe the internships and opportunities I had during college helped direct my overall career path and goals. I knew that I wanted to be a meteorologist, and coming out of high school, I thought my only career path was in broadcasting. I was fortunate enough to be selected to intern with the National Weather Service in Tallahassee and took undergraduate internship hours within FSU's Department of Meteorology.

It may sound cliché; these opportunities and the fantastic mentors helped shaped me into the climatologist I am today.

I still keep in touch with my first mentor, Dr. Paul Ruscher. He took a chance on me as an undergraduate student and offered me a directed independent study to learn more about modeling and programming. Working on his experimental planetary boundary layer (PBL) model was what started me down the path of wanting to be a researcher. The late Dr. James J. O'Brien was another one of my early career mentors that taught me a lot. Not just about being a quality researcher but about life, family, and friends; a sentiment he used as the tagline he had at the end of his email signature. Throughout the years, I have had many mentors, and most of them continue to provide me with insight and advice.

One take away about mentors is that not every mentor is the same. Some will be in your field, others from outside your particular niche. Others will be there to advise you only on professional matters, while some may be there to discuss topics on a more personal scale. And occasionally, you may come across a mentor that can help you with both.

BECP: What does a "work-life balance" mean to you? What recommendations would you give young professionals to avoid becoming overwhelmed or burnt out?

MG: The work-life balance is something I have struggled with throughout my career, and mainly because I put the pressure on myself to excel at my job. And as technology has changed since the late 1990s, it became harder to disconnect from the job/projects after leaving at the end of the workday. A few years ago, my best friend quoted Dolly Parton, when I told her I was working one weekend:

"Don't get so busy making a living that you forget to make a life."

I took it to heart and set goals to help with that balance: establish boundaries (also known as put the email down) and make sure to practice self-care every day. Eventually, a stressful situation will arise, be it a last-minute deadline, severe weather event, disaster response, etc. To be able to tackle these situations is to make sure you take care of yourself and your emotional well-being. Find something you enjoy and make time in our schedule for it - whether that is slaying internet dragons, painting a masterpiece, reading a book at your favorite coffee shop, practicing yoga, or running 5K's on the weekend.

Another favorite phrase that I will share is, "You can not pour from an empty cup."

BECP: Do you have any tips for those interested in leadership or mentorship?

MG: Do it!

it has been one of the most rewarding parts of my job. It has been inspiring to serve as a mentor to so many talented undergraduate and graduate students at FSU, Western Kentucky University, and now the University of South Carolina. I enjoy following their career paths and it is fun running into them at conferences, seeing them on television, reading their peer-reviewed publications, and hearing about their accomplishments within our field. For me, being a mentor is a way of 'paying it forward' for those that have mentored me during the early stages of my career.

